COACHING FROM ESSENCE

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Create a Thriving Practice
Doing Powerful Work
with Clients You Love

ROBERT ELLIS

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For my beloved Michèle,
who won't let me be anything less
than my best self.

And for the clients and coaches
I have been privileged to work with,
who let me coach from my essence.

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COACHING FROM ESSENCE

I

GOOSE IN A BOTTLE

A man will be imprisoned in a room with a door
that's unlocked and opens inwards;
as long as it does not occur to him to pull rather than push.
—Ludwig Wittgenstein

GOOSE IN A BOTTLE

There's a Zen riddle that goes something like this:

Take a baby goose and put it in a glass bottle. Pull the neck through the neck of the bottle so you can feed it. Feed the goose until it's too big for the bottle.

There are two rules:

You can't kill the goose.

And you can't break the bottle.

Here's the riddle:

How do you get the goose out of the bottle?

People will come to you for coaching for any number of reasons. It's usually because of an intractable problem, often with another person. It may be a project they need help with or a process they want to improve. It could be a pattern they've noticed (they keep recreating the same problems, or several people have given them feedback about behavior that's not serving them). A difficult passage may have them stumped. They may be seeking to clarify their purpose.

How do you get the goose out of the bottle?

Put it on a diet?

No, it's already too fat. The bones are too big. It won't come out.

Melt the bottle?

You don't want to cook the goose!

I'll give you a hint. . . .

You're the goose.

Clients come to you because they don't like where they are, or they don't know how to get to some place they'd rather be. And there are good reasons for their dissatisfaction or confusion. Some of those reasons are outside of the client—challenging circumstances—and some are *inside* the client.

Or, rather, the client is inside some of the reasons they aren't living the life they long for.

They're inside their bottle.

You're in a bottle, too.

The bottle tells you what things mean, what's true, what's desirable, what the future looks like.

It tells you what's *possible*.

Okay.

I don't know the Zen answer, but here's one answer:

Break the fucking bottle.

Who says you have to follow the rules? Where do the rules come from anyway?

All those beliefs about who you are and what will make you happy, what success looks like, and all your fears about failure and what you have to do to avoid it—that's your bottle.

All those beliefs you have about what coaching is and who you

are as a coach, and how to create a practice you love—those, too, are your bottle.

Think you can only charge like a therapist, maybe a couple hundred dollars a session? Bottle.

Think you can only charge by the session, not on retainer? Bottle.

Think you can't charge money if you're a new coach? Bottle.

Think you shouldn't coach for free? Bottle.

Think you need to be certified to be a coach? Bottle.

Think you need a degree to be a coach? Bottle.

Think you need to be older, more experienced, a white male, etc., to coach executives or be a successful coach? *B-O-T-T-L-E*.

We help clients break their bottles.

This book will show you how to break your bottle.

II

PATHS AND QUESTS

We must let go of the life we have planned,
so as to accept the one that is waiting for us.
—Joseph Campbell

PATHS AND QUESTS

Let's keep this simple.

All you're trying to do is get from A . . . to B.

A is where you are now.

B is what you want to create.

B can be anything: the solution to a problem; clarification of your essence or purpose; a change in feeling, mindset, or behavior; or the creation of a billion-dollar business. No one comes to you for coaching because they want to stay at A. If they do, then *staying at A* is their B.

To get to B, you first need to know what B is. That requires *clarity*. Getting clear about B is a better place to start than A. B is where you want to be, and where you want to be shouldn't be limited by where you are.

Once you know where you want to be, it's helpful to know

where you are. That requires *honesty*. You have to tell the truth about A. If you want to get to New York, it's helpful to know that you're in San Francisco and not Los Angeles; otherwise, you're going to end up somewhere in the Atlantic Ocean.

So.

What's the most important thing you want to create in your life right now?

What's your B?

Now, if you've thought of something that you want to create in your life, something that's important to you, we have to ask, *Where did that B come from?*

Have you ever had your heart broken?

I've posed this question to numerous audiences. Everyone raises their hand. But the real question is, *What did you learn from heartbreak?*

When I ask people what they've learned from heartbreak, the answers vary widely. Someone will say, "I should have protected myself more." And someone else will say, "I shouldn't have protected myself so *much*. I should have been more open."

What did *you* learn from heartbreak?

I'm not suggesting that heartbreak is the same for everyone, but everyone experiences heartbreak. And yet, what you learned is different from what everyone else learned. Why did you learn something different? Because you *chose* to learn something different.

We choose what to learn from our experiences.

Sometimes we choose the wrong lesson. Maybe it's the right lesson—at the time—but the lesson becomes obsolete. We have experiences, decide what they mean, and then create our future based on those choices. In other words, *most of the time we're actually creating the future from the past*.

If you ask most people what they want to create, they'll tell you a Bonsai version of their dream, a beautiful miniature version of what they actually want. Or they'll tell you a dream that isn't really theirs—it's their mother's or father's or spouse's or kid's or friend's or employer's. It may even be a dream from their past self—something they used to want or something they think they're supposed to want (but they only *want* to want it).

