The ARC Ontological Coaching Process: 
Back to the Center

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This paper has two objectives. On the one hand, it advances the practice of organizational coaching through the methodology developed and used by the Center for Executive Coaching in the past years. The ARC Ontological Coaching Process (Back to the Center)© works as a guide for the coach and at the same time as a monitoring tool. On the other hand, it contributes to the proposal of coaching theory, models, and taxonomies derived from professional successful practice, as evidenced in the diverse accounts and testimonials presented.

The greatest calamity is the loss of the center and the abandonment of the soul to the caprices of the periphery. To be man is to be at the center. To be man is to be center. - Frithjof Schuon (1992)

That which is widely dispersed becomes a whole, when it finds a center, and works in a collected manner. For only through a center does multiplicity become essential and effective. - Bert Hellinger (2002)

INTRODUCTION
Coaching is an invaluable practice to help us and others achieve this miracle in our lives, and to transform resentment and anger towards our past into peace and acceptance, resignation and abandonment towards the future into enthusiasm and hope, and fear and distrust towards our present into trust and confidence. But above all, coaching helps us to take effective actions to transform our own lives and the lives of others. Coaching then, acquires a powerful meaning and a greater sense: it is a spiritual process of transcending and aiding others transcend. But how can we understand transcendence? As the Native American teacher Phil Lane says “The longest road we will ever walk is the sacred journey from our head to our heart” (Senge, Scharmer, Jaworski, & Flowers, p. 234), or in other words, from the 

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center. Ontological coaching, as developed by Echeverría (1995, 2003) Flores (1981, 1995, 1997, 2003), and Olalla (2004), is a powerful process to achieve this journey back to the center of our lives. However, ontological coaching has been mainly used in one-to-one personalized coaching interventions; as such it is subject to the possibilities that are born out of the conversational dance (interpersonal interaction) itself (Beuchot & Bullen, 2005). It has seldom been implemented in organizational settings with specific methodological steps and designed intentions. However, if individuals don’t modify the way they act, organizations will not modify their acting either (Flores & Beuchot, 2008). Our purpose is to present a five-step methodology furthering and enriching the ontological approach to coaching when applied to organizational settings.
THE NOTION OF THE CENTER

The image of the Center has been held sacred by traditional cultures all over the world (Eliade, 1991; Guénon, 1995; Schuon, 2001). Succinctly speaking, all human beings have a center, which, and again according to traditional thinking, is invariably located in the heart. The association between heart and spiritual center is not new. The Egyptians removed every organ from the body during the process of mummification, except the heart, which they considered the seat of the soul and was to undergo judgment in the afterlife. The Hindus associate the heart (or cardial plexus) with the fourth chakra Anahata, center of emotions. Sufism has been defined as “a science whose objective is the reparation of the heart” (Zarruq, Istrabadi, & Hanson, 2008), while for the Orthodox Christians one of the most profound and mystical forms of prayer, or ceaseless praying, is called the Jesus Prayer, or Prayer of the Heart (Καρδιακή Προσευχή), an integral part of the eremitic tradition of Hesychasm.

The Parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-32) -- from leaving home or the center, living in the periphery, realizing this ego-bound stage through suspension, changing focus through redirection, feeling the attraction of the genuine intention, struggling back to the center in a destruction/creation process, and reaching once again the origin or departure place through connection -- is what we at the Center for Executive Coaching call the sacred process of transforming ourselves from human beings into persons, or the sojourn from the brain/mind to the heart/emotion. When we are born, we are in our center, and as we grow up, we travel from the center to the periphery of a circle, which spins at enormous speed, making us speed also. The sojourn to the periphery is equivalent to the construction of the ego. This allows us to become differentiated from other human beings, exert our will and our self-determination, and acquire a “you-me” view of the world, as part of a healthy development of the human psyche. This is the centrifugal move, a force associated with rotation that pulls you away from the center.

There is also a time, as part of that healthy development, when we should travel back from the periphery to the center. This is the centripetal move, a force associated with the pulling towards the center. If we do not do it, then it becomes unhealthy to stay in the periphery. We then start living and acting from the ego nature exclusively, placing our individual egos erroneously as centers. Doing so, we tend to think that the world then revolves around us; that as centers we hold world-views and paradigms that are essentially correct and definitive; that we, as such, should tell the rest of the world how things are and individuals what they should think. We then judge others as wrong and incorrect, as there can be only one center, and that is us.
Conflicts then naturally arise, when we confuse assessments with facts, points of view with truths, and diversity with opposition, negative emotions then follow. As emotions are reactions to our interpretation of the world, if we perceive the rest of the world as attacking our false ego-center, then we naturally start living in fear, hate, resentment, and then proceed to take actions under those emotions: fighting, fleeing, or freezing. Our materialistic, Western type of thought seeks to preserve our speeding motion in the periphery (“Oh dear! Oh dear! I shall be too late!”, as the Rabbit in *Alice in Wonderland* exclaims) (Carroll, 1981, p. 2), seeks to enthrone the ego as king of our lives (“Some people have no more sense than a baby!”, as Humpty-Dumpty proclaims in *Through the Looking Glass*) (*ibid.*, p. 164), and has this king live in permanent dissatisfaction (“Off with their heads!”, as the Red Queen shouts) (*ibid.*, p. 61), always seeking out what lies within. This produces suffering, as we cannot get everything the ego wants to survive, and even if we get it, we cannot keep it forever.

