

Integration across continents



Clare Myatt trained in California initially, having moved from the UK. After adding other trainings, including an emphasis on the somatic, she felt the need to integrate her work in a country where rigid divisions are enforced between coaching and counselling. A completely different landscape awaited her on her return to the UK

In true John McEnroe style – although I said ‘you’re kidding me, right?’ instead of ‘you cannot be serious!’ – I expressed my horror at the suggestion: ‘Use somatic coaching in my private practice? Really?’ My colleague nodded, serious beneath a gentle smile.

And that places us in the middle of my story – behind where I am today, ahead of the start of my journey to therapeutic coaching and grateful membership of AICTP. So let’s go back and start at the beginning.

Denied the opportunity to study psychology in the UK by well-meaning (undoubtedly terrified) parents, I studied law and entered the human resources arena. As my 30th birthday approached, I decided a big change was in order. I started a new life in Dallas, Texas in July 1987. Moments of clarity descended thick and fast over the next couple of years and, to cut a long story short, I enrolled for a Master’s degree in Marriage and Family Therapy in Los Angeles in 1989. The California Family Study Center¹ focused on Murray Bowen’s family systems approach, augmented by studies of Carl Whitaker, Virginia Satir, Milton H. Erickson, Salvador Minuchin, John Bowlby and so on, thereby encompassing Structural, Strategic, Systemic/Milan, Narrative and Transgenerational therapy. A thorough grounding.

Practice as a psychotherapist in the US is markedly different from that in the UK, although I will speak here only to the system in place for California. In conjunction with a Master’s degree, I was required to conduct 3,000 hours of supervised counselling with individuals, couples and families, and pass a written and then an oral exam. At the time, pass rates for both the written and oral exams were less than half, so the process required extensive preparation. From enrolment in college to licensure took six determined years. I immediately opened my private practice, revelling in the freedom and independence! For the next four years, I saw clients and took a business development course to develop my entrepreneurial desires. It was at such a convention that I met Richard Strozzi-Heckler², founder of Strozzi Institute³.

Richard was demonstrating an aikido-styled *randori* described by Wikipedia as ‘a form of practice in which [he] defends against multiple attackers in quick succession without knowing how they will attack or in what order’⁴. I watched – both alarmed and invigorated. In that moment, I knew I wanted what he had – no words could explain what ‘it’ was – although now I can say without pause: ‘Richard embodies deep and resonant presence.’

As soon as my business course ended, I enrolled at Strozzi Institute for their somatic

coach training. It was one of the best decisions I've ever made. Life-enriching, life-changing – I can't say enough about my transformational experience there. My nickname on arrival was The Mouse. I left with an embodied ability to own my history, be self-generating and self-determining.

Those interim years of practising as a psychotherapist and training at Strozzi Institute were both rewarding and frustrating. Clients worked through family-of-origin issues that held them back, achieved sobriety, improved their mood, reduced anxiety, had extensive insight, changed behaviour... and yet... there was something missing. Both for them, and for me as a practitioner. Those presenting for therapy would complete a chunk of work, become suitable for coaching, and with the limiting parameters of California law in place at the time (keeping the practice of psychotherapy and coaching separate), I would be compelled to refer them on. Equally, those coming to me for coaching would dip into therapeutic territory and, as per prevailing ethical standards, I would be duty-bound to refer them to another therapist. I knew I had the competence to guide these clients utilising all my skills and I felt frustrated. My hands were tied. Or so I thought.

Not stuck at all

Enter the therapist featured at the beginning. She was a licensed marriage and family therapist like me, certified as a Master Somatic Coach, as I soon would be, and managing to use all her professional skills. I believe she contracted with her clients for either psychotherapy or somatic coaching. And then there was a grey area. What actually happened in the room took whatever course it took. An emergent process perhaps? I can't say for sure because I was never her client, but the conversations we had suggest a confident commitment to

serving the best interests of the client. Of course, this was based on her opinion of what constituted best interest and I had no way to assess it, or anyone else to ask. Was this OK? Ethical? Foolhardy? We are now squarely back to my alarm about incorporating somatic coaching into my practice.

Before I continue with my story of integration, how I came to weave together the strands of counsellor and coach, perhaps I should shed a little more light on some of the terms I've used here that may be unfamiliar to some readers. First of all, what does 'somatic' mean, how does that fit with the word 'coaching', and what do somatic coaches do that others do not?

I knew I had
the
competence
to guide
these clients
utilising all
my skills, and
I felt
frustrated.
My hands
were tied

Somatic is the term used by my teacher Richard Stozzi-Heckler, and others⁵, to describe the living body in its wholeness – beyond skin, bones, organs. Here, reference is being made to the body in its aliveness. Somatic practitioners believe that who we are is revealed in the body moment to moment, that our character is inseparable from our form. Imagine someone who cannot maintain eye contact, energy darting all over the place, tapping one or more limbs, an underlying sense of anxiety or distress. Compare with someone who can maintain both gaze

and silence with equanimity, a peacefulness and stillness emanating from deep within their being. As practitioners, you can already recognise clients like this and will undoubtedly be curious about what created such a presentation in the world. Somatic coaches are trained to not only recognise the way someone shows up and connects, but also to make assessments about aetiology. They read the body, assess its energetic shape and way of interacting with others,

and observe capacity and competence. Armed with such insights, they are able to assist clients to shift from their 'old shape' (the one that has been sustained over time and isn't necessarily helping them move forward) to a 'new shape' providing greater possibilities.

