



Jumping Red Lights

Revealing the 3 Fold Self

(The name and some of the circumstances have been changed)

When I was just starting out as a coach I had a client called Alice (not her real name) who had come to coaching hoping to re-invent her career in her early forties. With its focus on helping people become more aware of their potential and therefore ability to make better quality life choices, this is not an unusual issue to bring to coaching. After a few sessions things looked promising. While some people have no idea what their true passion is, I was excited to hear that Alice already did. She quickly opened up that a career in the performing arts as a performer had always been her secret ambition. It felt like we were really making progress. And while her career as an arts administrator often left her frustrated, always the bridesmaid and never the bride, she was able to rationalize that it had given her an intimate knowledge of the industry she wished to make her own. It seemed the stage was literally set for her to take the first steps towards the spotlight. However, when it came to translating her vision into a set of more immediate steps Alice froze and her mind became flooded with doubts about her ability to fulfill her dream and its viability as a bona-fide career choice.

The sudden amplification of the voice of self doubt is not unusual when we try to move beyond our comfort zone. While enticing, life outside our comfort zone, may pose a threat to our established sense of self-worth, safety and security, which, while we were growing up, relied on our ability to acquire the approval of our primary care-givers, including our wider family, those responsible for our education, and in some cases our faith. This is why coaching can be particularly powerful in helping overcome such fears. Not only can I begin to isolate the voice of self-doubt as just one available point of view, I can also, through a process of reflective questioning, begin to define for myself, as an adult, what is truly important to me, and where I have otherwise assigned a value to some quality, or moral code out of loyalty to my care-givers.

What made Alice's resistance even more surprising was that there was no financial reason to prevent her from taking a first step towards fulfilling her dream of becoming a performer. She was financially secure and moreover her employers in the performing arts would have happily supported her moving to part-time while she re-trained. On paper there was nothing to stop her from at least testing the water, but every time the conversation circled from exploring the dream to make it real, Alice's body slumped and the voice of self-doubt with its defeatist tone took over.

Having exhausted the different tools coaching has available, I too was ready to admit defeat, when I remembered the instruction to coach the whole person and the whole life. This idea reminds us that a person is not just a mind, but also a body, heart and

soul. They are also not just a career but defined by their whole life which includes their relationships, their role in the local community, and indeed how they choose to spend their time outside of work. Often a client is able to access the resources they need to make a change in one area of their life, by exploring another part of their life. It was with this in mind that I asked Alice, 'what do you do for fun?'

'I like riding my motorbike really fast around the local town, late at night, jumping red lights..'

I've been confidante to thousands of people in my career as a coach and facilitator of personal and professional development, and have heard many unusual stories. It takes a lot to shock me, but this still stands out as one of the most unusual stories I've ever heard. I remember having to compose myself in the moment to stay open, present and curious about what Alice had said. As I asked her to say more about her motivation to do this, I noticed just how alive she was. While she told her story of breaking the law, her eyes sparkled, and face became flush with vitality. A stark contrast to the slumped body and defeatist language that emerged when considering taking even the smallest steps towards fulfilling her dream. Perhaps it was this contrast that sparked the intuitive insight I offered next. "I wonder if you would feel the need to break the law to feel alive, if you were performing on stage each evening?"

It seemed obvious to me that this is what was happening. Alice had marginalized the vitality and excitement of living in the moment, profoundly connected to her body, which could have been fulfilled in a career as a performer, so successfully, that the only way she could access it, was unconsciously, by breaking the law and risking hers and perhaps others lives in the process. However, it was not so obvious to her. 'I hadn't considered it that way before..' she replied. This is also normal. In our search for truth what is blindingly obvious to an impartial observer may elude us, even when it's right in front of our own nose.

Giving voice to parts of ourselves, especially when they present in such a polarized way, can be helpful in such cases. Over the next few sessions I asked Alice, without expectation of any outcome, to simply give voice to the defeatist part of her, who couldn't see any hope even in the most assured step towards a more fulfilling career, as well as the part of her, the biker, who loved the thrill of riding her bike and jumping red lights. Over time, she was able to let each part express itself without judgment, and then speak to each other. It was clear the defeatist part of her felt scared of what would happen if the biker was allowed to lead her life, without the protection of the diligent Alice who had dedicated herself to serving others by being efficient and thoughtful, as an administrator of the arts. Conversely, the biker felt as if no one would listen to her anyway, and that her appreciation of the moment, and indeed her body intelligence, had no value in Alice's life.