To stay in the periphery implies separation from others and from the world. To reach the center implies a union (in every case it is more of a re-union, like the word “religion” implies, *re-ligare*, Latin for re-unite or re-join what was once united and became separated), non-separateness, at-one-ment. Ultimately, then, this separation or fragmentation as seen from the periphery is an illusion. However, and unfortunately, this illusion (*maya*, for the hindus) “is the glue that holds our current story together” (Senge, Scharmer, Jaworski, & Flowers, 2005, p. 72), the metaphor of the Western civilization. Leaving the circle is easy and natural, but going back is a perilous journey and by no means an automatic and natural one. In literary terms, the Iliad can be seen as the
departure from the center, and the Odyssey, as the sojourn back. In every mythology the hero has to leave home, test himself in the world, and then return, victorious after having defeated the beast (the ego) and rescued the princess (the imprisoned soul), making the once wasted, barren, and desolate land whole, plentiful, and abundant once again. Campbell (1980) calls this the “monomyth”, which describes the journey of the hero from his departure (separation) from the center to his coming back again (freedom to live), in seventeen stages. In the New Testament, the Prodigal Son parable tells exactly the same story.

The journey back to the center is the search for ultimate meaning, as Frankl (1997) calls it, both for individuals and for organizations. There are of course other lesser searches for meaning, when the ego is becoming strong, when we are young. However, this ultimate meaning comes not from the ego, but from the Self. Coaching can then be seen as a human endeavor to help people, and organizations, find their way back to the primordial center, which is the only part of the circle that does not move. And it is a primordial issue that a blind man cannot guide another blind man. At least one of them--the coach--has to be able to see some light. He has acquired “skills, a presence, and a level of development” (O’Connor & Lages, 2007, p. 15) because he himself has started the journey back home, even when he may no even be close.

The way back to the center, in traditional thinking, has three main steps. First, we have to be able to understand and distinguish the Real from the real; to discern that there IS a Center that is not our ego (discernment between the Real and the illusory), even though Postmodernists have told us once and again that the Real is always real (with a small “r”), that there is no such thing as a spiritual center, as spirituality is just one of those meta-discourses that should be avoided (Anderson, 1995). Second, we should then be oriented towards that Center (concentration upon the Real). Third, we must conform our beings, and therefore our actions, to that Center. When we do that, results in our personal lives and in our work lives ensue. In this view, coaching is not about learning how to stay in the periphery and introduce tactical changes in our actions to improve our results. It is about heading for the center and as a consequence, strategic changes will be produced to refocus and reframe the situation.

These stages-comprehension, concentration, and conformation- (Schuon, 2001) roughly correspond to the Orthodox spiritual way stations of wisdom--purification, illumination, and union (Dionysius the Areopagite, 2007), and to the three stages of the alchemical inner transformation process--nigredo, albedo, rubedo (Klossowski de Rola, 1973). We have called them, respectively, Awareness (A), Rebuilding (R), and Centering (C), or the ARC ontological coaching process in organizations (Back to the Center). These three steps in traditional thinking can be explored, adding
two more to the intermediate stage, and thus analyze the sojourn from the periphery to the center (see Figure 2 below). These five stages are thus Suspension, Redirection, Intention/Attraction, Destruction/Creation, and Connection.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>AWARENESS (A)</th>
<th>Suspension</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>REBUILDING (R)</td>
<td>Redirection</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Intention/Attraction</td>
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<td>Destruction/Creation</td>
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<tr>
<td>CENTERING (C)</td>
<td>Connection</td>
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**Figure 2. The ARC ontological coaching process (Back to the Center)**

**STAGES OF THE ARC ONTOLOGICAL COACHING PROCESS**

**Suspension**

First, in order to get back to the center, we have to stop spinning along the periphery. We have to suspend motion along our taken-for-granted ways of seeing the world, our paradigms, or our biases, assumptions, and expectations (Lazar, 2007) through which we frame any given situation and thus interpret it. This is a field where the coaching process is essential. No one can suspend their safety-giving assumptions about reality through a sheer will effort, because most of us think and believe that our assumption about the world are both the world itself and us. In other words, most of us do not hold a worldview; the worldview has gotten hold of us. Suspension happens when we “stop projecting our habitual assumptions and start to see reality freshly” (Senge et al., p. 41). Who would like to do that (who would need to do that) unless a very traumatic and eye-opening experience happens? However, we believe that suspension can be introduced in the coaching process very early on. In fact, suspension has to be introduced by the coach in order to be able to make the coachee stop and pay attention to her.

This is what is pretended by the use of parables, koans, and initiatic stories in spiritual practices like Christianism, Zen Buddhism, and Islamic Sufism. The purpose of these resources is to drive the disciple to the border, where rational analysis is totally useless to decode the meaning of the resource. The idea is, precisely, to help the disciple attain suspension of his habitual train of thought, and to allow him to “see” his blind spot (Scharmer, 2004).