Often, it's something they already know how to create; it's just a recycled goal they already know how to achieve, but in a different form.

In my experience, once you start working with a client on B, their B changes, partly because they don't really know what they want.

"I want you to help me find the shortest path to becoming an extraordinary leader," my client says.

"That's great," I say. "What do you want to lead?"

"I don't know."

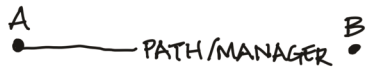
"Then you're not on a path," I say. "You're on a quest."

If you're doing something you already know how to do, if you're recreating something you already know how to succeed at, then you'll probably end up at B or somewhere similar to B.

If you know where B is and where A is, then you're just looking for the shortest distance between two points. That's a project management challenge.

You're on a *path*.

You need a pathfinder, a project manager. That's called *management*.



Everything is familiar. It's like being on a guided tour. *On the right is what I already know how to do, and on the left are some things I've already done, now with a different coat of paint applied.* Yes, it's a journey, but it's not a very interesting one.

You don't want to be on a tour. You want to be on an *adventure*.

So, you don't actually want to get to B.

As Yogi Berra said, "If you don't know where you're going, you'll probably end up somewhere else." You *want* to end up somewhere else, *but somewhere better than you can imagine when you set out from A*.

Let's call that *B-prime*.

Since you don't want to get to B, B is not your goal. It's an *aim*. You aim for B—the best B you *can* imagine—but you're really looking not for the life you have planned but for the one that's waiting for you.

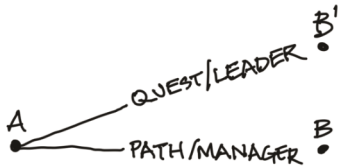
Since you can't imagine it, you don't really know where B-prime *is*. You may not even know where *A* is. There is no path.

You have to go on a *quest*.

To be on a quest, you must know how to journey into the unknown. You need to embrace uncertainty. If things are certain, there are few possibilities. When things are uncertain, the situation is full of possibilities. Anything can happen. You

need to learn how to navigate the unknown, to befriend uncertainty.

That's called *leadership*.



You are not a leader unless you are guiding people through the unknown to something better than they can imagine when they begin their journey. If you know where you're going and how to get there, you're a tour guide.

To be clear, you're always on one or more *paths* somewhere in your life and business—and you should also be on one or more *quests* somewhere in your life and business.

The only way to create B-prime is to risk creating something less than what you want. Let's call that *B-sub*.

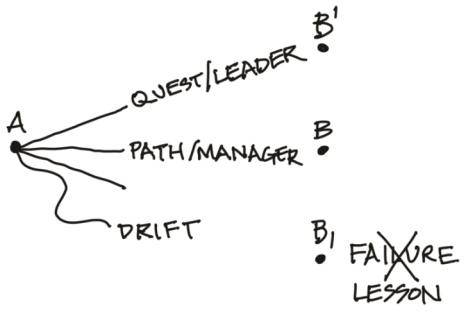
Some people call that *failure*.

I call it a *lesson*.

The faster you can learn, the faster you can create B-prime. You create B-prime by conducting experiments and by creating rapid feedback loops.

There's another possibility: *drifting*. If you are not creating—even if only a B you already know how to create—if you are not on an adventure, learning and growing, you're adrift.

You don't want to drift.



Our role as coaches is to help our clients create B-prime—something that is better than they could imagine for themselves when they began to work with us.

Every good Quest starts with a good Quest(ion).

Let me give you a personal example of what I mean.

At the end of 2014, I experienced a heartbreak that sent me into a dark passage. I experienced not only emotional heartbreak but physical heartbreak, too. In 2016, I had two heart operations for atrial fibrillation, an electrical malfunction of the heart. Almost every day for these two years, I would wake in the morning and ask myself, *How did this get to be my life?* I had somehow managed to create the exact opposite of everything I thought I wanted.

One day I had an epiphany: *I was half-hearted everywhere in my life*. I had one foot in and one foot out of my relationship. No wonder it imploded. I was a hired gun in my work, showing up and doing only what I was paid for. My work was transactional; I wasn't building relationships. It was the same with my friends and family. It was a harsh awakening.

So I started my Quest with this Quest(ion):

How can I be wholehearted?

I became intentional about showing up, as much as I could, with my whole heart. I made new friends (and I was astonished they would be friends with me, something I am eternally grateful for because I was in a very dark place—I didn't even want to be around me). I completely reinvented the way I work as a coach (which has become Coaching From Essence), and I focused on creating relationships with my clients, doing deep personal as well as professional work. When I was ready, I started dating again, showing up as my wholehearted, imperfect self.

The results were better than B—I discovered B-prime. I met Michèle, my extraordinary beloved, in 2017, and we married a year later. My coaching practice is full of clients I love. I now make more money than ever (multiple six-figures), and my full practice includes only about a dozen clients (a third of whom have been pro bono because I love working with early-stage founders and entrepreneurs).

