

To say 'Yes': a base for individual change

Experiences in settings of therapy, counselling
and coaching

Introduction

When teaching students who want to work as counselors, coaches or therapists, my students and I are often made aware of how hard it is to purposefully and concretely change something in one's own life. Often there is discussion about the forces that can lead to concrete changes. Normally, the majority of a class agrees that change usually happens under the pressure of suffering.

This is a very pessimistic view, both of mankind and mankind's potential for creation, innovation and change. It also makes the task of a change-agent harder than it needs to be. This standpoint, stemming probably from a traditional view of psychotherapy and sustained by the Judeo-Christian tradition, doesn't acknowledge that most of the sustainable changes in our lives have happened without conscious effort and often without us even noticing. We all have changed former patterns of dealing with people and things, often in an easy and smooth way. In the first ten years of our lives, particularly, we changed patterns of moving, perception and countless other patterns. Recalling some of these occasions may raise feelings of satisfaction, adventure or challenge. In adulthood, old patterns might not change so easily, but even then it is possible to make changes without a great strain. In an uplifting environment with an attractive partner, an old man can learn steps to a dance he has never done before. In a foreign environment or country that I begin to like, I can learn to behave in a new way—perhaps with some shame and uneasiness in the beginning, but without anything as extreme as pain or suffering.

However, a lot of us undoubtedly remember situations where we felt forced to change patterns of behaving or thinking that we were used to and almost fond of. These changes *did* require conscious effort and sometimes *were* accompanied by pain and suffering. Also, if we have intellectual leanings, these changes included a lot

of thoughts about causes or consequences, as well as many doubts. These are the occasions that stick with us and make us forget all the other situations where changes happened more easily, effortlessly, sometimes with a touch of challenge or even excitement.

An example

In a coaching or counseling session (unlike a therapy session), I have met clients who don't feel really sick even though they are experiencing symptoms or situations that have a pathological edge.

Viktor, a former teacher, works in private practice as a coach and trainer, mostly with groups of teachers, headmasters and governing members of the school system. In his work he is usually successful. He has come to me for coaching "in order to deal differently with myself." Our work during the first few sessions shows a hard-working, sensitive professional with a great capacity to understand and deal with processes in groups. I can appreciate the things he has undertaken and their primarily positive results, so it is no trouble for me to establish a good, holding professional relationship. From the first session on Viktor can easily bridge the things we speak about over into his daily work—he is benefiting greatly from the coaching process.

However, in addition to these successful aspects of his life and our coaching work, he complains about a very uncomfortable work/life balance and describes periods of low spirits and doubts that go on for hours or even days. These periods often occur on days when he isn't forced to leave the house for a professional appointment. Instead of preparing a forthcoming workshop, working on an article, or at least having a good time at home, he sits around in a bad mood, beginning one thing or another and never finishing it or making visible progress.

He is particularly puzzled by a phenomenon that he names "circling" (*Kreisen*). This state is characterized not only by engrossing, circling thoughts but also by

a short-of-breath, almost asthmatic physical condition that leaves him full of fear.

He has experienced this since his early youth. Therefore it is clear for me that he must have found ways to deal with it in a somewhat successful manner. I ask about this, and I also ask about exceptions and about his sense of this phenomenon.

Indeed, Viktor has developed several strategies to overcome this “circling”—they often work, but not always. He might take a sauna or go on a long walk. Also, he is able to name many times where circling was not part of his experience. He is astonished by the fact that in his professional conversations where he is fully present, he has never experienced even a trace of the circling phenomenon. Paradoxically, although psychologically educated, Viktor is not able to find any reasonable explanation for the circling.

Viktor brings a lot to the coaching conversation from his experiences in the professional world, but we struggle to open up new perspectives on his personal life. We work on the work/life balance and on the circling phenomenon. In the fourth session, I hear Viktor describing the circling, for the first time, in a way that is not strictly negative. This prompts me to propose that he could give the circling an artistic expression at home. Viktor has previously told me that he likes music and sometimes writes stories or paints, so I leave the choice of medium open.

