Commentary on Jack Wood Interview: Finding the Courage to Uncloak the Unconscious

Gail Johnson Vaughan

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Interview: Finding the Courage to Uncloak the Unconscious

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The author offers her perspective on the Jack Wood interview. She uses a classic story, self-disclosure and a personal anecdote to illustrate the unconscious processes that are always at work. Readers get to view the impact of ‘covert private imperatives’ and appreciate the opportunities that come with such recognition and choice.

The Interview with Jack Wood evoked Nicolai Gogol’s The Overcoat for me. In this 1842 story Akaky Akakievich is a humble and hopeless minor clerk who comes to think that owning and wearing a fine overcoat will win him respect and meaning. He puts obtaining the overcoat above everything else. When he succeeds he is indeed noticed and at last feels self-worth but alas, when he is “robbed by a thief of his overcoat of pride he slipped into the shadows and died.”1

Whether we are looking through a Tavistockian, Freudian, Jungian or other lens, ignoring the unconscious has significant risks. Although coaching our clients in what Woods calls “procedure” has great value it is in many ways like Akaky’s overcoat. Even if it is made with the finest threads of current thinking on group relations and individual coaching technique, it can easily be dislodged by the thief within.

Bringing the unconscious to awareness brings it to choice. It is only then that we have the option of power over the thief. When we are aware of the fears that drive “management of anxiety” and the archetypes that populate organizational visions of hope, we have the choice to explore and learn from them. We have the choice to do the individual work that frees us from “covert private imperatives.” We have the choice to explore the gap between “text” and “subtext,” between collective delusion and reality.

If, as coaches, we can help our clients both gain the overcoat of skill and “procedure,” and gain access to the unconscious, we can help them distinguish the covert driving forces which all too often are the undoing of the organization and the individuals within it. We can help them harness the unconscious drive for healthy relationships and shared power which leads to true success.

1“robbed by a thief of his overcoat of pride he slipped into the shadows and died” unpublished song, The Overcoat, words and music by William H Kimball, 1965.
The rub of it all, of course, is that it is difficult, if not impossible, for the coach (or therapist) to take a client farther than they have gone themselves. Perhaps it is important for the individual coach to decide what kind of coaching they want to do. There is no harm in the coach helping the client obtain the overcoat of the finest materials as long as both understand that is something that can be set aside or even stolen. Not all clients will be ready to do the deeper work, but holding it out as vision for accessing its power when they are ready is perhaps the least we can do. The “coach” we provide can “protect and carry” our clients from a starting place to a specific destination. How profound that destination may be, and how lasting the residency at that destination, may well relate to our own access to, and comfort with the unconscious.

I have some “overcoat” experience of my own. From 1985 to 2007 I had the privilege to be the executive director of Sierra Adoption Services, a private nonprofit agency with a mission to “transform the lives of children in foster care by building and nurturing permanent families.” I joined the agency in a ten-hour per week position as assistant executive director, bringing the staff to a total of three, comprising 1.5 FTEs (full time equivalents). The total annual budget was $35,000. By 1989 I had become the full-time executive director with a staff of five. When I left the organization in 2007 Sierra Adoptions had sixty staff in three regional offices and operated with a $5 million budget. We were annually placing approximately 200 hard-to-place children from the foster care system into adoptive families. We were recognized as an innovative, effective agency showing that what was once considered impossible was well within reach, influencing the child welfare system and making it possible for children previously considered “unadoptable” to achieve permanent families. My learning curve was immense. I repeatedly grew the organization beyond my capacity and had to retool myself again and again to provide effective leadership.

I wore a number of overcoats over the years as I scrambled to develop what Wood calls “procedures”—management techniques necessary to fulfill the mission of our agency. Some of these overcoats were made of “smoke and mirrors”. These were relatively easy to identify and replace as my skills increased. Some were made of the strong stuff from my shadow. For these the hardest part was even recognizing that they were “overcoats” covering parts of me I was not prepared to own. The following story may be useful.

In the early years my role required me to wear many hats, even the social worker hat from time to time. Since I was blessed with an array of talents I enjoyed the variety and got pretty good at them. It was sometimes hard for me to let go of tasks as our staff grew,

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2 In 2009 Sierra Adoption Services formally changed its name to Sierra Forever Families to reflect its commitment to achieving a broader range of permanent families for children in foster care. These include reunification with birth parents, guardianship and adoption. For more information on Sierra Forever Families, contact Bob Herne, Executive Director, at bherne@sierraff.org.
both because I enjoyed them, but also, if I am honest, because part of me thought I could do them better. I was pragmatic enough to know that even if my arrogance was true I did not have the time to do them and released them to the growing ranks of our staff.

