

Spiritual Direction, Life Coaching and Culture

Andii Bowsher[†]

This thesis¹ explores the similarities and differences between life coaching (“LC”) and spiritual direction (“SD”), and their relation to wider trends in society.

LC is a profession-in-the-making which aims to facilitate clients’ progress towards fulfilling goals in such a way as to respect their autonomy and honour their innate abilities and resources. Its chief tools in this mission are counselling skills such as listening, reflecting, creating empathy and questioning and a commitment to the client’s agenda.

LC began in the mid to late 1980s in the USA, and the term appears to derive from sports coaching, probably reflecting the the “Inner Game” approach to sports coaching which Timothy Gallwey popularised in his book *The Inner Game of Tennis* (1975/1986), and applied to organisations by Sir John Whitmore and others.²

The aim of spiritual direction (“SD”) is probably best described as the art of discernment of the leading of the Holy Spirit in a person’s life (Leech 1994/1977:42, quoting Thurian).³ The person in the role of spiritual director is really ‘just’ an assistant in the process of direction finding. The Ignatian exercises, for example, call for the director to stay in the background, to watch and encourage and “allow the Creator to work immediately with the creature” (Leech 1994/1977:54, citing *The Spiritual Exercises*, 15).

LC and SD can be seen to be similar in a number of ways. Downey, writes, “The core skills involved in counselling and coaching and even mentoring, are very similar, if not actually the same; ... listening ... asking questions.” (Downey 1999/2002:23) and this would apply also to SD, as evidenced by this summary, “...to serve not in the capacity of judge, but simply as reflector, not giving advice, but merely attending, summarising, clarifying. The helper might also feed back the feelings he or she hears behind the words. ...an active listener and companion in the search ...not the final decider, the advice-giver, or the subtle persuader” (Hart 1980:80).

Questioning is common to SD and LC. LC has been described to potential coaches as “using effective questioning and listening,”⁴. Jeff says that a spiritual director is one “who asks important questions which may or may not

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have been considered, and leaves the directee to find out his or her own answers” (Jeff 1987:10).

Intuition also finds recognition in SD and LC. Co-Active Coaching explicitly names intuition among the list of coaching ‘contexts’ (Whitworth et al 1998:29). In SD, Alan Jones writes, “Spiritual Direction is concerned with the creative use of the imagination to enable us to see what is really there” (Jones 1999/1982:102; Leech 1994/1977:130). One Christian LC website shows intuition on a diagram illustrating their approach to coaching. Their coaching is effectively a rebranding of SD⁵.

A Roman Catholic website promoting SD showcases the experience of various directees, one of whom illustrates the holistic nature of SD very clearly: “Meeting monthly with a spiritual director creates a sacred space where she can articulate and listen for God’s movement in her relationships, work, and prayer life. ... Topics for conversation include work, relationships, prayer life, dreams.”⁶

There is a similar experience-driven dynamic when we come to examine LC. Harry Faddis articulates it well: “I am aware that life is a whole. When we look at one area, such as spirituality, it effects the whole of our lives, such as work and money. When we look at eroticism and make an inquiry into our values and goals, it effects other areas such as spirituality and recreation.”⁷

Both SD and LC recognise the practical wisdom of a whole-life scope to their work. Although it is arguable that there is a philosophical basis for this in Christian SD whereas there is less of a philosophical awareness in LC, nevertheless the practicalities of dealing with people means that a whole-life approach has to be taken.

Both LC and SD have a “non-deficit” view of the client/directee. By this I mean a view of a human being not as an empty vessel waiting to be filled with the knowledge of the teacher (or whatever), rather as co-active with the teacher and having much to contribute to the process of learning other than simply soaking up (to change the metaphor slightly) the knowledge presented to them.