The development of these three distinct parts - the defeatist one scared of failure; the diligent one dedicated to serving others, and the biker who could connect with her instincts and joy of the moment - was not surprising given the circumstances of her childhood. Growing up in a more conservative leaning family in which a great emphasis had been placed on succeeding in careers which held greater standing in society, such as business management or medicine, Alice's natural desire to move, sing and generally make a noise, had been frowned upon and at worse, harshly judged and punished as bad behavior. It had been difficult at first but over time she had learned to marginalize this part of herself in favor of a more conservative persona, although perversely, in a career that placed her as close as possible to the image of what she was trying to hide. Yet, keeping that vitality locked up was ultimately just not possible and so it found expression in her late night sojourns on a fast motorbike jumping red lights.

We might call the process by which we find ourselves as a threefold self of parts that pull in opposing directions, the Trade Off. In economic terms, a Trade Off is defined as "the achievement of something that you want, which can only be made by the loss of something which is also desirable". It is a compromise in other words. While it may be more complex than the way I have related Alice's story, this is the process that, depending on the circumstances of their lived experience, happens to most people who feel separate and unfulfilled.

This is how it goes. I am hurt by individual events, or a sequence of events or circumstances which leave me judging myself, and or, life harshly. We might call these negative self identifications the **wounded self**. Of course, being wounded doesn't feel good, so, in the absence of a safe harbor in which I can process the feelings and pain of my wounding experiences and be restored to feeling safe and free within myself, I will begin to adopt certain behaviors that I believe will give me a better chance of assuring my self worth, safety and security in the future. We might call this the **adaptive self**. But for the adaptive self to succeed I must pay a price. The price I pay is the marginalization or displacement of a part or parts of me, which I perceive pose a risk to the success of my adaptive self, or the re-creation of the wounding experience it is designed to hide. In other words I pay for my survival by trading off something which would otherwise allow me to feel whole and fulfilled. We might call the **displaced self**.

However, the trade off is never completely binding. It is simply impossible, no matter how far I may bury it, or place it at arms reach, to successfully cut myself off from a part of my very being. Like Alice I may stay in contact with it consciously via my career choices, getting as close to it as possible, without actually calling it mine. Or, also like Alice, it may make itself known through unconscious behavior which I cannot rationalize. Sometimes such behavior is called shadow behavior and mistakenly viewed as simply a recognition of having a dark side, when what it really is, is the part of me which I have displaced and which remains untamed. Or, I may

be completely detached from it, and only find evidence of it in the projections of the things or people I hate, the things or people which I idolize, or sometimes the places and material things to which I become attached.

The process of changing careers for Alice was not as simple as it originally seemed. It was necessary to take time to make space for the defeatist one (the wounded self) to express her original hurt at feeling judged as a bad person for being herself. In time she saw that beyond the pain of this wounding experience lay the freedom of authentic expression, something that fascinated her in the actors she served as an arts administrator. This was the wisdom she found in her wound. She came to better appreciate the value of authentic expression by knowing what it was to deny that within herself. Indeed, once she was able to recognise the origin of her biker self, (displaced self) what it represented in its own right was no longer threatening to the more diligent and dutiful persona that showed up at work (adaptive self). Only then, was it possible for a new dialogue to open up between the displaced self and adaptive self. The displaced self when brought into the light of self awareness no longer had to act out, unconsciously rebelling against its rejection by her care-givers, in order to make itself known. That vitality that she had hidden for so long in the shadow, could now be recognised for what it was: gold. The adaptive self, was no longer required to protect Alice from the pain of the wounded self, and now could be repurposed towards nurturing the vitality and joy of authentic expression which she had only otherwise been able to access by jumping red lights. Rather than apply the learned behaviors of diligence and duty out of loyalty to the family who had insisted they were more important than other values, she could now accept them as gifts for her to use in service of the realization of her vision.

I don't know whether Alice ever became a successful performer. Perhaps that doesn't matter. What matters is she was able to identify herself as a whole person of previously disparate parts. In identifying them as distinct from one another and opening a dialogue between them, she was able to claim the gifts of the Adaptive Self, the wisdom of the Wounded Self, and the Gold of the Displaced Self which had remained so long hidden in the shadows. Thereafter, with this awareness, she could channel what had been previously suppressed into becoming more self determined and able to consciously shape the direction of her life. If this is not the definition of having agency I don't know what is.

In Thresholds of the Soul, we do not attempt to fix or coerce the wounded, adaptive and displaced selves, or attempt to artificially meld them into an image of wholeness. Instead we approach them with gentleness, curiosity, and forgiveness, letting them reveal themselves and resolve their inherent conflicts in the light of self awareness and compassion.