*When we started a coaching process in a 17,000 employee car-manufacturing company in Mexico, our first meeting was with the Plant Manager and the*
Human Resources Manager (the so called “hard stuff” and “soft stuff” areas, respectively). We were being interviewed to determine if we got the job or not (I later found out that there were three other coaching companies attempting to get the contract). After listening to the Plant Manager’s point of view about his managerial team (mostly a set of complaints about their attitude, their non-cooperativeness, their scarce commitment, and their lack of understanding about the European way of doing business), the Human Resources Manager turned to me and expected me to say something. I just asked the Plant Manager the following question: “Everything you told me is only part of the truth. Can I ask you a simple question?” “Sure”, he said. “Could it be that your team is behaving towards you because you see them the way you describe? In other words, is there a slight (a very slight) chance that you could be the motive, the reason, even the cause of their behavior?” There was a deep silence in the meeting room. The Human Resources Manager looked at me with an expression of “I can not believe what I am listening to!” in his face. How did I dare to speak to the Plant Manager like that? How did I dare to even suggest that? After a while, and after some glance exchanges between the two of them, the Plant Manager turned around to me and said, in a calm, peaceful tone of voice. “You know, I had not thought of it that way. You may have a point here!” We got the contract.

By not accompanying the Plant Manager in his centrifugal train of thought, and by inviting him to seek for the answer to my question through a centripetal move, I was taking him from a “Window-like” to a “Mirror-like” approach. What does this mean exactly? The former approach usually seeks for the cause and the solution to a problematic situation in others. Responsibility and blame are assigned to somebody else than ourselves (the problem is them; therefore they have to solve it. I am here to see that they do it. In the best of cases, I will solve a problematic situation that does not involve me directly. I am the fixer, even the only thinker). Echeverría (2003) calls this the old way of doing business. When organizations’ sole objective is making money and learning about the business, then they have lost their sense of higher purpose. They become dead entities, well-oiled machines.

On the contrary, living organizations (De Geus, 1997) are rather focused on learning about their own effectiveness in relationship with others in the benefit of the business. They have not lost sight that, first of all, every business is a human community. This latter approach always includes the observer in the cause and the solution of the problem (the problem is us, the way we relate to each other and the way we think about each other; therefore, we are here to solve it, and I have the power to move the system in order to make this happen):

…the change leader or leaders are separate from what they are seeking to change. For example, executives seek ‘to change their organization’, as if they were a separate entity from themselves...The very terms ‘change program’ or ‘rolling out the change initiative’ imply the
position of human will on a presumed external reality. (However, there is a) ‘co-creation’ between the individual or collection and the larger world. The self and the world are inescapably interconnected. The self does not react to a reality outside, nor does it create something new in isolation—rather, like the seed of a tree, it becomes a gateway for the coming into being of a new world. (Senge et al., p. 92)

On our first group meeting with the Managing Team (8 people) two weeks later, they were already sitting at the table when I entered the room with the Plant Manager. Before I could say hello, one of the team members stood up briskly, and in an infuriated tone of voice shouted at me: “What the hell do you know about cars?” He then looked around smiling as if looking for support. I waited a few seconds, and as he did not sit down, I said: “Not very much. I turn the key for ignition, accelerate or brake according to the case, and turn the key the other way around when I get home”. There was laughing in the room. I then said to him: “Can I ask you a personal question?” I did not wait for him to answer. “Who are you so angry at and why?” This manager stopped laughing (as everybody else in the room), sat down and lowered his head.

Suspension can reach deep levels of understanding:

During an emotional intelligence workshop for a shoe company in Mexico as part of the coaching process, and after a good three hours had gone by, I was being interrupted all the time by a young executive woman in her late thirties, who seemed fine being the center of attention, patronizing me most of the time. As the workshop did not flow as I expected, I decided to ask the group of 32 people taking the workshop who in the audience was married. Only three did not raise their hands. I then approached the woman in question and asked her for permission to interact with her to show the audience something. She willingly said yes. “So, why are you not married? I expect a simple answer to a simple question.” She answered very confidently: “I still have not quite found the right man for me” (she giggled and the audience laughed). I wrote down her answer under number 1 in a diagram I made on the flipchart which consisted basically in an iceberg divided in three parts (Figure 3). I then got a little bit closer to be exactly in front of her. “That is a very plausible answer. Now I wonder what the real reason is, the one that you usually tell yourself when you look in the mirror.” She stopped giggling and looking around, and fixed her eyes on mine. She was silent for a while, and then said “I have firmly decided to pursue an executive career, and no macho man is going to keep me away from doing so.” She did not giggle this time. In fact, she seemed a bit annoyed, and the audience did not laugh either. I went to the flipchart and wrote her second answer under number 2 next to the iceberg.

I then approached her very slowly, placing me not in front of her, but on her side, and in a very low voice I whispered in her ear “Now, between you and me, which is the real answer for you not being married?” I stayed near her and looked at her eyes with a comprehensive smile on my face. She was silent for a long time and tears began showing in her eyes. She then looked at me, and crying, said “I was raped when I was seven years old by my stepfather, and I
I feel fear and hatred towards men, but at the same time I want so badly to have a family. Now I realize that my career has been a desire to beat men on their own ground (the business world) and with their own weapons. My motive has been resentment and revenge, disguised as a desire for personal achievements and worldly aspirations. I do not know what to do. I’ve had enough of that!” I asked for her permission to write that third answer on the flipchart, and then the audience started raising their hands to share their own cases. A “Eureka” experience had set in the room, and people started to silently review their assumptions. They started talking about why were they working in that company? Why did they live in such a place? Why were they married to the person they were married to? In summary, why did they do the things they did? (Sessions of one-to-one coaching with each of the members of the group followed before the next group session in order to take care of these issues privately).