While a path is predictable or easily discoverable and repeatable, a quest is unpredictable (once it has been discovered and becomes repeatable, it's a path).

Knowing where to start when you're on a quest is hard. As Joseph Campbell wrote, "You enter the forest at the darkest point, where there is no path. Where there is a way or path, it is someone else's path."

As coaches, we are allies on the quest. We have to help our clients find their own paths.

I always start by helping my clients articulate their Quest(ion). What is it that's missing? What are they longing for? What is the life that is trying to be lived through them? What are their tropisms? (Tropisms are what we naturally turn toward, the way plants naturally turn toward the light.)

The next step is to help them become comfortable with the unknown, to embrace uncertainty. They have to have the mindset that they are embarking on an adventure. They are putting themselves in the way of serendipity, of unforeseen possibilities. Now we are creating from the future, where dreams and possibilities are not dictated by what was possible in the past.

Once a client has clarified their Quest(ion), I can think of no better advice than this quote from Lewis Carroll: "If you don't know where you are going, any road will get you there." I encourage them to take any road.

When you take a road, you don't have to travel down it very far to know whether or not it is leading you in the direction of your longing. If it gives you life, it's easy to see it. When I work with clients who have begun a quest and are headed in the right direction, it's always visible on their faces. You can feel energetically that they have found a thread. A road that lights them up may become their path—or lead to another road that does.

I emphasize to my clients that there is no failure on this quest. It's not possible. You either get your B (something you were after or something equally satisfying), or you get B-prime (something better than you could have imagined when you set out from A—we are always helping the client optimize for this), or you get a lesson and a new road to try. It's impossible to fail if you are paying attention.

If the road doesn't light them up, they still learn something. We can also help them understand the lesson (and find the light) by helping them notice what the journey is bringing them.

Especially in my first several sessions, I will open the session by asking the client, "What's different? What's different since the last session? What's different since we first started working together?" What we pay attention to grows, and what goes

unnoticed withers. If they can notice some positive change, however small, we can amplify it. That's food for the journey.

So.

What's your Quest(ion)?

GRAVITY

If you look at our diagram, those dots below A and B look like planets.

A is kind of like Earth. It has a lot of gravity. B might be the moon. The moon doesn't have much gravity. If you're on Earth and want to get to the moon, you need a lot of energy to escape the Earth's gravity. A rocket burns more than half its fuel just to get out of Earth's atmosphere. It takes a lot of energy to get out of your comfort zone.

The moon's gravity—your B's gravity—is about one-sixth as powerful as Earth's, or A's gravity. That feels about right. A's gravity is much stronger because it has more mass, the weight of all your experiences, and all your choices about what your experiences mean. B's gravity is less, but the more it resembles

something you've already done, the more attractive it is because it's familiar and comfortable.

What about B-prime?

B-prime doesn't have much gravity; it doesn't have much mass. It's something you've never done before, something you don't know you can do. It doesn't exist yet, and it's unlike anything that existed before.

You can't imagine it.

B-prime may have little gravity—it may have *antigravity*. It may be attractive, but it may also be scary. This is one of the reasons you begin going after what you want with such optimism and enthusiasm—and then find yourself recreating B, back on the path, instead of pursuing your quest.

As coaches, we need to think like astronauts. There's very little gravity in space. When we work with a client, we need to help them leave A's gravity and find more space, the space to dream their real dream, the life that longs to live through them.

Sometime after the halfway mark of a mission, astronauts often encounter the *third-quarter effect*. Mood and morale suffer. It's likely that at some point in your client's quest, they'll find themselves bored, challenged, uncomfortable, or distracted. They'll want to give up on you, their dream, or themselves. The work may conjure up their *Dark Ally*. That's when you need to remind them why they're here and what called them to this journey. They told you their dream, you believed them, and even though that dream may (and most likely will) evolve on their quest, it's your responsibility to help them stay true to their dream—and their essence.

They may also experience the *overview effect*, which happens when astronauts look back at Earth and realize that it's all one planet. When you are 238,855 miles in space and look back at Earth, you see how everything is connected. You begin to see

that so much more is possible for you and for everyone. You may be inspired to idealism. That's a good thing. That's gravity for B-prime. Help your client be an idealist.

Finally, be careful not to let your client get a case of the *space stupids*. The lack of gravity, the usual ways you orient yourself—and stress—can all affect your vision, thinking, and mood. You need at least fifteen percent of the earth's gravitational pull to maintain your sense of up and down in space. Don't let them neglect their responsibilities while they pursue their quest.

Remember, you're creating a space with *little* gravity, not a space without *any* gravity at all. Create a safe space for your client to dream as well as a safe space for them to face hard realities where you question, challenge, and ground their truths.

THE LOVE THRESHOLD

WHAT DOES GRAVITY look like?

When you leave A and set out for B, you'll have to pass through several *thresholds*, forces that want to keep you from creating what you truly want, what's calling you.

Some of us flirt with answering the call.

