

## **Caring From a Distance: Technology, Coaching and Life Management**

(A feature article in *Christian Counseling Today* magazine, Vol, 8, No. 1, 2000, pp 20 – 22)

Mary steps down into the cabin of her boat anchored off the Gulf of Mexico. She kicks off her shoes and settles down into her favorite chair as the cell phone rings. The caller is right on time – phoning in for her weekly coaching session in much the same way clients used to come to Mary’s office for a private therapy session. The two exchange greetings, lift a prayer for the Lord’s blessing on their time, and pick up immediately on an assignment Mary had e-mailed after last week’s call.

John is sipping the last of his morning coffee as he watches nature come alive around his motor home. Traveling and seeing North America had been a dream he felt would have to wait until retirement. Locked into a full schedule in his Christian counseling practice, it had been hard to get more than a week away at any one time. Now, his phone rings and he begins a coaching session with a client who lives halfway across the continent. After three more calls, he’ll pop into the nearest town for some lunch and do a little sightseeing. Later this evening he’ll teach two teleclasses on a bridge line with twenty to thirty students in each class.

If these scenarios sound far-fetched, consider that I am writing this article from my office in the foothills of the Ozark Mountains where the nearest town has a population of 215. I could never have a counseling practice here – there simply aren’t enough clientele from which to draw. But technology and the growing field of Life Coaching have made it possible to close down my Christian counseling practice in Tampa Bay and fulfill a dream to work at home and raise our children in the country on the old family farm. All of my work is done via telephone, the Internet and the fax machine. I rarely, if ever, meet my clients face-to-face.

### **What is Coaching?**

In my years of practice as a Christian counselor, I often found people seeking help who didn’t really need to see a therapist. They were not in a state of crisis and could probably have gone on indefinitely as they were, but they didn’t want to. They had a distinct feeling that something was missing. They wanted help from someone who was objective, confidential, and skilled in active listening; someone who would care about them and give honest feedback. They wanted a guide or mentor to help them find greater peace and joy in their Christian life. These people were looking for a Life Coach.

Athletes, musicians and actors have always used coaches to improve their skills, overcome obstacles, remain focused, and attain the level of performance their professions demand. Corporate executives and entrepreneurs hire business coaches to help them excel in their industries, take a company public, or start a new business. People even hire nutritional coaches or fitness coaches to help them work a successful weight loss program

or tone up their bodies. Increasingly people are hiring Life Coaches to help them create and truly live out the life they desire for themselves and their families.

It could be said that no one truly *needs* a Life Coach. People seek out a coach because they *want* more for their lives. One of my clients states his goal as: “To learn to love my wife in a more dynamic manner. I desire to have the kind of vibrant and passionate marriage I see some other couples have.” Some of my clients are starting home businesses, switching to living on one income, or making other moves to allow them more time as a family. I work with a number of couples on effective parenting skills. Some are in life transitions, or working on organization and time management skills. I coach several Christian counselors who are breaking free from managed care, starting their own practices, even adding coaching to their practices. Whatever their life issues, all of my clients share this in common: they deeply desire a richer, more fulfilling, more God-honoring life.

### **Different From Psychotherapy**

When an individual hires a coach, the relationship that develops will be quite different from a therapeutic one. In fact, *it is critical that the coach draws a clear distinction between the service they are providing and psychotherapy.* The coach becomes a collaborative partner rather than a hired expert. There is no quality of “doctor-to-patient” in their interactions. Instead, the two are embarking on a journey together to understand more fully the Lord’s purpose for that person’s life and to see that fulfilled. The coach will seek to help the person draw out and hone his or her unique gifts, talents and calling in pursuit of the abundant life Christ purchased for us.

Psychotherapy can generally be said to be about the past and present. The purpose of the work is to address past traumas, painful relationships, unconscious motivations, faulty beliefs, psychiatric illness, and to help a person move from a place of crisis to a more acceptable level of daily functioning. Simply put, therapy is about healing. A client in need of healing is not yet ready for coaching and should be referred to a therapist. Recalling Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, there are more basic issues to be addressed before the person can effectively pursue greater fulfillment.

Coaching, on the other hand, is about the present and especially about the future. Starting from a place of stable functioning, the coach will help clients clarify and attain the vision they have for their lives. Coaching is about envisioning, creating and growing.

Coaching is also different from discipleship in that it is less instructional and more relational. The coach does relatively little teaching and much more questioning and challenging, helping the client take greater ownership of his or her unique giftings and life calling.

## **The Possibilities of Technology**

Coaching can be practiced in a number of different ways, depending on the preferences of the coach and client. Without a fragile client and concerns about risk to self/others, transference/countertransference and the like, there are not the strict boundary issues critical to ethical practice in psychotherapy. Some coaches do all of their work face-to-face, but their sessions might be held over a meal at a restaurant, at their client's place of work, or even over a game of golf.

Most coaches do the majority of their work over the telephone (TeleCoaching), supplementing with e-mail and faxes. Still others do CyberCoaching, working primarily over the Internet. One of my clients is a missionary overseas and all of our work is done in this manner. TeleClasses can be taught over bridge lines on which a hundred or more students can be present at the same time from all over the world. And many coaches stay in touch with their clientele and prospect new ones through e-mail newsletters and e-zines.

The advantages of TeleCoaching and CyberCoaching are immediately apparent. For the client, a busy work schedule doesn't have to be interrupted for three hours to drive to an office across town, wait in a lobby, be seen for a 50-minute hour and drive back to work. The coach is as near as a phone call or e-mail, and the disruption to the work schedule is minimal. For the coach, geography no longer limits the potential market. Clients can literally be anywhere in the world, and the coach is free to travel or live wherever he or she desires, so long as there is telephone and computer access.

## **A Growing Field**

Coaching is still establishing and defining itself in the professional world. A few articles began appearing in the early 1990s by people doing Executive Coaching or Corporate Coaching. Thomas Leonard, considered by many to be the Father of Coaching, founded a virtual training program called Coach University in 1992. Other training programs have followed and, in 1996, the International Coaching Federation (ICF) held their first conference in Houston. The ICF has recently developed a Code of Ethics for the profession and a national credentialing program.

Coaches come from a full range of professional backgrounds, with the majority only coaching part-time while maintaining their regular jobs. Most coaches are specializing in niche markets such as Corporate Coaching, Career Coaching, Parent Coaching, Relationship Coaching, or Cross-cultural Coaching, to name a few. The Christian Coaches Network (CCN) was established in 1998 to provide networking and referral services for those practicing distinctly as Christian Coaches.

Many therapists are adding coaching to their repertoire of services in the same way many offer mediation work and consulting. One virtual coach training program, Therapist University [now The Institute for Life Coach Training], offers an accelerated program

exclusively for therapists and counselors because their skills are so immediately transferable to the profession.

### **Looking Toward the Future**

As technology continues to open up new possibilities for Christian counseling around the world, coaching will become increasingly important as a service we can offer. In his plenary address at last year's AACC *Soul Conference on Christian Counseling*, Gary Collins emphasized our need to clarify the various services a Christian Counselor can offer, especially distinguishing between therapy, discipleship, and coaching. Each utilizes a similar set of skills, but each is uniquely different and each is suited to different life issues.

Whether coaching full-time or simply as an adjunct to an existing practice, we can powerfully impact the lives of people we may never meet this side of Eternity, and improve the witness of their lives as we help them more fully embrace Christ's abundant life. We can also have a measure of freedom and flexibility not previously possible – I really do know of a woman who coaches from her boat, and Thomas Leonard really does coach from his motor home!

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