We call this train of thought “suspension”, and it can trigger a new way of thinking. However, sometimes language itself is not enough to provoke this “Eureka” experience of suspension in the coachee. Sometimes emotions and the body itself need to be involved, as many people are very well trained to always have a rational answer to the coach’s inquiries:

Another Plant Manager of a metal-mechanic company came to see me to tell me that he had no rapport with his people. They were against him, they did not listen to him, and the organizational climate was going down for the third time. He was a Mexican executive with Mexican employees, and for a metal-mechanic plant, he was extremely well-dressed in an expensive suit. A clean-cut guy, he was a short man, dark-skinned, and making a great effort to look a man of high-class. He had, in fact, an answer for everything. So I decided to give him a task. I told him that for one week he should not change his clothes (not even the underwear), he should not take a bath and he should not shave. He got angry and said he would not do that, adding that he had lost his time with me. Three weeks later, he called me and said he had to talk to me. When he arrived, he had a short, well-trimmed beard, sports clothes and his hair was longer and less kept. He immediately told me that he knew what caused his employees’
reaction. It was himself. When he decided not to shave, bathe, or change clothes, he went to the company telling everybody he was sick. The next two days, he started to throw up, and was in a terrible rage. By Thursday, he was calm, and by Friday, he was laughing with his people (still had on the same pants) and telling them that he was participating in a coaching process. As it goes, he realized that as a boy, he had been poor. He had to fight for his position, and he wanted to forget about his childhood and everything that reminded him of that. His way of dressing tried to put a barrier between his workers (his past) and himself (the present). He wanted desperately to be listened to by them, but the message he was sending them was “I despise you. You and I do not belong together.” His final comment was: “Thank you. I never thought that throwing up was beautiful. I threw up all the trash I had accumulated these past years.”

The coaching process with this Plant Manager continued for two years. At the end, the change in his style of leadership produced an improvement in the organizational climate, which in turn was reflected in an increase of 53% in production figures.

Again, another experience of suspension had brought about the space and time to review the suppositions and assumptions that influence and even determine our behavior without us being aware of this. This causes unnecessary suffering which is a symptom of a not very efficient and now weak paradigm, and an indication that things have to be reviewed. However, people tend to solve the problems generated by their mental paradigms applying the same type of solutions that generated those problems. What happens is that things go worse.

Coaching is not only implied in making the coachee realize the present uselessness of a mental paradigm. She needs to make sure that the coachee understands that there are no right or wrong paradigms, just powerful and non-powerful paradigms. A certain paradigm or mental map may explain and solve, in a certain period of our lives, the problems that we face. And it might do it pretty well. However, if we pretend that this mental map can be kept for the rest of our lives when the situations out there are constantly and rapidly changing, trouble ensues. So, a mental map is not right or wrong: it is either in force or obsolete. This makes the coachee not feel guilty for his way of thinking, or to start blaming himself for certain events. This does not help the coaching process (this is, substituting a suffering for another one).

Suspension generates a vacuum, so the coach’s job is to transform this vacuum into a womb that gives birth, in the coachee, of a depth of understanding on the one hand, and a sense of commitment towards the future, on the other. After suspension, or the stopping from speeding along the circumference, the coachee sees clearly that there is something else beyond the usual speeding along the periphery. He starts acquiring the notion of the Center. Just then the real coaching process begins; just then does it make sense to the coachee. He is now open, because his own internal barriers have been temporarily suspended by the action of the coach.
But leaving the coachee in Eureka is not enough, and many coaches start and stop at this stage. Removing the blinder from the eyes can sometimes be very rewarding, but in some instances it can be demolishing. So once the paradigm breaks due to this moment of suspension — or after stopping from speeding along the circumference happens -- a shift towards the center follows. So it is not enough to help the coachee stop and suspend; we need to help him rebuild. Rebuilding is made up of the next three steps: redirection, intention/attraction, and destruction/creation.

**Redirection**

After suspension, there comes a shift in our movement in life, from outwards to inwards, motivated by a longing nostalgia of something. This is redirection. Once the suspension stage has been undergone by the coachee (induced or provoked by the coach), he realizes that the solution does not come from speeding anymore. The coachee now somehow feels that the solution to problems does not just come from outer actions, but from inner reflections (see Figure 4 below). This redirection is the equivalent of the Greek word *metanoia*, which literally means “changing one’s mind,” or “reforming one’s psyche”, in the sense of embracing thoughts beyond its present limitations or thought patterns. In Christianity, the word *metanoia* refers to a spiritual conversion, as the one Saul of Tarsus had in his way to Damascus (after that experience, he even changed his name to Paul). Far beyond a mere change, *metanoia* implies, in the end, a radical transformation of identity. It is related to the Latin word *correctio*, to correct or make right. A redirection is, then, a correction of a path, where the traveler changes route and heads some other place than the one originally planned.

![Figure 4. Triple, double and single loop learning](image)

**Figure 4. Triple, double and single loop learning** (Hargrove, 2003, p.90)

A redirection thus implies a profound change of paradigm. Such a change would be the equivalent or revising and modifying the underlying assumptions that rule our behavior, or what Argyris and Schön (1974) call theory-in-use. A change in the theory-in-use is
not only to correct specific behaviors and actions associated with that theory-in-use but to adjust one’s theory-in-use to bring it more in line with the corresponding espoused theory (the answer we usually give when we are asked how we would behave under certain circumstances). Argyris calls such reflective action ‘double loop learning,’ involving a reflection not only on whether the theory-in-use is effective, but also whether theory-in-use is compartmentalized from espoused theory when there are inconsistencies.