We dance back and forth.

Sometimes we're not sure the call is right for us. But usually, we hesitate because we're afraid. To leave the world you know, to leave the known for the unknown, is an act of faith. It requires surrender and commitment.

When you are on the cusp of embarking on your quest, standing at the threshold between the life you know and the one calling you, you will have to face the voices.

There will always be people who will say—whatever it is you long for—that it's not possible for you. You will have to face the Guardians of the Gate. They will say, *You can't come in. You're not smart enough. You're too smart. You're not old enough. You're too old. You don't have any experience. That's not possible, not legal, nobody wants that, it's a dumb idea.*

Some of these voices will come from outside—from parents,

spouses, friends, employers—and some, the most insidious Guardians of all, are *our voices of doubt*.

We gather allies on our journey, friends and colleagues and mentors who support and guide us. We also have allies inside us—our dreams, skills, what we know in our bones, our essence. And we also have saboteurs whispering in our ears, trying to keep us safe. Trying to keep us *in place*.

In my work with hundreds of clients, I've noticed several thresholds. Thresholds feel like *barriers* when you encounter them; they feel like walls, limits you can't overcome. But a threshold is not a wall; it's *a doorway*. It's a place to notice, pause, learn what you can, and then pass through.

There are a handful of thresholds you're almost sure to encounter on your quest.

SILLINESS

The first threshold is what I call the *Silliness* threshold. It's the fear of not looking good. If you start to pursue something you want, especially something you've never done before, something you may not be very good at, you have to go back to being a beginner. You may be going after something that other people—people whose opinions you care about—don't value, even though it's important to you. You may not look perfect initially. You may be less confident and afraid of losing your status.

That can stop you from embarking on your quest before you even start. You hit the Silliness threshold, shut down, and nestle back in A, where it's safe.

When I'm coaching someone, I know when we're getting close to their true dream because they almost always laugh when

they talk about it. They'll discount it, giving me all the reasons it's not practical or possible for them.

If you think you're silly for wanting what you truly want, you've hit the Silliness threshold.

KNOWLEDGE

If you make it through the Silliness threshold, the next one you'll likely encounter is the *Knowledge* threshold. You either know too much or not enough. We choose what we learn from experience, and what we know from experience determines what we think is possible for us and what we think we should pursue. You may think of something you want, but if you know too much about it, you'll think it will never work. You'll *know* it will never work because, after all, you have all the experience to know why it *won't* work, why it's not a good idea. You can become an expert at why you'll never have what you want.

Maybe you don't know *enough*. You want something aspirational, something you've never done before. You start believing it might be possible for you, and then you realize you don't know anything about it. And *not knowing* becomes an excellent reason to stay at A, where things are familiar and safe.

TRUST

We're hardwired to keep ourselves safe. If you've passed the Silliness and Knowledge thresholds, the next stop is often the *Trust* threshold. You're willing to take a risk, to step into the unknown, but—is it safe? What if you get hurt?

The space between A and B-prime is unfamiliar territory. It

can feel very vulnerable. You may not know how to create safety for yourself. If you are on a quest for something more aspirational, something that will require collaboration or partnership with people that are new to you, how do you know if you can trust them?

SANITY

The *Sanity* threshold is the fear that if you go after what you want, you'll be completely overwhelmed. I coach a lot of entrepreneurs, some very early-stage entrepreneurs. At some point, almost everyone I've worked with has had to cross the Sanity threshold. They fear they're in way over their heads. They're on the verge of losing everything. A constellation of emotions rises and threatens to engulf you: fear, uncertainty, confusion, exhaustion, and doubt.

LOVE

All of these thresholds ultimately lead to the most important one: the *Love* threshold. The Love threshold is the fear that if you knew the truth about yourself, you would discover that there is something fundamentally wrong with you—that you're unlovable. And the fear that, even worse, *someone will find out*.

These thresholds don't necessarily happen in the order I've described, and you may not experience all of them. But all of these thresholds and more lay between you and the life that's calling you.

And they are all lies.

They are forms—thought forms—that have nothing to do with your essence. As coaches, our work is to help our clients navigate these thresholds, disentangle themselves from these forms, listen to what calls them, and follow their longing.

YOU ARE THE SOLUTION TO A PROBLEM THAT NO LONGER EXISTS

I WAS HAVING a conversation with a friend. We were sharing tales about our past, talking about our fathers.

When there was a lull in the conversation, he looked at me and said, "You know, your father is dead."

"Huh? I know."

"No," he said, "You don't understand. Your father is dead."

"What?" I said. "I know. He died in 1976."

"You're not listening," he said. "Your father is dead."

I looked at him with a blank stare.

"You don't have to try to make him proud of you anymore."

You are still trying to solve the unsolvable problem of your past. And it keeps you from creating what you truly want.

What problem are you trying to solve?

At the deepest level, it's the Love threshold. You learned at a very early age to become something you're not in order to be loved.

