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Stephen@stephenbarden.co.uk

BE THE FATHER

Discovering and being Father to Self ©

by
Stephen Barden

FATHER TO SELF

Uncovering your perfect role model

A key ingredient in the coaching process is for both learner and coach to accept responsibility for their own learning; for their own development. This – in turn – presupposes the acceptance that, as sentient beings, we are all responsible for the choices we make: we are responsible for what we do and say; *and* we are responsible for how we deal with what others say and do to us.

There is, of course, the argument that those who are suffering from mental and emotional illness or who are under severe mental, physical and emotional duress, may not be in a position to make choices of this kind. That may be true but coach-mentoring does not aim to treat the ill. In fact, it is the coach's absolute responsibility, if there is the suspicion that the client is ill, to advise that he or she seeks appropriate help.

The Executive Coach seeks, with his client, to identify that client's desired outcome and to then enable the process within which that client will achieve that outcome. This process may involve a number of approaches, including the development of emotional self awareness, relationships management, improvement of appropriate skills and the nurturing of key alliances. However, they all require that key acceptance by the client that it is her responsibility to identify, develop and maintain the process.

It may well be, for example, that an executive's life is being made intolerable by a bullying boss. But the problem can only begin to be solved if the executive accepts that it is his responsibility to decide a) to deal with that boss; b) to go on to choose *how* to deal with that boss (from a range of options); and (hopefully) c) to choose how to minimise the chances of being subjected to this type of abuse again.

Now, those choices could involve a) finding a coach; b) working through relationship management techniques and so on; and c) avoiding certain behaviour patterns in the future. Or it could simply mean that the executive looks for another job. In either case, however, the choice of action and/or which tools to use is in the executive's hands.

Because of this, coaching is not therapy. Rather than a curative process it is one which reveals and illuminates that which is already there. It does not assume illness and weakness in the client. It assumes vitality and power undiscovered. And the explorer, the discoverer, the hero is not the Coach but the Client.

“The Buddhahood of each of us has already been obtained. We need only recognise it. Philosophy, religion, patriotism, are all empty idols. The only meaning in our lives is what we each bring to them...No one is any bigger than anyone else. There are no mothers or fathers for grown ups, only sisters and brothers”.¹

Or, to put it another way, we are each father and mother to our selves.

But what does that mean? Does that mean being what our own fathers and mothers have been to us?

¹ Sheldon Kopp: “If you meet the Buddha on the road, kill him”. Sheldon Press, 1974. p.140

“Physically, we are conceived from the biological union of mother and father. Psychologically, we are born from the Great Polarity. Behind the mask of the personal mother and father are the two primordial archetypes of the Great Mother and Father...In childhood we instinctively compared our objective parents to the internal ‘ideal’ parental archetypes. The fundamental need to relate to and be nourished, protected and guided by the Great Mother and Father was often painfully frustrated by the inadequacies of our biological parents”.²

I would rather not use the word ‘inadequacies’ to describe our biological parents. Who would *not* be inadequate when compared to an archetype?

The values, behaviour and dependencies inculcated by others - by our parents, teachers, employers, role models – can be barriers to our realisation of the ‘ideal self’ – within which lies the most powerful vision we have of ourselves, and therefore the most powerful *model* of ourselves.

So what does this model look like- and is it the same for all of us? Jung says “Again and again I encounter the mistaken notion that an archetype is determined in regard to its content, in other words that it is a kind of unconscious idea (if such an expression be admissible). It is necessary to point out once more that archetypes are not determined as regards their content, but only as regards their form and then only to a very limited degree”.³

The archetype, according to Jung, is akin to the axial system of a crystal which determines its ‘stereometric structure’⁴ but not its concrete form. Content – or the specific characteristics of an image - are only manifest as a result of conscious thought, action and experience. And this is where Jung separates the “*mother*, the matrix – the form into which all experience is poured” and the “*father*, on the other hand, represents the *dynamism* of the archetype, for the archetype consists of both – form and energy”. It is the *mother*, if we follow his description, which – as form – is the true archetype. It is the *father* that is the manifested energy of that archetype.

And associated with the father are other overlapping images – each strongly linked with manifested energy: the wise old man, the guide, the mentor, the authority figure – even the shadow father.

Jung is not unique in identifying the characteristics of ‘the father’ in this way. Clyde W. Ford in “The Hero with an African Face” relates the Congolese myth of Mwindo, who sets out on a quest to find the father who tried to kill him as a baby. He finds him, captures him and transcends him by forgiving him. “...the hero-warrior’s striking out in search of his father is also a quest to discover his own character and career”.⁵

Is the figure male? Not if the story of the original ‘mentor’ is anything to go by. In the *Odyssey*, Odysseus’ friend, Mentor, whom he entrusted with the guidance of his son, Telemachus, appears for most of the book as “the gray-eyed goddess Athena appearing ‘in the likeness of Mentor’...he is actually she, the goddess Athena, the guiding force of the entire epic”.⁶

² Charles Breux: “Journey into Consciousness”. Published by Nicolas-Hays, 1989

³ Carl Gustav Jung: “Four Archetypes”, p.12. Published by Routledge Classics, 2003

⁴ *ibid*, p.13

⁵ Clyde W. Ford: “The Hero with an African Face”. Published by Bantam Books, 1999. p.87

⁶ Phil Cousineau: “Once and Future Myths”. Published by Conari Press Books, 2001. p.120

I first realised the value of the ‘father’ model in my coaching work when a client insisted on blaming everyone but herself for her situation. Sheila admitted that she was falling very short of her sales targets and was way behind in recruiting vital staff. She insisted that she needed my help but invariably failed to carry out the action points she had agreed with me.