Redirection is then a second-loop learning or third loop learning, in which the actions we take change as a consequence of the change in the theory-in-use or in our governing variables. Redirection is not a simple or tactical change in the action itself as an adapting move, leaving the theory-in-use untouched. This would be single-loop learning. It is more a strategic change.

Table 1. Type loop, action, critical question and type learning

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type Loop</th>
<th>Action / (Critical Question) / Type Learning</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Triple loop</td>
<td>Theory-in-use / (Who am I?) / Transformational learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Double loop</td>
<td>Espoused theory / (Why do I do the things I do and why do I do them?) / Reframing/shift of context</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single loop</td>
<td>Performing behaviors / (What do I do?) / Incremental learning</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Redirection implies, thus, both a shift to within, and an expanded awareness of who we are, why we do the things we do and why do we do them the way we do them (Table 1). It is a transformation of, in, and from the heart. As such, redirection can also be very painful. It is the job of the coach to see that this is not so, and accompany the coachee in making this an awesome process of self-discovery, in amazement and wonder at the miracle of the journey.

For this to happen, ordinary, sequential time has to be suspended. The Greeks had two terms to refer to time. Suspension and
redirection happen in what the Greeks called Kairos (καιρός): a passing instant when an opening appears which must be driven through with force if success is to be achieved. It is ruled from within. Kairos time flows gently, allowing us to be in the moment. We participate in Kairos time, rather than racing to catch up with it. Kairos time may occur during meditation, the creative process, rocking a baby, reading a well written book, and other activities that are personally meaningful to us. “One is wholly absorbed in the moment, unhurried and unaware of time passing. These are the moments that nurture our souls” (Brodersen, 2001).

Chronos (Χρόνος), on the other hand, refers to time dictated from without. It is sequential time, that which happens on a daily basis. It is measured by clocks, hours, minutes, and seconds. It is entrepreneurial time, and has no special quality in it. Thus, Chronos is quantitative, while Kairos has a qualitative nature. It is not difficult to see that Kairos is born from the heart and takes us back to the heart. Second and third loop changes are only possible in Kairos time; they are a product of it. So, the coach is required to foster Kairos time, the right and opportune moment, so that suspension and redirection, as special events, can happen in the coachee’s heart.

During the above mentioned coaching process, several Kairos time events were designed. Sketch writing activities that involved humor, koan-solving problems that created paradox, physical activities that let emotions (anger and fear) emerge, and deep relaxation and awareness developing exercises that focused on the here-and-now were combined in order to suspend the perception of Chronos and produce a real flow and meaningfulness. Attraction then settles in.

Intention/Attraction

“When we suspend and redirect our attention, perception starts to arise from within the living process as a whole. When we are presencing, it moves further to arise from the highest future possibility that connects self and whole” (Senge et al., p. 89). We call this the stage of attraction, or the feeling of being pulled by a subtle force within us, as if we could sense an intention higher than us. The intention, or “an earnest commitment from the heart” (ibid., p. 135), clarifies our vision. Intention is different from purpose or simple motive. The latter has to do with the espoused theory (or the story I tell others, as in levels 1 and 2 of Figure 3 above). The former is strongly related to theory-in-use, or the inner springs that make us tick. Motives are related to reason (thinking) and the brain, while intention (feeling) is related to the heart. As Brian Arthur states, “intention is not a powerful force, it is the only force” (italics are mine, ibid., p. 37).

Many of my students do not know what to study after high-school. This is because they mix-up motives with intentions. They are looking for a career that will bring them money and fame, thus the question “what should I study to be rich and famous?” However, they get stuck. The real question should be “what type of person do I want to be?” When this happens, the focus shifts
from the outside to the inside, from the periphery to the center, and the answer to the former question comes smoothly, through natural delivery, not through caesarean intervention. It is not about what I want, but what does the world need. In other words, what will help me get closer to the center, not what will allow me to stay far from it. It is about acquiring a higher purpose, not about reinforcing the ego needs.

Intentions have to be brought to the conscious mind and thus change our reality forever. Declarations, as speech acts (Searle, 1969), have the power to change the reality out there, by not merely bringing it out, but literally producing it. Declarations are about ‘speaking that brings forth being’, as opposed to ‘speaking that describes being’. The intention is thus formulated through two important declarations. One of them is the declaration of detention, or of stopping. “I will not continue to be what I have been, or to do what I have done.” This declaration interrupts the, until now, transparent flux of events in life due to the power of language. Thus, suspension becomes a conscious decision of the coachee, not merely an event caused by the coach. This declaration has to do with the creative destruction of the past and aims at abandoning the periphery.

The second declaration has to do with the future. It is the declaration of intent, of construction of being. “I want to be somebody new and perform new actions.” It sets objectives and fixes a direction, and thus, constructs the future. It usually points towards a larger purpose. It is related to the future and aims for the center. So, this simultaneous pair of declarations establishes a deep and profound commitment with us. Without this commitment, moving ahead is not possible.