You created strategies to keep yourself safe because it wasn't safe to follow your essence. You had to protect yourself. You had to hide your pain. You learned to look out for yourself, to look

good in front of others, to be on the lookout for what you needed before someone else got it.

Above all, *you learned how to survive*.

Self-interest, status-seeking, scarcity, and survival.

All of us learned these lessons early in life. Even if you were fortunate enough to have parents who tried to teach you something different, you learned these lessons from your family, your teachers, your friends (and television, magazines, the internet . . .). It's the invisible soup we simmer in, the hidden curriculum we are all taught.

It started when you were a kid.

When I was a kid, I wanted to be an artist and a writer.

My father didn't value either of those things. I'm not faulting my father. He didn't understand art and writing. He worked for the Fuller Brush company, selling industrial cleaning supplies (I didn't understand industrial cleaning supplies). He was always encouraging me to learn something practical. He would say, "How are you going to make money as an artist and a writer?"

For a long time—even long after he died—I continued to do his work for him. I would ask myself, "How am I going to make money as an artist and a writer?"

And so, to be loved by my father, I didn't make art, and I didn't write. I did things that had nothing to do with who I was. I learned how to sell. I thought that would make him proud of me (the good thing is, *I learned how to sell*).

I also became a rebel. Rebellion is a great place to hide your pain. The strategy is simple: *pretend it doesn't hurt*.

All of this meant that I went on a long detour in my life before I could come back to myself and create a form that matches my essence.

I don't need my father's love now. The irony is, I always had it.

Being the solution to a problem that no longer exists produces a tension between *creating from the past and creating from the future*.

You're still trying to survive something that happened to you in the past instead of creating something out of the future, out of future possibilities, something congruent with your essence.

If you ask someone what they want, what their B is, many people will give you a B that they think would solve a problem they *had* that no longer exists. If you really get them dreaming, they'll give you a B they believe will solve the problem that no longer exists *once and for all*.

But it won't.

When a client presents a grandiose dream—one that is simply *bigger* than their life now—it's often an attempt to finally solve the problem that no longer exists once and for all. A true dream is not grandiose; it's *resonant*. It may be big, and it may require a personal transformation, but its defining quality is that it feels authentic to the person and their essence.

You want to create from the future and help your clients do the same. To create from the future, you need to do the work of unraveling your outworn strategies for staying safe.

The decisions you made to survive served you when you made them.

You're here. You made it.

But even though your decisions served you, your understanding of the conditions you based them on may or may not have been *true*. And even if it was true then, it may or may not be true *now*. Most likely, it's not true now.

Your decisions may be obsolete.

You've outgrown them. You don't need to be afraid to express an opinion that somebody else might not like. No one is going to

send you to bed without dinner. You're no longer in danger of not surviving.

What's more, the problem you're solving *may never have existed*.

A sad reality of human relationships is that they're fraught with disconnects (what my beloved, Michèle Taipale, calls *perplexities*).

When you have a disconnect, you make up a story.

And then you have to protect yourself from the story you made up. You develop a limp from the imaginary pebble in your shoe.

And before you know it, you're a goose in a bottle.

LEVELS OF CREATION

On your journey to the future you're creating, you have a handful of tools to work with. You can arrange these tools in a hierarchy, with each level affecting the other levels. I call these *Levels of Creation*.

Some levels are more obvious than others. Some happen within yourself. Let's call those your *inner game*. Some are about how you take action or manage people or resources. Let's call those your *outer game*.

You can think of the Levels of Creation as a backpack full of creative tools:

At the top is your *essence*, and then your *vision* or *purpose*. Who are you and what do you want to create?

Next is *identity*. Your identity is the sum of your beliefs about yourself. Do you see yourself as a visionary? A coach? A leader? An entrepreneur? Who do you need to become to be the person who does what you want to do? Become the kind of person who can create what you want to create.

Examine your *beliefs*. To a large extent, your beliefs determine what's possible for you. People tend to act in a way that's congruent with their beliefs about themselves and the world—and you're no different. But most of us don't examine our beliefs to see if they're helping us or hindering us.

Identify your *values*. Your values reveal what's important to you. Do you have the right priorities to create what you want?

Know your *capabilities*. Do you have the knowledge, skills, and abilities required to create what you want? You can hire someone with the capabilities you're lacking, but there are also capabilities you will need to have or develop yourself in order to reach your vision.

All of that is the inner game. The inner game is the inner work you have to do for yourself. Many people don't think about the inner game, which is one reason they can't produce the results they want in the outer game. They have an identity or hold beliefs that aren't congruent with what they say they want, or they lack the necessary beliefs or capabilities to reach their aims.

The outer game is about the *behaviors* or actions you need to take—what you need to do—and the *environment*, or the outer world, that consists of people, places, things (i.e. resources), and time. Do you have the right people (or the right relationships), are you in the right place, have all the resources you need, and is it the right time to create what you want?

You can work from the top down or the bottom up. In other

words, if you commit and pursue a clear vision and purpose, it will change who you are, your beliefs, your values, and so on. But you can also change the people you hang out with, the places you go, and your behavior, which will influence your capabilities, values, beliefs, and the sense of who you are.