“A lot and nothing,” Viktor answers at the beginning of the fifth coaching session in response to my question about what changed since our last session. Over the last several weeks he has accepted less work, and therefore has had “more time to breathe.” There is more space to do what he likes, and this makes a big difference for him. On the other hand, the circling periods haven’t changed. They are happening as often as before. The homework I had assigned seems to have fallen out of his mind. Instead a question I had asked in the last session has taken hold of him—*What is the usefulness of this circling for you?* After much thought, he still has no answer.

Viktor says that he had planned to paint a picture about the circling. He says he can see this picture in full detail with his inner eye. I decide to do an aesthetic analysis with this virtual picture (treating it like an artistic work in a decentering phase), (Eberhart, 2002; Knill, 2005). I encourage him to place the picture in my office and then describe it in detail. Viktor “sees” a big spiral in blue, red and yellow over a dark and clouded background. I ask him about the different qualities of the colours, differences of strokes and so on. Then I ask about the process of painting, surprises, memorable moments while working on the picture. Finally, I ask about any possible connections between this “work,” the process that led to it and the circling phenomenon (Harvesting Phase within Intermodal Decentering).

Viktor is able to answer all my questions without hesitation. He is surprised that the picture has “some lightness” in it, since the circling is something very difficult which keeps him down. But the biggest surprise for him is the fact that the spiral (i.e., the circling) is full of colours. “It is colourful!” he exclaims and then spontaneously adds, “These are my resources.” And then, in a low voice: “I see something here that I don’t have in my life. And I feel a longing to experience it.”

There is a tenderness and intimacy in this session that I haven’t yet experienced with Viktor. Viktor has firmly decided to paint the picture. He will do it during the five weeks that he plans to spend alone in Thailand. He also plans to write a story. This time, instead of homework, I give him the suggestion that he possibly could bring the spiral and the background in a conversation.

Almost eight weeks have passed when we meet again. He immediately begins to tell me about Thailand where he had a very good stay. He tells me about the warmth, his place at the beach, the two rooms he had and the work he did. He had painted, written, put his coaching concept in words and even had made an outline of a possible book. Then he adds: “I have gained some knowledge. Our last session was very important for me.”

He shows me photos of two pictures he painted in Thailand. One shows the circling, and the other “the transformation from the circling and heaviness into the colourful and bright.” An important point for him is that on the first picture the circling is coloured (as he spoke about in the last session) and the background is not just black, but tinted. In the lower left edge of the second picture, there is an airy black-brown globule structure, surrounded by a field of light that leads to the upper and right parts of the page. This light is transformed by many small, brightly-coloured objects, like the tiny feathers of a bird, flying in a sort of stream towards the upper right edge. “Here the bright colours erupt and are not tamable anymore.” And later he adds: “The black is like a source of energy. A lot of power comes from this place. But at the same time it is light as a feather. And it is mine: nobody can take it away.” At the end of this session he mentions that the whole situation had turned around, and he had found a totally new relationship with the circling.

Our conversation shows that Viktor had begun to change significant aspects of his life. Therefore we decide—surprisingly for both of us—to finish the coaching contract.

Basic and methodological aspects of the work

It is rather difficult to intentionally and directly alter an old pattern that occurs unconsciously. Since Freud’s findings, nearly everyone in the Western world has agreed upon this, yet even professional therapists sometimes attempt to work in this way.

Viktor had found other activities which helped him overcome the periods of circling. But he couldn’t influence the appearance of the phenomenon itself. When he came to his first coaching session, it was not his main wish to rid himself of this “symptom” (as we normally would say in our pathology-focused language). He wanted “to deal differently with himself.” That in itself shows an attempt to look at things from a broader perspective.

