

VIA™ coaching; a path of transformation

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Introduction

Via, in Latin, means path or way. It is pleasant to imagine life as a journey along a clear path towards a beautiful horizon. But the way is more convoluted; each step or turn can change our destiny. VIA is also the acronym for my coaching approach: Vocational Integration and Alignment. In this article I shall give an overview of VIA coaching, in which we accompany our clients on their journey, staying close by as they explore inner and outer landscapes, challenging them to clamber up the mountain, lending a hand when they stumble and fall, sitting with them to gaze in wonder at a new view.

What is coaching?

I developed VIA organically, during 20 years of practice and action research in personal and professional development. My life work is guided by a central question: *how can we, while honouring our differences, acknowledge and use wisely our power to co-create the world in which we live?* I engage in a range of therapeutic, educational, artistic and research activities, which I broadly call leadership development: supporting and challenging clients as they lead social and organisational change, lead groups and teams, or simply (ha!) lead a balanced and creative life. As part of this work, I engage in many one-to-one adult development dialogues, with pragmatic goals and no predetermined curriculum. These dialogues are what I mean by coaching. Let us look at this definition in a little more detail.

one-to-one: In contrast to organisational consulting and community development work, in coaching my focus is the individual. Coaching may be integrated in team and organisational development, but has its roots and its flowering in the individual and their sense of purpose and meaning.

adult development: The 'coachee' is a multi-dimensional human being, with unfathomable physical, emotional, intellectual and spiritual resources. Presupposing the client's capacity for transformation helps me to address the whole human being: intelligent, artistic, intuitive, creative and destructive, passionate and compassionate.

dialogues: The form of coaching is dialogue – at once verbal and non-verbal – shared and co-created by coach and coachee. We work face-to-face, enabling us to keep the body in mind. Alongside the power and precision of language, we use movement, breath, drawing and other creative media to facilitate mindful, embodied learning and development.

with pragmatic goals: Unlike much therapeutic work, coaching has pragmatic goals concerning the individual's contribution to a larger system. My task as a coach is to help the coachee identify, understand and fulfil their life work, with due awareness of economy, ecology and ethics. This supports a sense of one's own power and responsibility, which in turn enables the coachee to make a greater contribution to – and a critical assessment of – their team or organisation.

and no predetermined curriculum: The coach does not set out to teach a specific set of ideas or skills, although they may introduce conceptual models or provide skill development. Coaching is an ongoing creative response to issues that arise in the dialogue. We identify and address needs at two levels: (i) the presenting challenges and (ii) the coachee's long-term development needs. So, pragmatic problem-solving is in the context of a more holistic and personal vision.

What is VIA coaching?

The VIA journey has three phases

- Ø Vocation: clarifying the individual's sense of meaning and purpose
- Ø Integration: integrating diverse roles, perspectives, interests and identities
- Ø Alignment: aligning inner and outer worlds, individual and shared purpose

I shall present these core components of the VIA approach through notes from three coaching sessions with Juno, a fictional coachee inspired by dialogues with hundreds of clients from over sixty countries.

Vocation

Juno has arrived for his first coaching session. A successful executive in a multinational corporation, he greets me with a warm smile and firm handshake. As we walk into the meeting room, I notice his confident stride and slightly puffed-out chest. I introduce myself, say a few words about coaching emphasising the confidentiality of the process; then ask Juno to tell me about his work. He launches into a detailed description of his organisation, his team and his own senior role. I focus my attention on Juno, listening for key words, finding empathic connection and feeling my way into his world. After twenty minutes, I feed back to Juno the information I have gathered, not on the details of his business, nor on his experience, but about his core values. When I use the phrase 'your sense of purpose', Juno suddenly sighs. His chest deflates and his chin drops. 'That's the trouble, Sara', he says, 'I've got everything I wanted, but I've forgotten what I'm doing it for'.

Victor Frankl reminds us that mankind can bear everything except the loss of meaning. By starting – and ending – with the question 'Why are you here?', VIA coaching addresses a compelling human question. Vocation, the personal sense of meaning, purpose, or calling, is the heart of this approach. It is the measure we return to, whenever the coachee is struggling with a tough decision. Vocation is the enduring context for all the problem solving, planning, analysis and insight that takes place in the course of the VIA coaching dialogue. Purpose and meaning are shaped by culture. I have written elsewhere of the role of culture in therapeutic practice (Boas 2004); here let us note in passing that people whose culture is more past-oriented (traditional, conventional, ancestral, such as in France or South Korea) are likely to have a Vocation based on meaning. Those whose cultural context is future-oriented (seeking progress, innovation and achievement, such as in the Netherlands or the USA) are likely to have a Vocation based on purpose. In either case, our Vocation – calling to us from past or future – needs to be discerned and acted upon in the present.