In a workshop during a coaching process for small enterprises, I met Ralph. He is an artisan who makes cheap religious images. In a public interaction, he tells the audience that he is tired and fed up with this activity, which he learned from his grandfather and his father. He felt empty, and plans to sell the workshop and migrate to the United States. I tell him the story of the three bricklayers that were interviewed by an architect for a job. To the architect’s question of “What is it that you do?” the first one answered “I am laying bricks, can’t you see?” The second one’s answer was “I am building a house.” But the last one answered “I am helping somebody’s dream come true.” After the story, I asked Ralph who of the three he would hire if he was the architect. “Obviously the last one”, he said laughingly, “because that guy really knows what he is doing.” “Can I ask you a personal question, Ralph? Do you know what you are doing?” “Sure”, he said, “I make and sell precast religious images, just like my father and grandfather did.” “No, that is what THEY did… What do YOU do?” He was silent for a long time. I asked again “Why do people buy your images? Just to decorate an empty space?” Then he said, with a lit face, ‘Are you saying that I help people pray?’ “More than that, Ralph, more than that. You may be helping other’s dream come true; you may be helping people contact God through your work. Your work may be a channel so that they can better communicate with Him. Does this make sense?” After what seemed an eternity, Ralph started crying. “Of course, it
IS so. The images I make help people connect”. He then sat down with a smile on his face, and remained sort of immersed in himself for a long time.

Our sense in life is a product of the story we tell ourselves --- of the way we interpret and grant significance to what we are and what we do. An important task of the coach is to help the coachee acquire a new and more powerful interpretation, to tell himself a different story, to build a new attractor for his life and furnish a new intention for his actions. Intention is then another word for vision, and a vision is “not lofty sentiments or inspiring phrases; they are practical tools” (Senge et al., p. 140). This is not always a complicated process as the above cited example shows. Michelangelo used to say that he did not sculpt; he only removed from the marble piece the necessary amount of material so that the figure that was inside would emerge. The marble block contained, in potential, the figure already inside of it. The coach becomes a sculptor.

**Destruction/Creation**

The previous stages were, in a certain sense, passive. The coachee was exposed to them by the coach. But this stage is the first that requires a real effort, a deep struggle from the coachee. In order to finally start moving, declaring it is not enough. Realizing and declaring change is one thing; bringing it about is another. So, we then move from the domain of ideas to the domain of action through the commitment we built in the previous stage. We still have to effectively cut the attachments that tie us to our former state, and which we declared we would do. It is a difficult stage, where fear and pain are sometimes present. Deep inside, we know that in order to advance, we cannot be what we have been. So we have to destroy and abandon what we now see as a weight upon our shoulders. As we feel we have to start moving in the new visualized direction, we cannot carry that old weight. But leaving it behind is like leaving part of our own being with it. This is because the ego identifies with us, forgetting that it was a construction that was useful when in the periphery, but is useless now. It is as if we wanted to travel in the ocean by car. Leaving the car behind to take the boat is difficult if we think we are the car. It is like seeing our future through the eyes of our past. Two parables from different spiritual traditions illustrate this:

**Parable 1.** Two Zen monks were travelling. They came to a ford of a stream that was running high, and the current was strong and frightening looking. An attractive young lady was standing at the ford, looking nervous. She clearly was afraid to cross, but had an important reason to go. Without a word, the older of the two monks lifted her in his arms and waded across the stream, and placed her safely on the far bank. The younger monk looked shocked at this action, but kept his silence for quite some number of miles as they continued their journey. Finally, he blurted out “You know that it is against the rules of our order to have any contact with women. How could you do that?” The older monk replied “I put her down when I reached the other side of the river. You, on the other hand, have been carrying her this whole way.”
Parable 2. And as he was setting out on his journey, a man ran up and knelt before him, and asked him, "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" And Jesus said to him, "Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone. You know the commandments: 'Do not kill, Do not commit adultery, Do not steal, Do not bear false witness, Do not defraud, Honor your father and mother.' And he said to him, "Teacher, all these I have observed from my youth." And Jesus looking upon him loved him, and said to him, "You lack one thing; go, sell what you have, and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me." At that saying his countenance fell, and he went away sorrowful; for he had great possessions. (Mark 10:17-22).

Leaving the assumptions behind and acquiring a new life. Destroy to create, abandon and embrace, bid farewell and welcome, empty to fill again. This is the spiritual meaning of “The king is dead; long live the king.” In this sense, Lao Tzu (1987) states that “in the pursuit of learning, every day something is acquired. In the pursuit of Tao, every day something is dropped.” Or again, “Neither do men put new wine into old bottles: else the bottles break, and the wine runneth out, and the bottles perish: but they put new wine into new bottles, and both are preserved.” (Matthew 9:17). Tarzan and Spiderman advance, the former in the jungle and the latter in the city, letting go and holding (or issuing) new lianas and spider webs.

The sojourn to the Center, to connection, will not come easy, or as a simple consequence of realizing the new direction. Commitment to our intention is the driving force behind this struggle. The Muslims have a word derived from the root j-h-d, "jihad", which means “warfare” or struggle.” They distinguish the Greater Jihad (al-jihād al-akbar) from the Lesser Jihad (al-jihād al-asghar). The latter is the struggle against external obstacles that menace the new equilibrium we must have to start the journey, while the former deals with the obstacles within the soul. The man in the Jesus parable above had been successful in the Lesser Jihad. However, he had not begun the Greater one. Both lesser and greater together constitute a single “spiritual activity. Human beings must exert themselves at all moments of life to fight a battle both inward and outward against those forces that if not combated will destroy that equilibrium which is the necessary condition for the spiritual life.” (Nasr, nd). Most of the heroic epics and hero stories deal with this stage. Herakles (Hercules) had to perform 12 tasks before he reached and recovered the Golden Fleece (an image of the Center), fighting against external forces and internal tendencies at the same time.