In LC, “The coach is the catalyst. It’s the client that makes the decisions and commitment, and discovers amazing answers that their inner wisdom held all along.”⁸ Similarly: “Coaching is different to consultancy in that it sees the solution lying with the client”⁹. A non-deficit view of the client is also the implication of seeing LC within the scope of a self-help endeavour

(Whitmore 1992/1996:6, 13).¹⁰ One SD source is more explicit and “... suggests that young people are not in ‘deficit’. They already have the Spirit of God in them.” (Green & Chandu 1998:5). From his own experience Jeff writes, specifically focusing on prayer, “... beginners ... [are] often helped to realise that they are already effectively praying when they don’t think they are. In other words, prayer is a much wider activity than we are sometimes led to believe” (Jeff 1987:11). Jeff articulates that not only is it a non-deficit starting point, but that the role of the director is to help to explicate what is already there.

In SD, the term “director” is now usually found to be somewhat embarrassing because a different understanding of the role of the director tends to prevail than when it was coined. There have been some attempts to find alternatives; one of the more popular of these is “soul friend” from the Gaelic “anam Chara” and the term “companion” is used quite frequently (eg Hart 1980:17; Jones 1999/1982:151).¹¹ Jeffrey Gaines the director of Spiritual Directors International comments, “There is a tradition of using the word “director”, and I don’t see that being changed, but truly God is the Director, and the spiritual director simply assists the seeker in uncovering and discovering the direction of God in that person’s life.”¹²

While it is a non-hierarchical relationship, nevertheless one partner to the relationship is serving the other in a particular way that is not necessarily reciprocated. So while the images of friendship and companionship are useful, they too can mislead and so have not gained favour as substitute terms for ‘director’.

Perhaps the clearest expression of non-hierarchicality in LC is found in *Co-Active Coaching*, “The coaching relationship ... is an alliance between two equals for the purpose of meeting the client’s needs,” (Whitworth et al 1998:3). The word ‘alliance’ implies a fundamental equality between coach and client whilst ‘meeting the client’s needs’ gives a service focus to the role of the coach – a fairly exact analogy with what we have identified as the main contemporary emphasis in SD (Whitmore 1992/1996:16, 24). Non-hierarchicality is at the heart of coaching.

Dr Anthony Grant (MacQuarrie University, Australia) defines LC in a way that brings out its claims to develop potential: “ ... a systematic process in which a coach facilitates self-directed learning, personal growth and enhancement of the coachee’s life experience and performance. It aims to bring about sustained cognitive, emotional and behavioural change which

facilitates goal attainment and performance enhancement either in a person's work or personal life."¹³

The terms 'personal growth' and 'performance enhancement' signal development of a person's potential.

Turning to SD, Jeff writes, "... the whole exercise is one in which the potential of the directee is being helped to emerge" (Jeff 1987:10). He is not simply importing post-enlightenment views of humanity into his Christian faith. As claimed by Hart, "God's purpose for each of us is that we reach the fullness of our personal potential," (Hart 1980:71).

Leech is wary of the tendency of consumer capitalism to co-opt spirituality and for views that are only "tenuously Christian" to take hold (Leech 1994/1977: xviii). So when he writes "... It is this process of spiritual maturing which is the purpose of spiritual direction." (ibid:33) we should take seriously the notion that developing potential is part of mainstream Christian SD (ibid:79).

There is a long tradition of Christian SD attending to deep desires as potentially the voice or the guidance of God within a person. One of the Desert Fathers, Abbot Nisteros, is reported as having said to someone inquiring as to what they should do with themselves. "Therefore, whatever you see your soul desire according to God, do that thing and you shall keep your heart safe" (cited in Northumbria Community 2002:426).

SD encourages the listening to one's heart desires as part of the discernment of vocation that is a life's purpose. Thus Hart is able to write: "When we come in touch with our own deepest orientation and desire, ... we have also found God's direction for our lives. This is the fundamental principle around which the discernment process pivots," (Hart 1980:75).

Jeff links deepest desires and life-direction: "unless we know what we want at our deepest level – we shall be lacking both in self-awareness and in knowing what is our true direction in life. The path that we are actually taking may be pulling against a much deeper want ..." (Jeff 1987:31).

Life Coach Harry Faddis makes a similar connection between fulfilment and 'deepest-felt dreams': "Some expected results of personal life coaching ... [include] living a life of purpose that is in harmony with our deepest-felt dreams."¹⁴ And from Co-Active Coaching a description of what a coach will be seeking in a client: "The coach is listening for the appearance of the

client's vision, values, purpose. The coach is also listening for resistance, fear, backtracking, and the voice of that internal saboteur ..." (Whitworth et al 1998:9). In the latter part of that quotation we find something that would also not be out of place in SD: a sense that there are forces at work within the human psyche that push against our best interests and true vocation.