Many coaching clients have lost touch with their Vocation. Taken over by success, duty, necessity or gratification, they feel hollow. How does this manifest itself? We hear it in their language, in statements like: 'I'm going through the motions... I'm only in it for the money... I'm bored... I'm tired... I'm not having fun any more'. And we see it in the body: the chest caving in or artificially puffed-out, or a slouching, 'spineless' way of sitting.

I come straight to the point 'What *are* you doing it for, Juno? Let's take some time to clarify this... When you were a little kid, what did you want to be?' Juno: 'Not poor'. 'Not poor?' Juno: 'We were poor; everyone in the neighbourhood was poor. I saw my mother suffer. I wanted to change all that'.

At a moment like this, we might explore the family dynamics and the child's feeling of responsibility for the family well-being, his role in relation to the mother, the meaning of 'poor'... I stay on the track of Juno's Vocation.

'What kind of change did you imagine?'...

Through a series of questions and responses, shifting our focus between past, present and future, we articulate Juno's evolving sense of purpose. I ask which work activities currently give him most energy and fulfilment, what makes him really angry, and a whole series of 'what for' questions. At the same time, I take Juno's sunken posture into my own torso, seeing and feeling subtle changes as he starts to reconnect to himself and sit more upright. His chest becomes relaxed and his breathing softer. Mirroring his movement, I feel strength and vitality in the middle of my body, up the front of my spine. I suggest that we stand up as Juno finds words for his life work: 'I want to help to create a fairer society; this means taking a stand on abuses of power and finding balance and justice within myself'. As he says this, Juno stands tall and centred, his spine long and balanced.

In movement terms, Vocation is associated with core strength, the vertical plane, taking a strong stance. I see it as a channelling or gathering of energy from earth and sky. This 'knowing what you stand for' is the beginning of the VIA journey. I often conduct part of the coaching dialogue standing up, to anchor the conversation in their Vocational stance.



illustration Jonny Shapiro

Vocation – Sara standing

As you read, you may find yourself reflecting on your Vocation. Ask yourself: 'What am I here for?' Perhaps no word comes. What about an image; a picture or sound? Or a feeling? Try standing with your feet hip-width apart; pelvis heavy; spine unfurling towards the sky; head balanced lightly like a flower; shoulders wide; arms hanging; belly soft. Breathe into your centre. Here you stand, like a tree, roots deep in the earth, branches reaching lightly to the sky, in readiness for your life work.

Integration

A few sessions into the process, Juno feels connected to his sense of purpose and is finding ways to make his employment the arena for his own life work. His sense of Vocation manifests in his energy and posture and is reflected in new focus and motivation. He has resolved a conflict with a team member, refined some key business processes so they take less time and initiated a corporate social responsibility forum. The forum has given him greater visibility in other parts of the organisation and he is increasingly called upon to speak at round-table meetings or sponsor new projects. Juno finds these new activities meaningful and fulfilling, but he is spending more time in meetings and catching up with emails in the evenings and at weekends. Renewed motivation for his work means more stress in the family.

Clients often feel pulled or even torn between different roles, relationships and responsibilities. Many see this as an 'either/or' choice and give something up – solitude, music, intimacy, exercise – in order to succeed at work. For these clients, the Integration phase of VIA coaching involves a paradigm shift, from *either/or* to *both/and*. To understand the photon, scientists had to embrace two seemingly incommensurable truths: light is *both* particle *and* wave. Similarly, our coachee may be both ruthless businessman and caring steward of social justice; friend and rival; outspoken public figure and gentle family member.

An individual embodies many roles, is engaged in diverse relationships and guided by multiple beliefs, desires and dreams. VIA coaching supports the Integration of these and encourages the wisdom that arises from being able to perceive a situation from different points of view, without confusion. Integration is the basis of personal integrity, allowing us to be true to our own multi-dimensional nature. I think of this as a kind of *inner democracy*: listening to all our own voices, creating a diverse, harmonious world within ourselves. This internal listening allows us to be democratic in our dealings with others.

As Juno talks, I notice that he is leaning slightly to one side. His right hand makes relaxed, generous gestures while his left hand hangs limp. One foot taps nervously under the table. 'It's getting stressful', he says, 'My wife is giving me a hard time about the emails at home. She keeps on about it; I find myself disconnecting emotionally and coming home later and later'.