Part of becoming a somatic coach involves a series of somatic bodywork sessions with a Strozzi practitioner, and this I did with enthusiasm. Having spent most of my adult life in psychotherapy of one sort or another, finally here was someone paying attention to more than my intellect and emotions. Someone was actually interested in my body.

As you may imagine, 'someone was actually interested in my body' was a trigger all on its own, let alone someone interacting with my body in a safe, non-sexual, gentle, respectful way.

I found the process illuminating, moving and fundamentally transformative. My body became an ally, an integral part of my identity, rather than something assessed (critically of course) by weight or dress size. Beyond stamina, fitness or shape, my body became a resource for generating new actions, communicating moods and messages, allowing me to fulfil on commitments, and provide a safe container for clients.

At the conclusion of one particular bodywork session, stepping out into the California landscape of space and sunshine and feeling intensely alive and grateful, I had an aha moment: everybody has a body.

If that be so, then I'd found a natural way to blend my therapeutic and somatic coach training, because from this point forward, I couldn't ignore the body in the conversation. The body and its owner were there, right in front of me. Whether a client contracted for therapy or coaching, they brought their body with them, providing an obvious route to engage with their past, present and future. Here was a clear path to avoid getting caught up in what is, for me,

an unnatural separation between therapy and coaching. I felt revitalised.

Acting on the aha moment

Reflecting my own historical shaping, I proceeded with caution. Bringing in somatic observation with clients, introducing them to what might be possible if we focused more on the body and less on the intellect, I expanded my capacity to seamlessly offer a somatic sensibility. I remained careful in the contracting, redesigning my paperwork to reflect the evolution of my offer. From time to time, the rule-abiding part of me worried about the Board of Behavioral Sciences⁶ 'finding out' what I was doing, yet I remained confident – just like my colleague – that I was best serving the needs of my Silicon Valley clients. I had the opportunity to work with incredibly intelligent serial entrepreneurs whose intimate lives were either non-existent or in shambles – introducing them to the innate wisdom of the body, heretofore mostly ignored, and enabled a different type of action to founding a new company or inventing a new product. One proposed to his long-term girlfriend and went on to marry and become a father; another developed greater work-life balance and saved a failing marriage; another negotiated a flexible working arrangement so that she could pay attention to fertility concerns.

Then came a seismic shift, affecting both personal and professional horizons. Some of you know that my kindergarten sweetheart found me via the website Friends Reunited in 2005, and within a year he'd proposed, I'd moved back to the UK and we were married⁷. When it came time to establish my practice again, I was shocked to learn how different the parameters in the UK were. Initially I joined BACP and the Association for Coaching – a foot in both camps. Then came the chance to join BACP's coaching division, and soon after, AICTP – I was suddenly surrounded by other clinicians in a similar exploration of how to weave together our therapeutic and coaching skills. Having the freedom to proceed with a broad-ranging offer – built on a foundation of clear, careful and appropriate contracting with the client

– was liberating to say the least. And in this brave new world of integration I call myself a ‘therapeutic coach’ or ‘integrative coach-therapist’, ‘working somatically’. I haven’t yet studied with Debra and Nash so don’t feel competent to declare myself a Personal Consultant⁸, but I do know the coaching work I do is informed every moment by my therapeutic training from all those years ago and is the richer for this systemic underpinning.

I am completing this article the day after delivering an information session to coach-therapists about how to be deeply present for clients. Naturally, I focus on the role of the body in presence. Beyond our intellectual skill set, accessing sensation, mood and emotion brings us fully into the room, creating the limbic resonance for safety, trust, healing and change. Whether we are practising as therapists, coaches or integratively, I believe this to be an essential element of our work. And so I come full circle. That deep and resonant presence I witnessed in Strozzi-Heckler all those years ago now informs not only how I work with clients, but also in training our profession to become more embodied themselves. I conclude with a quote from one of my favourite sources:

‘The person of the therapist is the converting catalyst, not his order or credo, not his spatial location in the room, not his exquisitely chosen words or denominational silences. So long as the rules of a therapeutic system do not hinder limbic transmission – a critical caveat – they remain inconsequential, neocortical distractions. The dispensable trappings of dogma may determine what a therapist thinks he is doing, what he talks about when he talks about therapy, but the agent of change is who he is.’⁹

Clare Myatt LL.B MA offers therapeutic-coaching to a broad range of clients, and training in deep presence for practitioners in Birmingham and London. +44 (0) 7894 714 853 or clare@claremyatt.co.uk – see more information at www.claremyatt.co.uk

References

1 California Family Study Center became Phillips Graduate Institute, named after its founder, Clinton Phillips. <http://pgi.edu>

2 Richard Strozzi-Heckler PhD is a psychologist, founder of Lomi School, with a sixth degree black belt in the martial art of Aikido <http://www.strozziinstitute.com/about/faculty>

3 Strozzi Institute

www.strozziinstitute.com

4 <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Randori>

5 See for instance Peter Levine’s Somatic Experiencing <http://www.traumahealing.org>, Pat Ogden’s Sensorimotor Psychotherapy <https://www.sensorimotorpsychotherapy.org/home/index.html>, or Ron Kurtz’s Hakomi <http://hakomi.com>

6 BBS is the licensing body for Marriage and Family Therapists in California. www.bbs.ca.org

7 www.claremyatt.co.uk/sweethearts

8 Popovich N, Jinks J. Personal consultancy: a model for integrating counselling and coaching. London: Routledge; 2013.

9 Lewis T, Amini F, Lannon R. A general theory of love. London: Vintage; 2000.