Freud and his followers would disagree, but I don't think that it is essential to have an explicit knowledge of the reasons for a symptomatic behaviour in order for a change to happen. But what seems to be necessary—or at least very helpful—is a change in the personal meaning of such an unwanted phenomenon. We need a new perspective on the unwanted. We need to cultivate a friendlier regard for this part of ourselves that causes annoyance or suffering or failure. We also need a goal, a positive vision of the future.

Therapists and coaches can support this by:

- displaying an appreciative attitude toward clients' past and ongoing behaviour and values (not necessarily towards the meanings and reasons they attribute to a specific behaviour or experience)
- offering supportive and nurturing acceptance
- providing a frame where the client can be sure not to lose face
- working on a concrete, positive vision of the future
- searching for past examples of this vision already revealing itself
- providing animating and activating sessions
- being open to surprises

The arts can help to create a positive vision of the future. Using the arts to create something new makes the idea of newness very concrete and accessible, and opens the space for surprises. If professionals working with clients are able to promote the courage and playful lightness necessary to dive into a new experiment, many new experiences can be had, which can then lead to discoveries and surprises about oneself and others.

Professionals and clients cannot do all these things mentioned without at least a partially affirmative attitude toward oneself and the other. This has nothing to do with either a superficial way of positive thinking or a denial of all the pain and suffering in the world and in one's own life. It is an attitude that takes the positive and happy sides of life as seriously as anger, pain, aggression and grief. And it is an attitude

that gives as much attention to successful behaviours, former experiences, self-image and bodily or emotional states as to failures, losses, and breakdowns.

My experiences show that it is often helpful or even necessary to extend the transitional phase in order for a sustainable experience of “new” to evolve. This also absolutely requires a “yes”-saying attitude.

The synergetic view as a possible theoretical base

In working on the theory of the laser stream, Hermann Haken developed synergetics as an interdisciplinary, strongly mathematics-based science, explaining the formation and self-organization of new patterns, structures, processes or functions in open systems (Haken, 1983). An internet search shows that the term “synergetics” is used for many different theories, all of which refer to the Greek meaning of the term as “(theory of) working together.” In this article, I am using this term based on the thinking of Haken and the scholars who have worked with this term in psychology (Haken and Schiepek, 2006).

Observations in physics and chemistry show that a new pattern or structure, also known as a “new order,” can originate spontaneously. Synergetics is a science that provides a frame in which to understand and explore such spontaneous development of order. Since every living entity can be described as an open system, it isn’t surprising to also find spontaneous, self-organized developments of new orders in biology, sociology and psychology. In all of these systems, there are non-linear laws at work.

Every living system is ordered. Life needs order, no matter if such order is judged healthy or pathological. Chaos is deadly. In a human being we find a multitude of orders. One might say that as newborns we were born into many orders of different levels: organic, physiological, cultural, social, and linguistic orders. Therefore, orders are among the most normal conditions of living—so normal that we are seldom aware of them. New orders emerge without us even noticing.

I don't wish to go further into this new science. I only want to enumerate some findings in the synergetic realm that seem to fit exactly with some of my experiences of working with clients in an art and resource-oriented way. If the science of synergetics proved itself as a valuable theoretical base for our work, it would not only expand our understanding of the processes and conditions of sustainable changes, but would also stimulate our concrete work.

- Transitions occur irregularly; one cannot observe any pulse or rhythm; thus the time when “the new” appears cannot be foreseen.
- Transitions occur by leaps. Before they happen, we can observe an unstable state with noticeable fluctuations of motion and speed. Therefore, in our work with people we need to focus equally on structural and emotional security (so that the client dares to leap into this unstable state) and also on the destabilization of stereotypes and patterns.
- If an old order—for example a pattern of behaviour—has lasted for a long time, it requires more effort to establish a new order, because the person not only has to change his present behaviour but also has to walk away from old ways of perceiving and thinking.
- It is helpful to attempt to dismantle preexisting symmetries, i.e., by a very concrete preparation for a new order.
- It is important to pay attention to *kairos* (the just-right time) within the overall process and rhythm within the ongoing work with a client.
- A new pattern has to be stabilized again (re-stabilization). This may need quite a lot of time and require a lot of professional work.
- On one hand, the overall process of self-organization seems to be universal (independent of the individual diagnoses of clients or different methodological procedures). Yet every concrete process is, largely,

individual. Here, “no egg is equivalent to another “(as we say in Switzerland).