At a moment like this, we might explore the link between Juno's relationship with his wife and earlier maternal relationships, or how these stereotypical roles of 'nagging wife' and 'brow-beaten husband' are created and perpetuated. I am interested in the neglected inner part that Juno's wife gives voice to. This kind of splitting is well-known to therapist and coach alike. Integration issues may present themselves in the form of a loved one who makes demands, or feelings of obligation and resentment. Or we may hear the client say, 'I feel pulled in different directions... I don't know what I should do... I start things and don't finish them... I am not sticking to my decisions'. In more extreme cases, this becomes, 'I switched off... I had to disconnect... It doesn't matter... It's not important...'. In movement terms, Integration issues may manifest as foot tapping, pen fiddling, hair twiddling, rocking and swaying. The client may make disjointed 'weighing up' hand gestures, body parts may appear disconnected, or the whole torso may tilt to one side; angles of 45 degrees are not uncommon!



illustration Jonny Shapiro

Integration

Much executive coaching includes practical advice on how to achieve life balance. In contrast, VIA coaching prioritises *inner* Integration, preparing the ground for new behaviours to be sustained, without internal sabotage. In movement terms, I associate Integration with the horizontal plane: lateral stretching or reaching from side to side and around the body; taking space; embracing, balancing and drawing together with ease. I view Integration as an exchange of energy with others and the environment.

I suggest to Juno that his different body parts might embody different duties and desires. He maps this out with coloured markers on a large piece of paper, playfully exaggerating the size and shape of dominant parts. We consider his caricature together. He names and writes core values alongside the different parts: efficiency, creativity, justice, intimacy,

achievement. I inquire about the internal relationships. 'How do these two compete for your time, energy and attention?... How could they support or nourish one another?' When he comes to 'intimacy' and 'achievement' I invite Juno to stand and imagine holding these two, one in each hand. I stand by him as he intuitively weighs them up, re-balancing his body. He draws his hands closer together. He laughs suddenly, 'Without intimacy, my achievement isn't sustainable – I'll get worn down. And then the real work will never get done!' We sit and talk some more. Juno appears more centred. The gestures of both hands are lively and relaxed. His foot has stopped tapping.

As you read, you may notice both balance and imbalance within yourself. How democratic is your inner world? Do you make space for the part that seeks recognition and the part that gives freely? For your need to earn a living and your longing to serve the world? Try drawing a picture of your diverse relationships, duties, desires, roles and responsibilities. It could be a self portrait, a tree with many branches, a pie chart of how you spend your time, an imaginary landscape... stand in front of your picture and take it in. Let your body do the thinking as you move, sway, stretch, reach and pull. Notice how the feelings change as you embrace and integrate your own complexity. Enjoy a moment of quiet balance, alive to what's around you and connected to your own spacious centre.

Alignment

Juno and I have been working together for some months. New challenges have arisen and been addressed; creative solutions have been found and fresh problems revealed. Juno approaches his immediate concerns with insight and equanimity, but he is becoming frustrated with the wider context. Juno speaks of the corporate culture. His arms are folded and his torso seems narrow and dense, as if he were 'holding himself in'. This self-protective, stuck posture intensifies as he says, 'The CSR (corporate social responsibility) stuff is great, but our internal workings are still based on personal power bases and unilateral decision-making. The others applaud my lead but they don't follow. I'm the odd one out. I can't go along with their way of doing things any more'.

Aligned energy is power. VIA coaching helps individuals explore the congruence between their own aspirations and those of their team, organisation and wider community. I have coached many brilliant and successful people who dream of

leaving work or home because their environment no longer fits them. Behind this dream there is a feeling of impotence – no hope of changing the system, the only solution is to leave it. Alignment, then, is about empowerment, as we channel energy into action. It concerns the mutual tuning of self and system so that our inner and outer worlds are 'on the same wavelength'. Occasionally, this cannot be accomplished and the coachee needs to make radical life changes. Most of my clients come to love the life they lead. A few leave to lead a life they love.

We hear alignment issues when clients say 'I wonder if I am the right person for the job... I don't think they value me... I feel so different from the others...My heart's not in it...'. The body tells a similar story in jerky movements, hand gestures going in all directions, a stuck, blocked, self-protective stance or an awkward, wide-based gait. In the presence of Alignment issues, the coach may experience headaches, tension or confusion as we somatise our client's mis-match with their environment.

I suggest to Juno that we work outdoors. Walking and talking, Juno seems to 'unblock' and gain perspective. He becomes intrigued by the idea of being a change agent for the culture of his organisation. His despair lifts as he develops a vision of the whole team becoming more effective, efficient and fulfilled as they start to work more democratically. Juno strides along, his arms and legs swinging more freely and smoothly as time goes on.

Alignment is expressed in physical grace, clarity of thought and efficiency of action. It is associated with movement in the sagittal plane, which passes like a wheel through the mid-line of the body. The sagittal is the last movement plane to develop in child development: an infant walks in the vertical plane – shuffling forward on a wide base. Then the horizontal movement plane is integrated. An adult, however, swings through the centre line of the body. This is accentuated by models on the catwalk or other 'adult' walking! Sagittal means 'like an arrow'; I view alignment as channelling energy, with clear direction and motion.

