

Mentoring for Change

executive mentoring and coaching, leadership, storytelling

*In a reflective mood as I approach my 50th birthday, this newsletter contains some thoughts from the midpoint of what I hope will be a personal century! It also features a story from John Fowles' *The Magus* which I have long enjoyed and which has a particular resonance for me now.*

With best wishes

Mike the Mentor



Reflections

Ten years ago my 40th birthday came and went with barely a trace. I was focused on building my business and on my four year old son and ten month old daughter. Another year on the clock, even if it took me into another decade, had no meaning or significance for me.

Ten years on, as I approach my 50th birthday, it all seems very different. Becoming 50 feels like a major transition, a significant staging point on my journey though life. Why? What is it about this mid-life transition (whenever it falls for us each personally) that gives it such force? One aspect is eloquently expressed by the poet John O'Donohoe:

"There is a presence who walks the road of life with you. This presence accompanies your every moment. It shadows your every thought and feeling. On your own, or with others, it is always there with you. When you were born, it came out of the womb with you; with the excitement of your arrival, nobody noticed it. Though this presence surrounds you, you may still be blind to its companionship. The name of this presence is death." (Anam Cara, 1997, page 243).

This blindness, aided by a younger me's belief that I was going to live for ever, has begun to lift as my parents age, my children grow, and my body, as Leonard Cohen so starkly puts it, "*aches in the places where I used to play*". There are other factors too. As I write this, I am sitting in a train in the Vale of Evesham which an hour

ago hit a van full of fruit pickers which was crossing an unmanned level crossing. We have just heard that at least three are dead. There are always reminders of the fragility of this life. So, although there is (probably) quite a bit of time left, for me it is visibly running out.

We try to blot out death, to never grow old and to stay young forever – because we (or at least our egos) fear death. We believe that if we let in an awareness of death it will obliterate us. And yet, as many writers have observed, it is precisely this awareness of death that can allow us to live life to the fullest – to be most alive.

Carlos Castaneda explains how to approach this awareness "*To be a warrior a man has to be, first of all, and rightfully so, keenly aware of his own death. But to be concerned with death would force any one of us to focus on the self and that would be debilitating. So the next thing one needs to be a warrior is detachment. The idea of imminent death, instead of becoming an obsession, becomes an indifference.*"

Easier said than done! But, as I approach my half-century, I find myself drawn to the challenge of not just being aware of death but seeing it as an ally. If I can prevent myself from overwhelmed by it, being able to live with the awareness that I will die creates the impetus to align my life with what is fundamentally of importance to me. Just as the oft used coaching question "What would you like your epitaph to be?" connects me to a bigger context, so the awareness of the presence of death

The Prince and The Magician

Once upon a time there was a young prince who believed in all things but three. He did not believe in princesses, he did not believe in islands, he did not believe in God. His father, the king, told him that such things did not exist. As there were no princesses or islands in his father's domains, and no sign of God, the young prince believed his father.

But then, one day, the prince ran away from his palace. He came to the next land. There, to his astonishment, from every coast he saw islands, and on these islands, strange and troubling creatures whom he dared not name. As he was searching for a boat, a man in full evening dress approached him along the shore.

'Are those real islands?' asked the young prince.

'Of course they are real islands,' said the man in evening dress.

'And those strange and troubling creatures?'

'They are all genuine and authentic princesses.'

'Then God also must exist!' cried the prince.

'I am God,' replied the man in full evening dress, with a bow.

The young prince returned home as quickly as he could.

'So you are back,' said his father, the king.

'I have seen islands, I have seen princesses, I have seen God,' said the prince reproachfully.

The king was unmoved.

'Neither real islands, nor real princesses, nor a real God, exist.'

'I saw them!'

'Tell me how God was dressed.'

'God was in full evening dress.'

'Were the sleeves of his coat rolled back?'

The prince remembered that they had been. The king smiled.

'That is the uniform of a magician. You have been

deceived.'

At this, the prince returned to the next land, and went to the same shore, where once again he came upon the man in full evening dress.

'My father, the king, has told me who you are', said the young prince indignantly. 'You deceived me last time, but not again. Now I know that those are not real islands and real princesses, because you are a magician.'

The man on the shore smiled.

'It is you who are deceived, my boy. In your father's kingdom there are many islands and many princesses. But you are under your father's spell, so you cannot see them.'

The prince returned pensively home. When he saw his father, he looked him in the eyes.

'Father, is it true that you are not a real king, but only a magician?'

The king smiled and rolled back his sleeves.

'Yes my son, I am only a magician.'

'Then the man on the shore was God.'

'The man on the shore was another magician.'

'I must know the real truth, the truth beyond magic.'

'There is no truth beyond magic' said the king.

The prince was full of sadness.

He said, 'I will kill myself'.

The king by magic caused death to appear. Death stood in the door and beckoned to the prince. The prince shuddered. He remembered the beautiful but unreal islands and the unreal but beautiful princesses.

'Very well,' he said. 'I can bear it.'

'You see, my son,' said the king, 'you too now begin to be a magician.'

From "The Magus" by John Fowles, published by Jonathan Cape, 1977.

connects me to my sense of purpose and brings that purpose into the present moment.

If I also recognise that death is inevitable and unavoidable, then I realise too that there is no point in wasting my energy in worrying about it. Instead I can use its presence to sharpen my thinking and connect me to what is of real importance in my life.

Again, as Casteneda says: "A warrior thinks of death when things become unclear."

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