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## GOING DEEPER THAN CHOICES AND DECISIONS

# TRANSITION COACHING: IT'S ABOUT SOUL WORK

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*Sometimes everything  
has to be  
inscribed across  
the heavens  
so you can find  
the one line  
already written  
inside you.*

~ David Whyte  
*The Journey* (on [YouTube](#))

I've always loved this poem—and honestly most every poem David Whyte has written. As a coach, I work with people who are discovering themselves anew. This is intimate and delicate work. As Whyte writes, they are looking for “...the one line already written inside...”

Most people don't recognize that line. Some people never even know that this line exists. They don't know that there may be an essence to their being that has not yet fully manifested. These individuals may live their entire lives content and comfortable, accepting their lives exactly as they are. They will not sense that there is more and for them, there may not be any more than what is there in the present moment.

Then there are others who awaken one morning, confused, disoriented and uncertain about who they really are and what they are doing on this planet. When they look in the mirror they no longer recognize the face staring back at them. They begin to feel a void

and a mysterious longing even if their lives are by all appearances rich and fulfilled. This is the beginning of a new journey, one that requires courage and honesty to undertake. In the face of all evidence, this person begins to challenge the status quo. She will be told that she should appreciate everything she has, that there is no reason to “rock the boat” and that life is hard and you do what you can with what you have and that's just the way it is. But that nagging feeling persists and eventually the sleepless nights lead to an undeniable longing for an unknown life on a path that has yet to be explored.

This is transformational work. It requires a coach, a guide, a mentor, whatever you choose to call that person, who has done the deep work herself. You cannot guide someone down a dark path if you cannot carry the lantern. How I work with individuals through these life transitions requires a deep respect for another's path, and the grounding to be witness to an unfolding that is unpredictable.

Coaches are trained in technique, in self-awareness and coaching frameworks. The soul knows nothing of frameworks, however. Working with someone on a profound transition requires the coach to be vigilant of her own prejudices, beliefs and assumptions. We must become the blank canvas on which the client can paint her future. Our job is to ask the radical question, not the obvious question. Our work is to listen beyond the

words and to use intuition and sensing to inquire into the story our client is telling us, a story that may well not be her story, but a myth she has come to believe.

When I work with individuals who are in some kind of life transition, I know that what is really at stake is the ego identity. The client has created a life that provides self-worth and self-esteem based on this identity. That ego will resist all attempts to dethrone it and will fight if it feels threatened. The only way to move beyond the current identity is to enlist the ego in an open dialogue and to invite the ego to partner with the heart to create a different future.

People speak of letting go and leaving behind things, relationships and ways. The minute they speak of letting go of something, the tighter the grasp on the thing that may need to be released. I prefer to use another metaphor. If you think of life as dynamic and constantly in motion, like a river whose waters flow, then the idea is to become acquainted with the current and to flow with it, instead of against it. It's not so much about letting go of something as it is about moving with the current. The river will take you whether you resist or not. Understanding that your life is in movement and that you have the power to create a life that is in alignment with that

movement is empowering. You experience less stress and greater purpose and meaning when you are in alignment with that essential Self.

Some people call it finding your purpose. Most people are asking themselves what that purpose is. I think that is the wrong question. Finding purpose is an outcome of discovering your true nature and creating a life that is the fullest expression of that creative spirit within. It might be, as Richard Leider (2015) proposes, more aptly described as finding your calling. When you truly know who you are, the purpose is a non-issue, it appears and you immediately recognize it.

The role of the coach is to be present for the unfolding of a new way of being for the client. It may not result in a change of jobs, location, spouses or friends—and it also may result in those things. Ours is not to judge but to convene the conversation for our clients, and to provide compassion and safety for the deeper personal inquiry that can eventually move the client forward in her life. This is truly soul work.

Parker Palmer (1999) writes that we must provide safety for the soul to appear. In his book *Let Your Life Speak: Listening for the Voice of Vocation* he writes, “Before I can tell my life what I want to do with it, I must listen to my life telling me who I am.” A coach’s role is to



***“Each suburban wife struggles with it alone. As she made the beds, shopped for groceries, matched slipcover material, ate peanut butter sandwiches with her children, chauffeured Cub Scouts and Brownies, lay beside her husband at night—she was afraid to ask even of herself the silent question—‘Is this all?’”***

~ Betty Friedan (1921-2006) ~  
Women’s advocate, author, social activist  
Mentor to Sheila Heti  
[Biography](#)

be a conduit for the client to listen to their true voice, so that they may know who they are in this moment in time and to align with that truth.

It's easy to call this transition coaching, but truly it is more profound than finding purpose or navigating changes in life. Our work is to provide a safe environment and support for our clients to enter into a deeper inquiry, perhaps even an existential inquiry, into who they are essentially and how to bring that beautiful being forth.

If we do our work well, we will meet our clients at the door as they arrive. As David Whyte concludes his poem,

*Sometimes with  
the bones of the black  
sticks left when the fire  
has gone out  
someone has written  
something new  
in the ashes of your life.  
You are not leaving.  
Even as the light fades quickly now,  
you are arriving.*

## REFERENCES

Leider, R.J., & Shapiro, D. (2015). *Work reimagined: Uncover your calling*. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler. (Available from [here](#).)

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



As President of Sophia Associates, Inc. Alicia Rodriguez, a member of the Peer Resources Network and an ICF Professional Certified Coach, has worked with C-level executives to develop talent in their organizations. She was chosen to coach

executives at The Notre Dame Executive MBA Program. Her coaching often focuses on cultivating a leader's ability to make decisions in the face of ambiguity, to manage competing commitments and to develop the skills to build collaborative relationships cross-culturally. She is certified in several assessment tools including the cutting edge individual and group profile from The Leadership Circle™.

Alicia graduated from the Leadership Coaching Certification Program at Georgetown University. She lives in Annapolis, Maryland and Ecuador, and enjoys yoga, writing and kayaking on the Chesapeake and its tributaries.

(Note: As a member of the Peer Resources Network, Alicia Rodriguez was awarded three months to her membership for providing this article for the *Peer Bulletin*.)

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