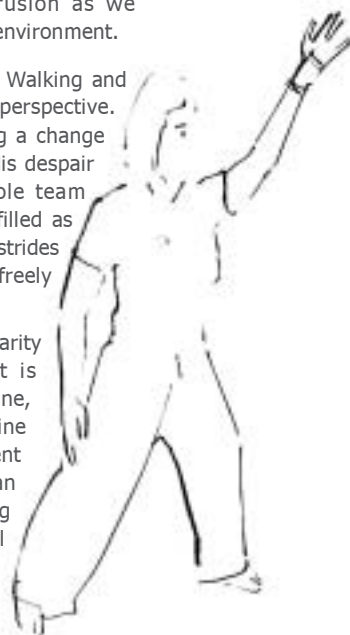


Illustration Jonny Shapiro

Alignment

Back at the meeting space, we explore the corporate culture. Juno draws an iceberg. Above the waterline, he sketches and notes the actions and behaviours of daily life in his work place. Below the waterline, we fill in the unspoken assumptions and unwritten rules that may support them. I ask him to identify areas of incompatibility and we explore which are actual value differences and which are simply different expressions of shared values. As we explore core values that Juno shares with his colleagues; he gets excited about building on this narrow base to create something new. At the same time, Juno realises he can't do this alone. We decide to hold a management retreat, taking the whole team off-site, into a beautiful environment where they can connect to their own natural resources and reflect on their shared culture. During the retreat, Juno comes into his power, listening, supporting, challenging and inspiring his team mates as they explore, articulate and re-align their common purpose.

Individual coaching can be the forum for transformational learning. As a client once said to me, 'I've got a whole new way of looking at the world. It makes everything easier'. However, piecemeal coaching has its dangers. If one individual changes while their environment stays the same, new tensions arise. We need to integrate individual work in wider processes. VIA coaching usually happens in the context of an Integrated Coaching Partnership – our change process that facilitates and connects individual, team and organisational transformation. There is an ethical basis to this choice, linked to the fact that most coaching has an organisational context. Coaching may transform a client's outlook – while seemingly beneficial, this can be painful and confusing when they go back into a relatively unchanging environment. We need to be careful not to put a client in the role of isolated change agent within their team or organisation.

As you read, you may be thinking about your own Alignment. What is the arena for your life work? Which professional community shares your values? Who understands and supports your deepest aspirations? Try taking a walk in a beautiful place, to reflect on these questions. Begin by standing, connecting to your Vocation, to earth and sky. Feel the movement of the air and your own watery body as you stretch, reach, balance, embrace and Integrate your different aspects. When you are balanced and centred, start to walk, letting your legs swing from the hip sockets and your head float upward. Enjoy your natural grace and power... Imagine this as part of a long journey. Who else is walking? Who shares this path? Who lends a hand when you lose your way?

The Coach's Journey

Who is accompanying whom in coaching? Who is the learner? Who the guide? Have my clients learned more from me than I from them? If so, I have failed. For my own path – as coach – is also a journey of learning, of exploration and discovery, of map-making... and stepping off the edge of the map. We need courage and compassion to take this journey, to engage in this dialogue of self-making and world-making from which we all emerge transformed. We need a professional community that will support and challenge us; creative, insightful supervision to deepen our awareness; opportunities to study, read and reflect, to hone our sensitivity; good self care. Then we enter the dialogue and pray that the coachee will – with words and body and breath – tell us where they need to go.

The journey of a thousand miles...

My clients travel in leaps and bounds: 'The coaching changed my life! I would not be where I am today... my whole outlook is different... I am renewed!'. I take baby steps: a little insight here, a moment of grace there, a small expansion of the mind, a gentle opening of the heart. As we learn and grow, finding our way, let us remember the power of this strangely transient, intangible work. We are but momentary companions on the client's path, but this companionship can touch a life and change its course forever. One small step to left or right can alter the direction of the journey of a thousand miles.

...going nowhere

Let's get this clear. We're not *really* taking steps; not actually *going* anywhere, are we? The VIA journey may help us and our clients be more effective, efficient, ethical, ecological in our dealings in the world. But it's a journey through inner space. The coach's most powerful gift may be our presence with our clients, in each present moment, awakening in turn their presence to themselves.

*You are strong in flight like an eagle. Let me be your
companion in freedom, as you journey to the vast expanse
of your own soul, I to mine.*

Further Reading

Boas, Sara (2004). *The Body of Culture: Transcultural Competence in Dance Movement Therapy* in H. Payne (ed.) *Dance Movement Therapy: Research, Theory and Practice*. London: Brunner-Routledge.

Boas, Sara and Reeve, Sandra (2003). 'Cultural Embodiment' in *e-motion: ADMT Quarterly, Association of Dance Movement Therapy (UK)* Vol. XIV no. 4, pp20-21.