The use of language and the power of the arts

To conclude, I'd like to stress two things that strike me as centrally important.

The methodological approach in work with clients is not as important as one would think. More important are the basic understanding of phenomena by professionals and their basic attitudes toward their clients. Our work is founded in a constructionist epistemology (Gergen, 1999), a phenomenological approach to the arts and a systemic and resource-oriented attitude towards people.

Language

As therapist, coach or counselor, one mostly moves in the medium of language. Speaking together is not only an exchange of information. It is also a co-creation of reality, a reality that reigns (at least) in the counselor's office. Therefore it is important to be sensitive to words and to listen carefully, firstly in order to better understand the reality of the client, and secondly to identify narrow or distorted views, possible openings or new perspectives. The way a client speaks with me about herself shows me the way she thinks about and treats herself:

Tania is an artist and the mother of three youngsters. She is very attached to one of her sons who abuses drugs. With herself, Tania is very judging and critical, sometimes even denying her own capacities.

In the second session she speaks of changes in her relationship to herself: she is able to be milder with herself and accept herself more. Later she speaks about homesickness as her most overwhelming feeling-state and adds: “I am not able to let go.” I ask her about this statement. “Do you have to say ‘I am not able to let go,’ or can you say ‘I don't let go’?”

At first she doesn't see the difference between the two sentences. But suddenly she says: "Now I've got it. It makes a big difference. They're two completely different feelings." She decides to say "I don't let go," instead.

At first glance, the two different wordings don't make a big difference, but if I contemplate this, or experiment with different ways of describing a significant behaviour or issue of my own, I see that it makes a real difference. It changes my position from a victim into one of an author, writing my own story, and allows me to take responsibility for my life.

The arts

Language enables and influences but also limits our worldview and our view of ourselves. It is stereotyped by culture and past experience. Language also has a limit—we cannot communicate everything by lingual means. We have all experienced this when we've fallen in love.

The arts and play open new possibilities for looking, expressing and communicating. The danger of expressing something through the arts in a stereotypical way is much less, at least if the person isn't an artist in that particular modality. What *is* necessary is that in a counseling or therapeutic situation, the client overcomes the desire to do the arts "right."

In professional contexts we speak about the arts' special capacities (and these seem to be reliable even long-distance, as shown by the example of Viktor):

- They enable a client to express something that he couldn't explain in words.
- They open new dimensions.
- They encourage the client to control himself less, and therefore open the doors to the emotional and unconscious aspects of the situation.

- They give form to the unspeakable, and are therefore often a source of surprises.

The arts—certainly in the way expressive arts work views the arts—are subversive. They refuse any generally agreed-upon norm of beauty. One cannot subordinate them to any rite. And, on a personal level, they amiably but efficiently undermine old, inherited beliefs. Thus, the pretense of beauty may hide not only a possible Dionysian drunken *Seeligkeit*, but also a certain readiness for surprise, and the power to break down patterns and meanings that previously seemed to be “holy” and everlasting.

To gain the most from an art-making period within a session of coaching or counseling, the professional needs to use careful, well-chosen language. It is important to verbally approach the art work in a strictly descriptive and phenomenological way. This practice leaves the arts in their own domain as much as possible. Only once this phase is complete is it appropriate to allow room for associations about and possible connections to the client’s current situation or concerns, as in the Harvesting Phase of Intermodal Decentering.

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