Some of those forces are reckoned with during the course of LC, not least among them is the tendency to be captured by what in SD might be described as 'worldliness': "Fulfilment ... becomes defining what fills the coachees heart and soul not just their pockets."¹⁵

Despite the similarities noted above, there are also some important differences between LC and SD.

SD explicitly deals with the spiritual dimension of human being in a framework of shared assumptions acknowledging God has primacy in life. It is possible for LC to deal with spiritual coaching and this may substantially overlap with SD in what may actually take place in a session. However, LC is methodologically agnostic about God.

It would be possible from the point of view of LC to see SD as a niche of LC. From the perspective of SD, LC could be seen as sharing only some techniques and perhaps an integral view of human being. SD frames itself within a triadic relationship consisting in director, directee and God. Since this triadic relationship is definitive, then LC must regard SD as other; having only some techniques and important but not central concerns in common.

It seems normal for LC to be optimistic about humanity while Christian SD would be skeptical of human ability to achieve its goals and to choose, consistently and unaided, good goals. However, it is likely that the divergent approach relates to two different questions. As James Beck writes, reviewing a book on *Sin, Pride, & Self-Acceptance* and commenting on the differences between approaches to humanity based on analysis of sin, versus those concerned for lack of self-esteem:

Theologians are interested in identifying what is at the heart of human separation from God. Psychotherapists seek to determine what is at the core of our clients' pathology. ... The answer to the question of the theologians should be "sin." And the answer to the psychotherapist's question should be related to some overall theory about the development of psychopathology.¹⁶

While this is not directly dealing with our particular issue, nevertheless it does have parallels (Leech 1994/1977:91). LC is not, in Christian terms, offering a way to salvation, but rather a set of techniques to help people improve their lives and in that sense it could be compared to, for example, an educational project in central Africa to enable farmers to improve their agricultural techniques and so feed their families. In reality, LC has no anthropological assumptions, except the principle that human beings can help themselves to achieve greater fulfilment.

The normal way of conducting a SD session has been face-to face or in some circumstances by letter the latter is attested by the publication of letters of SD, for example of Jean-Pierre de Caussade under the title of *Abandonment to Divine Providence* (1751).

In LC, “There are a variety of different ways to coach ... most common is the weekly phone call, often a thirty-minute conversation, ... face-to-face sessions ... cyberspace.” (Whitworth et al 1998:15). It may be that using the phone is in part a result of the fact that much coaching is done in smaller portions of time than SD; 20-40 minutes is normal for a LC session whereas SD typically takes place over around an hour or sometimes 90 minutes. It makes sense in contexts such as modern business to use the phone, particularly when travelling regularly to a meeting that might only last 30 minutes may not be regarded as a good use of time. In turn, it may be that the greater regularity enables shorter sessions and that shorter sessions necessitate more frequent sessions.

LC training promotes a structure for sessions, usually described with the acronym GROW (Whitmore 1992/1996:49; Downey 1999/2002:29) – Goal, Reality, Options and Wrap-up (or other words beginning with W). It seems to me that this structure makes explicit the logical flow of sessions designed to help to clarify and plan to achieve goals.

LC has an advanced network of training schools. In contrast, there is a long tradition in SD of no training for directors, since it was regarded simply as the outgrowth of pastoral ministry and a life of prayer (Leech 1994/1977: xvii). There is also something of a suspicion of training as professionalisation of a retrograde sort (ibid).

Many of the differences between LC and SD in observed practice seem to result mainly from different histories. None of the differences are sufficient or of such a kind as to disallow the possibility that the similarities that LC

and SD share are in certain cases at least related to our cultural context at this point in history. It is to that context and their relation to it that we turn next.

In modern societies, individual identity can no longer be taken as given in terms of class and gender. Globalisation means that jobs for life can no longer be part of a realistic life strategy. A consumerist mindset further relocates the search for purpose or meaning with the consumer and away from the institutions of society, such as work (Baumann 2003; Giddens 2003/1991; Handy 2002/2001).