You can also start at the level where you have the most leverage. Maybe changing your beliefs will provide the biggest shift. Maybe you're not taking enough action. If you are working on the right level, you'll see results.

It can be immensely helpful to take an inventory of your Levels of Creation:

–Are your vision and purpose clear, compelling, and congruent?

–Do you believe you're the kind of person who can succeed at what you're aspiring to do?

–Do you have any untrue beliefs that are holding you back?

–Do you have the necessary values and priorities, or are any of your values in conflict with one another?

–Do you have the knowledge, skills, and abilities you need to accomplish your aim? If not, can you hire them? How can you acquire them yourself?

–Are you taking the right action? Are you taking enough action?

–Do you have the right people, are you in the right place, and do you have the resources to do what you want? Are you allowing enough time? Is right now the right time?

If you have all the right things on each level, if you have enough of the right things, if the levels are aligned with each other, and if you're taking consistent action, then it's just a matter of time before you have what you want. If success is

possible, success is assured—in time. But you've got work to do if things are not right, enough, and aligned. The levels can help you pinpoint where to focus.

Working on these levels is straightforward if you're conscious and intentional about how you apply them. If you're not, there are several gaps or conflicts within the levels that can cause problems:

Integrity gaps. Integrity gaps are misalignments between your values and your behaviors. If you aren't walking the talk, you're unlikely to create the desired results. This is one of the most common leadership traps.

Knowing-doing gaps. Some people know what they need to do, they're capable of doing it, but they won't take action. Why don't they do what they know to do? There are lots of possible reasons, including holding onto an identity, beliefs, or values that are not right, enough, or aligned in a way to help them create what they want to create.

Competing commitments. Competing commitments are value conflicts. For example, you might simultaneously hold both *innovation* and *risk avoidance* as values. One value may be at the forefront and the other unconscious, making it difficult to see and address this incongruity.

Impostor syndrome. An impostor is someone whose *identity* is greater than their capabilities. They're pretending to be better than they are. Impostor syndrome is when your *capability* is greater than your identity; in other words, you don't know how good you are. This is a very common syndrome, especially among entrepreneurs—and most especially among women entrepreneurs.

If people tell you how good you are or you're meeting with

success in the world, believe it. Own it. Make it part of your identity. You'll be surprised how you act differently and produce different results when you integrate your capabilities into your identity.

THE FUTUROSITY CONTINUUM

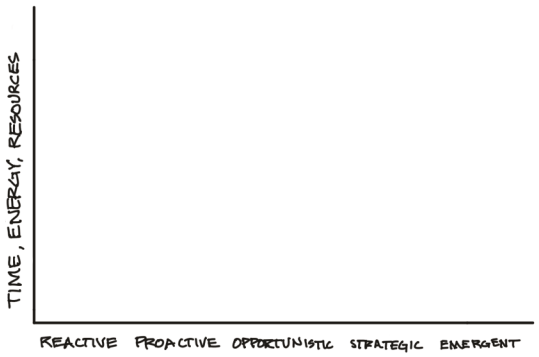
Moving from where you are now to the vision you want to create will require you to confront many choices. You'll have to choose between countless options, bifurcation points where your decisions will either take you closer to your vision or lead you down dead-ends.

Every choice you make puts you in a different relationship to time. Are you being led by the past or the future? Are you reacting to external forces or intentionally shaping the future you envision? You're constantly locating yourself along a continuum, with the past tugging at one end and the future pulling you from the other.

You create your future by making decisions and taking action. But how do you know which actions to take?

The *Futurosity Continuum* is a simple model to help you understand how you're allocating your time, energy, and resources. Knowing where you fall on this continuum can help you understand why you're not producing the results you want and how you can be more creative about your future.

Here's the Futurosity Continuum:



The y-axis of the continuum represents time, energy, and resources. The x-axis runs from reactive to proactive, opportunistic, strategic, and emergent. Each of these stances represents an orientation toward time, either compelling you to fix the past or pulling you to create the future.

REACTIVE

When you're in a reactive stance, you're responding to situations outside yourself. You're putting out fires. You're on the defense, responding to something that's already happened and solving past problems instead of creating future possibilities.

If you're solving the same problems over and over again, you can do a postmortem or retrospective to learn what went wrong and take measures to prevent the same issues from happening again.

PROACTIVE

When you're proactive, you're beginning to orient yourself toward the future instead of the past. You're not yet creating what you want; you're just preparing to get ahead of problems that might happen. You can do a *premortem*. Instead of reacting, you're looking for problems before they occur and taking steps to prevent them.

OPPORTUNISTIC

In an opportunistic stance, you're creating and taking advantage of opportunities that come your way. The more you put yourself out there, the more opportunities you'll create, and it will be tempting to take each one, even if they won't get you to B. At its best, being opportunistic can help you if you're on a quest and don't know exactly where you want to go. At its worst, opportunism becomes shiny object syndrome; you're just being distracted from what you really want.