So letting go and embracing both imply an inner and outer struggle. For the Japanese Budo martial arts, Zanshin (vigilance or attention) has, as Jihad, two meanings. One is the instinctive Zanshin, which animals have by nature, and allows them to be continually alert and awake. This is called negative Zanshin, because it is founded on the fear of losing the armor of our ego, our beliefs, desires,
and needs. It is, therefore, contractive. By contrast, the positive Zanshin is being awake, open to life and the beat of the universe in us. It is based not on fear, but on love and thus is expansive. So, the practice of Zanshin is double: “the elimination of the ego crust that imprisons our Self, the abandonment of our ivory tower on the one hand, and the expansion of our inner force towards life on the other” (Ríos, 2008, p. 49). They are simultaneous processes.

In Ralph’s case above, I saw that he started scribbling something in his notebook. He read it aloud: “Now that I have decided to follow this new story about myself and my business, I know I have to get rid of the old artisan way of thinking that my grandfather and father passed on to me. This was based on the old vision of selling images. I will rebuild the workshop so that it reflects this new vision of helping people attain their spiritual center. I realize that my business was an end in itself, now I see it as a means to an end. I was worried about my profits, now I am concerned about salvation of others, because in helping others attain salvation, I help myself also. This goes far from being a make-up change, I have to abandon behavior in my life that are not in accordance with this present vision quest. I have to be congruent and coherent now in what I think, feel, and do.”

“Continually letting go brings us back to the here and now” (Senge et al., p. 96). What is it that we need to let go? Two things: Mainly the illusion of control, and the illusion of the fixed ego. What is it that we should welcome? We should welcome the truth of constantly becoming and the truth of the flow. Control comes from the feeling of separateness, itself a product of “analytic knowing” (logical, rational, analytical, left brain thinking), while flowing arises from “primary knowing” (intuitive, emotional, synthetical, right brain thinking; ibid., pp. 97-100).

Letting go equals surrendering, leaving attachments behind, abandoning the luggage. The key word in this stage is Vision. A vision is always larger than life, transcending the ego and involving the Self. But we let go only if we make a balance and believe that what we let go is less important than what we will gain. This is not an analytic knowledge, but a primary knowledge. Letting go can be a fearful experience too. The coach is also there to help change disorientation and fear into wonder and amazement. Actions are now suggested by the coachee herself, suggested by a new sense of purpose.

We helped Ralph undergo a duel phase, to help him let go of his inherited past, to thank his grandfather and father for what he had and what he was, and to let go in peace and acceptance. This was much a process of a second birth, and we handled it that way. A special rite-of-passage ceremony was designed for this, in which Ralph transformed his resentment towards the past into peace, his resignation towards the future into enthusiasm, and his fear towards the present into trust.
**Connection**

Holy Grail, Satori, Illumination, Suki. These words refer to the brilliant light in the darkness that is achieved once the dragon of the ego has been defeated and the riddle has been deciphered. Suki is the Japanese word for the sacred sanctuary, the inner garden, the Sancta Sanctorum of personality. It is not a place, but a station of being that allows someone the possibility of an individual and profound existence, in peace, enthusiasm, and trust, once their opposites have been conquered (resentment, resignation, and fear). We then have attained presence, in the perpetual here and now. Connecting means completing, in three different aspects (*ibid.*, p. 168):

1. Bringing into reality enduring changes that are both external and internal.
2. What once required conscious effort happens effortlessly, almost automatically.
3. Shifting our awareness and understanding.

This phase requires acting, but the type of action that the Japanese call “*Wu-wei*”, or non-action, action that proceeds from feeling more than from thinking, or natural action. Thus knowing when (and how) to act is not knowledge in the sense that one would think:

*Wu-wei* refers to behavior that arises from a sense of oneself as connected to others and to one’s environment. It is not motivated by a sense of separateness. It is action that is spontaneous and effortless. At the same time it is not to be considered inertia, laziness, or mere passivity. Rather, it is the experience of going with the grain or swimming with the current. Our contemporary expression, “*going with the flow*”, is a direct expression of this fundamental Taoist principle. (Kardash, 1995)

This again is the way of the spiritual warrior or the hero. A hero “aligns the wisdom of our head, heart, and hands by forcing us to act before he has figured everything out and created a plan” (Senge et al., p. 148). He manages this because he stays connected to the larger purpose of his intention. The zen archer learns that he, the bow, the arrow, and the mark are just different aspects of the same whole, consciously experience himself as part of the unity. The archer does not see the trees, but the forest. Learning comes from acting: it does not precede it.

Once you are in your center, once you have arrived home to your heart, your actions are performed in a natural flow with circumstances. You are not “fighting” the outer world anymore, because the distinction between outer and inner does no longer hold. The Center is, therefore, not a temporary state of being, another stage as the previous five ones, but a station, a destiny. It is not a fleeting moment, but a permanent achievement. Once
there, always there. Finally, the Omega is now one with the Alpha, where the former is the Periphery and the latter the Center. The separation between them was, ultimately, the Grand Illusion.