In the words of Bauman, “What used to be considered a job to be performed by human reason seen as a collective endowment and property of the human species has been fragmented (‘individualised’), ... and left to individuals’ management and individually administered resources. ... The emphasis (together with, importantly, the burden of responsibility) has shifted decisively towards the self-assertion of the individual,” (Bauman 2003:29; cf Handy 2002/2001:12).

In such circumstances, other people are looked to for help, not to make decisions for or to take responsibility, but as models to learn from. And it is interesting to note, commenting on New Age ideas and practices in business circles, that Ferguson writes: “The growing network of support ... encourages the individual in the lonely enterprise of changing jobs, starting a business, changing the practice of a profession, revitalising institutions. It is a do-it-yourself revolution, but not do-it-by-yourself ... (Ferguson 1980:345).

While LC may have been born out of late consumerist capitalism or even post-modernism, SD has had to make an accommodation with it rather than being native to it. We need to ask, therefore, whether SD has accommodated.

The non-hierarchy of much contemporary SD, the non-deficit anthropology and the non-directive role for the the coach/director has been noted. In addition, where SD partly envisages its business to be developing potential and connecting to ‘true purpose’, then it is also capable of working with a contemporary cultural theme related directly to individualism. SD, then, may be seen to reflect the growing Self-sacralising (Heelas 1997) individualism of the culture. It is therefore possible that the growth in demand for SD is driven, in part at least, by the same or a similar cultural emphasis on the individual as the growth in LC.

It is arguable that the interests of self are served, but in turn the fragmentation of society that this entails serves the interests of global capital. It is here that SD's connection with a broader vision of human being that involves a degree of corporateness, at least, has the resources to challenge the cultural formation of persons as isolated individuals.

Marilyn Ferguson's *Aquarian Conspiracy* (1980) has some very helpful material taken from a series of interviews with people who might broadly be characterised as 'New Age'. In the following quotation, it is easy to see connections with LC and, to some extent with elements of SD: "In transpersonal education, the learner is encouraged to be awake and autonomous, to question, to explore all the corners and crevices of conscious experience, to seek meaning, to test outer limits, to check out frontiers and depths of the self ... It is education's counterpart to holistic medicine: education of the whole person," (Ferguson 1980:287).

We should note the holistic approach, the call to be autonomous and the exploration of experience through questioning – all identified already as coaching themes.

Heelas offers a synthesis of the way that New Age perspectives mirror those in management and education and so can be used in commenting on cultural formation: "A somewhat similar aspect runs from (non-expressivistic) skills-oriented management trainings, through Human Resource Development, to those which serve to unlock spiritually-informed human potential. Another similar chain begins with traditional, disciplinary educational practices (again of a non-expressivist kind), enters the realm of the expressivist 'child centred' teacher, and then moves into the more radical practices of New Age Education," (Heelas 1997:116).

The point here is that the continuum between what Heelas terms "expressivist" and "non-expressivist" contains both New Age concerns and the kind of management and training approaches into which LC fits fairly comfortably. And given the genesis of LC and its uptake in business communities, we should note the probability that there is a strong link. I am not making the claim that LC is a New Age artefact, rather that many of the concerns that underlie both the New Age movements and LC are the same; that they share common cultural drivers.

There are other plausible dimensions to the take up of LC within western culture. Resting on the foundation of individualism, Bauman finds strategies for negotiating the demands of contemporary consumerist culture in elements

of popular culture. Commenting on chat-shows, he identifies how they can act as a kind of checking mechanism allowing viewers to assess whether their own strategies and approaches could be supplemented or whether there might be a clue to enable them to develop their own resources differently (Bauman 2003:68).

It is not hard to see a trajectory from the use of chat shows in identifying their own resources and potential life strategies to using a life coach in a similar way as a means to explore “the parts of the ‘inside’ which [they] passed by without paying attention to or did not dig deeply enough to discover,” (ibid).