STRATEGIC

You're being strategic when you're *intentionally* creating a future of your choosing. You're taking deliberate action to move toward your vision. You're constantly calibrating and adjusting to optimize for your vision, or an outcome even better than you imagined when you set out:—B-prime.

EMERGENT

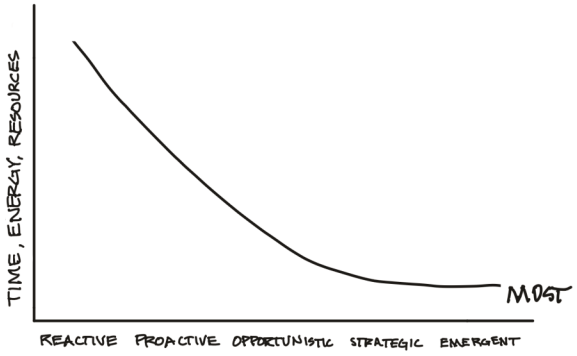
If you're on a path, being strategic may be enough. You're clear about what you're trying to create, and you're intentional about taking the actions you know will produce your B.

But you're not on a path; you're on a quest. You're not creating from the past. Even if you're being intentional, you don't know how to create B-prime. You conduct experiments, try different things, and then *notice* how the universe responds.

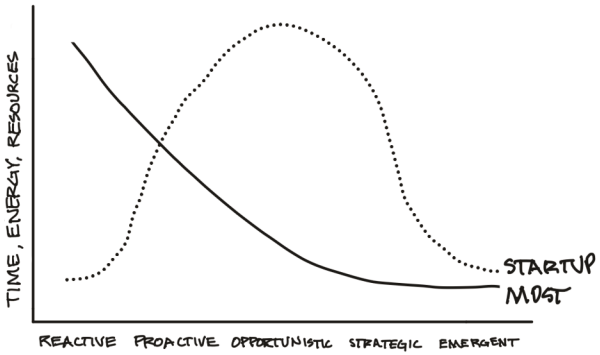
Being strategic means being as clear as you can be and asking for what you want. It's a *monologue*.

Being emergent is asking what's possible and being in conversation with the universe. You try something, listen for a response, make adjustments, then try something else. It's a *dialogue*.

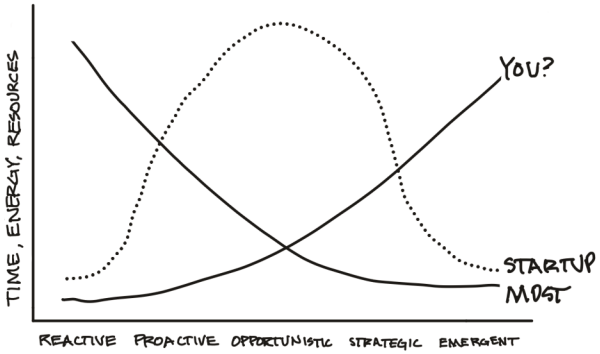
If you understand the Futurosity Continuum, you can plot how you spend your time, energy, and resources. For most people (and most leaders and organizations), the continuum graph looks like this:



Things are a little different at a startup. A startup hasn't been around very long and may have fewer problems to solve and fewer challenges to react to. Compared to established companies, more of its time is spent being proactive (trying to anticipate customer needs) and opportunistic (trying different things to create many opportunities).



Ideally, the Futurosity Continuum looks like this:



You'll always spend some of your time being reactive—you can't foresee everything. By definition, when you're reacting to something, you're reacting because something happened that wasn't in your control.

You can use the Futurosity Continuum like a compass.

With every choice you consider, ask yourself, "Am I being reactive? Am I being proactive? Is this an opportunity that's likely to move me closer to my vision, or is it a shiny object? Is this a strategic decision that will take me closer to my aim? Am I being emergent and paying close attention to the results I'm creating?"

The biggest trap is getting sidetracked by an opportunity that leads nowhere. Being emergent requires focus.

Are you being opportunistic or emergent?

Here's how you'll know:

Have a clear vision. You must have a clear picture of what you're trying to create. If you don't, you're not on a quest. You're drifting.

Pay attention to the results you get. Don't stubbornly persist if things don't work out as you expected. Pay attention and see what you can learn. What is the universe trying to tell you?

Know what you're saying NO to. It's helpful to know what you're creating and what you're actively *not* creating. It's addition by subtraction. Very often, the most strategic thing is subtracting or stopping an action altogether. Memorize these words from Steve Jobs: "People think focus means saying 'yes' to the thing you've got to focus on. But that's not what it means at all. It means saying 'no' to the hundred other good ideas that there are."

Know your values—and your essence. When deciding what to

do, make sure your actions align with your values and your essence.

Ask the essential question. If you have any doubts, ask yourself, *If I choose this, who will I become?*

OPTIMIZE FOR SERENDIPITY

How did you meet your spouse, significant other, lover, or friend?