After ten or more years of not receiving annual evaluations, my board responded to my request for feedback and put a 360° evaluation process in place. In a few years I began to notice a pattern: consistently high marks, but also a recurrence of occasional comments about me not respecting or valuing staff. Since these comments in no way fit my self-image I dismissed them as coming from underperforming staff.

By my fifteenth anniversary the agency was recognized as a leader in the field, developing and implementing cutting edge model programs, successfully advocating for legislative and policy changes to remove barriers to permanency for the children we served, and annually increasing the number of hard-to-place children we placed into adoptive families. We even received the Federal Adoptions Excellence Award. And the comments on the 360’s kept coming. Finally they escalated into a painful confrontation from staff who declared at a management team meeting that there was an elephant in the room that no one was willing to name. Three of us left that day being sure we were the elephant. Only one of us was right. I asked a trusted consultant if he would invite the management team to email their understanding of the “elephant” to him so that he in turn could email them anonymously to all of us.

Indeed, I was the elephant. Emails ranged in tone from apologetic to vitriolic but they shared the common observation that I did not respect or value staff. I met individually with my executive staff to ask them to help me see what the team members were talking about. I met with the consultant as well. Slowly and painfully, I began to see through their eyes.

I saw an executive director who’s verbal communication expressed warmth and appreciation of staff, but whose behavior communicated something else altogether. For example, in order to keep things moving I ran management team meetings with a steam roller. Rather than allowing time for full expression of ideas I rolled them flat and moved on. Likewise, rather than fully delegating tasks I held my breath in expectation that staff would fall short of what I could do. I began to ask myself what message I was sending by those behaviors. To my horror it became clear: I actually did not respect or value my staff. They were right and I was crushed. These were my teammates whom I truly cared about.

My “warm and fuzzy boss” overcoat had served my self-image, but not my organization nor the children we were there to help. Once I had wiped the tears I phoned each member of the management team and asked for individual meetings with them in their homes.
I told them that I finally understood my behavior and asked for their forgiveness and help. I explained that the behavior came out of unconscious survival strategies that I had developed in my childhood. I confirmed that those strategies certainly were not effective in my role as their leader and declared my commitment to personal change. My goals were real authenticity, humility, and support for our mutual growth as a team. I asked for their help and compassion as I developed new communication habits and risked a new level of honesty in my communication with them. They responded kindly. I was forgiven. They agreed to support my goals.

The time that followed was hard work of an entirely different kind. Real leadership requires modeling the values you believe in. Authenticity takes real courage. It takes looking in a clear mirror and accepting the flawed reflection that looks back. It takes beginning the analysis of a problem with the question of how you might be part of the problem. It takes owning your real power by changing the only person you have the power to change, yourself.

As I look back at that time and the “me” that emerged, I have to say that I did not change, I transformed. The authentic self that was revealed is far more courageous, far more humble, and far more appreciate of what others have to contribute to common goals. I was able to finally identify my real strengths and work actively to bring on staff leadership that I could groom for my role when the time came. In 2007, I became clear that I no longer wanted to run an organization. I wanted to focus my energies and talents on influencing positive improvements in child welfare and build capacity in the organizations that serve the children and their families. I announced that I had taken the organization as far as I could and looked forward to passing it on to new leadership that could take it to its full potential. Nine months later, after a national search, our board selected the staff member I had groomed.

In my role as advocate, change agent, consultant and coach I rely on the shared wisdom of those with whom I work. I am so much more effective for what they bring to the process. When things get complicated I check out to see if I’ve donned another overcoat and how I might be contributing to the problem, in whatever small way. I seek the courage to be authentic and the humility to accept my shortcomings. And I keep on keeping on, because that’s what it takes to do the impossible for children who deserve it.

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Gail Johnson Vaughan is the executive director and only staff person of Mission Focused Solutions, a not-for-profit organization with a mission to “influence improvement in child welfare and build capacity in organizations that serve the children and their families.” She has been recognized with the US DHHS Adoption Excellence Award (2008), the California Foster Care Month Coalition “Change a Lifetime Award” (2008), the Sacramento Business Journal’s “Women Who Mean Business” Award (2005), and is featured in Positively M.A.D., Making a Difference in Your Organizations, Communities and the World, published by Berrett-Koehler (2004). Under her leadership Sierra Adoption Services was honored as by Sacramento’s Nonprofit Resource Center as the Outstanding Nonprofit of the Year (2005). Gail is a graduate of the University of Redlands and is currently pursuing graduate degrees in Organizational Psychology from the Professional School of Psychology. She is Senior Fellow of the American Leadership Forum. She and her husband live in the foothills of the Sierras and have a total of five children and five grandchildren.
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