It is a commonplace now to analyse approaches to life from the point of view of narratives and the way that they are used to bring a sense of meaning, direction and/or unity to a person’s self-understanding. It seems to me that one of the things that both LC and SD offer into a situation where DIY narratives are required, is the opportunity to revisit the personal narrative and to find ways to re-tell the story so that the trajectory projects into the future a better story-arc of who they would like to become and what they would like to achieve. LC and to some extent SD, under such cultural conditions, are concerned with enabling people to find ways to recognise if not increase their ‘capacity to forge a future for themselves’.

Individuals are increasingly thrown onto their own resources, distrusting institutions such as churches or even finding that the churches’ approach is too programmatic and too little concerned with the individual struggle or circumstances in the way that spiritual nurture is provided. In such circumstances, it makes sense to seek SD since it is inherently personal and individual and focused on personal spiritual growth.

A recent study in England on the Alpha course, a popular basic introduction to Christianity, investigated the desire to ‘do’ the course, noting that many of those who did it were already Christians:

“The pursuit of spiritual growth was a conviction which came out directly during interviews. ... As one interviewee put it: ‘I signed up because I wanted to know God better. People have been let down by their churches. They may go through Baptism or confirmation. But often that’s it, you have to then fend for yourself. The churches do little in the form of guidance as where to go from there.’”

(Hunt 2001:73).

It is worth noting that the Alpha course is used as a (potential) resource to find clues and perhaps, in a similar way to the use of chat-shows noted above, the small group dimension to the course holds out the promise that the other members of the group “may have come across a wondrous stratagem which I have missed; they might have explored the parts of the ‘inside’ which I passed by without paying attention to or did not dig deeply enough to discover,” (Bauman 2003:68).

SD offers a way to negotiate the different pulls on a Christian’s spiritual development: allegiance to the traditions of faith, hunger for spiritual growth and the detraditionalising and individualistic development of culture.

A potential criticism of LC is that its process is co-opted into serving ends that may seem good to the client but in the long-term and global frames may not be so. Of course, it is possible also that LC could be a useful tool in helping people to make personal changes that are consonant with global ecological and social concerns. SD has more of a connection with traditions that take these concerns seriously but, similarly to LC, may also suffer from the co-option into merely going along with the potentially narrow pietistic concerns of the seeker. This parallels Bauman’s comments regarding counsellors: “The counsels which the counsellors supply refer to life-politics not to Politics with a capital P; they refer to what the counselled persons can do by themselves and for themselves ...” (Bauman 2003:65).

There do appear to be similarities between SD and LC, at least those forms of SD that are most sensitive and responsive to the cultural backgrounds of directees. The nature and extension of the similarities make it likely that the cultural drivers behind the rise of LC and the current forms of SD are to some extent shared. The relative undersupply of both life coaches and spiritual directors points to a growing cultural attachment to the kinds of matters with which SD and LC are concerned. Both LC and SD appear to reflect and respond to cultural trends and the concrete conditions of living in a consumerist society where individualisation and where employment insecurity have become well-embedded.

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Notes

¹ A dissertation in partial fulfilment of the requirements of Anglia Polytechnic University for the degree of Master of Arts, submitted February 2005, pp101. Full text available via www.ourmedia.org/node/3744. Referenced websites were accessed in April 2004, and are reproduced in full text format in the dissertation.

² *ibid.*

³ See also Spiritual Directors International, www.sdiworld.org/html/whatis.htm.

⁴ www.byregion.net/glossary/lifecoaching.html.

⁵ <http://userpages.itis.com/vanzyl/christian.html>.

⁶ www.uscatholic.org/1999/07/cov9907.htm.

⁷ www.harryfaddis.com/coachqa.html.

⁸ www.4change.info/life-coaching.htm.

⁹ www.byregion.net/glossary/lifecoaching.html.

¹⁰ See also Dr. Anthony Grant, www.pr.mq.edu.au/macnews/ShowItem.asp?ItemID=146.

¹¹ See also www.uscatholic.org/1999/07/cov9907.htm.

¹² Jeffrey S Gaines, www.sdiworld.org/html/whatis.htm.

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¹⁵ www.gymuser.co.uk/corporate/life/life-coach-training.htm.

¹⁶ www.denverseminary.edu/dj/articles2004/0700/0701.php.