But none of this was her fault: the train was late; she had been too busy (even though the action points were directly related to her work); her staff had been failing her. At one stage, her emails were, uniquely and consistently, failing to reach me.

When –after a number of cancellations –Sheila finally turned up for a coaching session, she was enormously anxious. In an effort to calm her down I asked her about her family and then her father.

“He would have given me a really hard time if I hadn’t delivered stuff that I’d promised him”, she blurted out.

So I asked: “What would you have done if you had been father to yourself?”

“What do you mean? If I’d been him?”

“No, if *you* had been your *own* father”.

She understood immediately. It was as if someone had held her head still for a second.

“I’d have asked myself what I was running away from. I’d have asked myself why I didn’t stop and look at myself full in the face”.

It was the breakthrough we had both been looking for. And over the next few sessions we explored how Sheila as ‘father to herself’ would behave to herself, to her family, her colleagues, her work; what values and principles guided the father; what allies and resources the father would seek. She produced benchmarks that although – by definition – were ‘greater than herself’, were nevertheless within reach. And equally valuable, as father to herself, Sheila had nobody she could blame. If Father is in charge, then Father to Self must, surely, be in *total* control.

By using the ‘Father’ as model, Sheila was taking full responsibility for transcending the self that had been diminished.

I wondered whether the process had been unique to Sheila. But, again and again I found it worked. Not only did it set their benchmarks at a stretch (at a stretch beyond that even the most devoted of parent would have hoped was possible) but it ensured that they – and only they were responsible – for reaching them.

In my work I have found significant resonance between the ‘the father’ and the concept of the ‘ideal self’ as expounded by Boyatzis in his Theory of Self Directed Learning.⁷ The Ideal Father does, I’ve found, have a number of advantages over the Ideal Self. The concept of the ideal *self* remains within the influence of the ‘self’ that has been constrained – if not reduced – by natural parents, teachers and peers. Like it or not the ideal self – as a bench mark – uses the *non* ideal as the springboard, and is therefore tied

⁷ Daniel Goleman, Richard Boyatzis and Annie McKee: “The New Leaders”. Pub: Little, Brown Publishing, 2002. p.110

to it by a restraining umbilical cord. The Archetypal “Father” – on the other hand – transcends both the self and the natural father. It reaches back to “the internal ‘ideal’ parental archetypes”, as Breaux called them:⁸ to the *ideal* state of nourishment and nourishing, development and therefore developing.

And because it is firmly intertwined with Self – as Father to Self – it remains within the power of and responsibility of that Self. This is the Self as Nourisher, as Developer – and, as Hero.

So, in summary, “Father to Self” displays the following characteristics:

- The dynamic energy – rather than form – that is associated with the Father Archetype
- A bench mark – a model – which is not a progression of what I earlier called the ‘constrained self’, but which is drawn from the ‘power fullness’ of the *ideal* nourisher and developer.
- Whereas the form of the model may be universal, its content, the detailed characteristics of ‘the Father to Self’, varies from person to person.⁹ And needs to be ‘owned’ by each person.
- The “Father to Self” is both actor and author of itself and its actions. It is both the ideal and the actual. It sets the target, designs the course, acts as trainer and runs the race. There is no escape here.
- The Father to Self is the double helix of mutual self responsibility:
 - As Father – as ideal nurturer/developer - I can not set the targets **below** *or* **beyond** the self’s capabilities
 - As Self I can not blame failure to reach those targets on the excuse that the bar was set too high. That aspect of me from which I can not hide set the bar. And it will get me there because it *knows* – in the fullest sense possible – what I can do.

I have used awareness of Father to Self as a tool¹⁰ to enable clients to:

- Take ownership - to assess and develop self responsibility in the early stages of coaching
- Stretch - to reach beyond the constraints of their image that was moulded by their environment; by parents, peers, teachers etc.
- Model themselves - to develop a clear model for themselves which they admire but with which they can identify
- Build themselves - to establish and take practical actions to fill their model of themselves

If you would like to know more about the “Father to Self” self assessment and coaching programme, and how it may be able to help you, please contact me by email.

It is important to remember – and for me to remind myself – that the client’s responses will change as we progress in our coaching. Equally important, I have found that the

⁸ Charles Breaux: *ibid*

⁹ Although I have found in my work that my clients’ “Fathers to Self” are remarkably similar

¹⁰ That tool takes the form of a set of self assessment questionnaires and a development programme which I use as part of my coaching practice.

Since establishing Father to Self in January 2005, I have worked on the programme with around 50 clients.

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Stephen@stephenbarden.co.uk

outcome the client identifies will change – or rather, evolve – as well. What seemed a stretch at the beginning, of course, is no longer a stretch when achieved!
Stephen Barden, January 2005 (updated June 2006)¹¹

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