Connecting is related to the Greek term *kenosis*, κένωσις, the concept of the ‘self-emptying’ (Ríos, 2008, p. 27) of one’s own will and becoming entirely receptive to the intention itself, until one attains union with the intention. The intention and the intender are one. It is a definitive break from the ego world, from egotism, ambition, and personal, individual desire. The barriers that separate us from the others are definitely broken, and a holistic feeling appears, manifesting itself in an inner harmony that reflects as an outer harmony in flow. Connecting is permanently living in *Kairós* time, in an eternal presence, performing in a *Wu-wei* fashion, living in a Perfect Center of repose and action, of emptiness and wholeness, of movement and serenity (*ibid.* p. 43).

Somebody that knew Ralph told me some three months after the public interaction we had that he did not sell his family business and was working as hard as ever, with the following slogan: “God is as close as his image”. I met him some time later, and when I asked him what really made him keep his business and redefine it under this new light, he told me that he not only kept his family business, but was organizing other colleagues in the trade under a new organization. What had really happened, according to him, is that God wanted him to do what he was doing, that he had a SACRED DUTY to Him, to himself, and to the world. He had a MISSION to fulfill. To me, he had reached his center.

**CASE STUDIES**

**Leif Lindholm, Metso Minerals Mexico, President**

(Beuchot, 2008)

“The Mexican market organization is made up of Mexico and Central America. We supply equipment to the mining industry. We have for the last five years been growing with extremely high growth rates. This has put a lot of pressure and strain on our organization, especially on our managing team. This demand started to show some tension in the different areas of the company. We knew that to be able to keep on growing we had to change the way we were behaving. The process Back to the Center gave us the support we needed to change this behavior. Today we are much more capable as individuals, but more important, as team workers. It has been a demanding process, but an exciting one. Metso Minerals Mexico was one company before this coaching process and another one, a much more improved one after it.”

**Geff Hoots, Continental Automotive Systems, FIPASI Plant, General Director** (*ibid.*)

“The plant in Silao, Mexico had been growing 40% annually. We have more than doubled our business in the last three years. Looking back, my greatest challenge was achieving this with a very young managing team. In January 2006, the average tenure for the team members was less than seven months. For three of my six managers, this was their first managerial position in their careers.
Early in 2007, it was apparent that this team, while very successful, was not operating as effectively as we wanted. Our young team was struggling with hard work loads in a rapidly changing environment, cross-border teamwork and life-balance dissatisfaction. We contacted the CEC (ARC approach) and began this program in October 2007. The coaching process itself was both enjoyable but also challenging. It forced us to identify and confront weaknesses that existed in our working relationships and to agree on and execute an action plan to improve in these areas. The process also included one-to-one sessions that often touched personal issues that were affecting our performance. Our team concluded this process in June and all of them are very pleased with the results. There is a unanimous opinion on the team that we have greatly improved our communication and our teamwork. Now we can face a growth of 60% in the midst of severe economic circumstances. The motivation, commitment, and spirit of our team are at their highest levels, and this is important, because in today’s world, you cannot win without a strong and effective leadership team.”

Otmar Hauck, VW Wolfsburg Plastic Part Unit, Executive Director (ibid.)

“Our unit comprises 1850 people from line workers to highly qualified engineers. In February 2007 the leadership team was facing three challenges. First, to supply our internal customers with a high daily production volume. Second, a new and challenging car project. Third, the start-up of our new VW production system. We decided to approach of the Center of Executive Coaching in Mexico. We had planned three or four intense one week sessions, and in between, work via telephone and videoconferences. The first session was dedicated to knowing each other, to individual and collective data gathering, and to personal interviews. We also did the first group exercises. At the beginning, some of the team members were very restrictive. As well, the language (English in Germany) seemed to be a much bigger problem than we had estimated, but thanks to the good spirit, energy, and professionalism of our coach things improved a lot during the week. The breakthrough came with the second block, which was titled Changing the Mental Map. As a result, the team members started to behave differently; communication and interaction improved a lot. Block three in June was called Back to the Center and made the team climb to the next level. The change that the team achieved in nine months is substantial. We understand each other better, we share a common vision, we help each other and we are more and more successful, both in private and business life.”

CONCLUSION

The process from suspension to connection, or as Olalla (Bergquist, 2008, p. 25) calls it, the process of alignment of the individual with himself, is chaotic (Hock, 1999), not only because order is created from chaos, but because the process itself is a chaotic order, or if you may, an orderly chaos. We mean this specially because of the emotional ups and downs that manifest as the journey takes place: happiness combined with sadness, despair mixed with amazement and awe, pain combined with joy, and fear intermingled with peace.
Table 2. ARC stages, steps and key actions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stage</th>
<th>Step</th>
<th>Key Action</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Awareness (A)</td>
<td>Suspension</td>
<td>Stop assumptions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rebuilding (R)</td>
<td>Redirection</td>
<td>Turn away from the goal</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Intention/Attraction</td>
<td>Generate a vision</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Destruction/Creation</td>
<td>Abandon old assumptions and create new ones</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Centering (C)</td>
<td>Connection</td>
<td>Become the vision</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

We can say that ontological coaching is a co-creative, five-step dance (see Table 2) between coach and coachee that both engage in to traverse their way back to the long forgotten center. Is there a nobler and more urgent task?

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