Chance encounter? A random event? Did you meet at a bus stop? On an airplane? In line at the bakery?

Were you actively looking? Going to events, Meetups, and watering spots, or swiping left and right?

Did someone introduce you? A friend playing matchmaker? A blind or not-so-blind date?

Were you pursuing your life, being adventurous, not looking for anything in particular, but holding open the possibility that you might meet someone?

You most likely met your match in one of the four ways above.

It may have been *pure chance*. You were walking down the street, bumped into someone, looked up, the heavens opened, and there stood your soul mate. Lucky you (if serendipity is luck, then chance is *dumb* luck).

Maybe you made your luck through *curiosity* and *experimentation*. You went to social events or suffered through a queue of OkCupid, Bumble, or MeetMindful dates, intentionally

creating as many encounters as possible. (This is how I met my beloved.)

If your roommate's sister's girlfriend fixed you up with someone, you found your beloved through *making connections*.

If you were going to places you were interested in without any particular intention of finding someone, but you went with an open heart and mind, you were *wandering and wondering*.

We don't just meet people through serendipity. We also meet *ideas* through serendipity.

Splenda was invented when a scientist, told to "test" a new compound, heard "taste" instead and discovered that it was extremely sweet.

The Post-it Note was invented by a scientist trying to invent a superstrong adhesive. Experimenting in his lab, he found a super weak one instead. The Post-it Note languished in the lab for about six years. It was a solution in the search of a different problem. In other words, *it was a failure*. Until . . . a colleague, wandering and wondering in church one day, noticed his bookmark kept falling out of his hymn book. Problem of finding a problem—solved.

Keep this in mind as you come up with ideas for yourself or your clients. Maybe your "failures" are the solution to a different problem.

Something unique just happened. A miracle! A one in a million chance. How did it happen?

There's a law that explains it. It's Littlewood's law of miracles, named after Cambridge University Professor John Edensor Littlewood.

Littlewood calculated that an "event" occurs about once every second. He conservatively estimated that we're alert for

about eight hours a day. In thirty-five days, we experience about one million events. Every thirty-five days, something happens that has only a one in a million chance of happening. In other words, *a miracle*.

He didn't set out to prove the existence of miracles. He wanted to prove that extraordinary events are commonplace because so many events occur. Life is, to a greater degree than we might like to admit, a numbers game.

Your clients can follow their known path—or they can optimize for serendipity by using one of the methods outlined above: pure chance, curiosity and experimentation, making connections, or wandering and wondering. Whatever their strategy, they can improve their chances of creating something better than they can imagine by simply going on a quest, thereby increasing the number of events and, consequently, increasing the number of possible miracles.

If you do the work, success is assured but not predictable. You *will* succeed; it's just impossible to say precisely how or when. That's not metaphysics. It's statistics.

Thanks, John.

HOW TO KNOCK OVER THE EMPIRE STATE BUILDING

You can knock over the Empire State Building with twenty-nine dominos. Each domino knocks over the next domino, which is about one-and-a-half times its mass. The last domino is as tall as the Empire State Building.

Here's the real question: *How big does the first domino have to be?*

About the size of a breath mint!

What does this mean for you?

Most people get clear on their B, their Empire State Building, and they get excited and try to knock over the tenth domino. They push, and they push, and they can't knock it over, and they say to themselves, "I was right all along. It's not possible to have what I want. It's not possible to create a form that matches my essence."

And they give up.

Instead, if you start with the biggest, smallest step you can take, the step you know you can do and not fail, you will soon create so much momentum that you're knocking over the tenth domino with ease.

The critical thing to understand is that it must be the

BIGGEST smallest step you can take. It has to be big enough that it matters—it will move you closer to your aim—and small enough that success is assured.

If you're trying to build your coaching practice, that step might be going to a networking event. It's big enough—it has the potential to lead to some prospects—but it's also small enough (if you go, you've already succeeded in getting out of the house and going, and you've likely learned something as well).

String enough of those small dominos together, and suddenly you're knocking over some meaningful stuff.

BEGIN BEFORE YOU'RE READY

You think you're not ready, but you are.

Maybe you're new to coaching, and you're wondering if you need to be certified or go back to school. Maybe you already have a coaching practice and want to do more profound work or raise your fees.

You tell yourself you'll start coaching when you're certified or graduate from a coaching program. You'll begin to work differently after you've read a few more books, or you'll raise your fees when your practice is finally full and you see clients every day of the week.

You're not the only one.

Your clients aren't ready. They're not ready to quit the passionless job that's going nowhere with the boss they hate. They're not ready to launch their startup. They have a brilliant idea but not the faintest idea of how to begin. Maybe Stanford has an online course.

You'll never be ready.

They'll never be ready.

But it's too late for ready. Wherever you think you're going,

you've been on this journey your whole life. You've already begun.

Forget ready.

Begin before you're ready.

Time to knock over your next domino.

III

FORM AND ESSENCE

Everyone is a genius.
But if you judge a fish by its ability to climb a tree,
it will live its whole life believing
that it is stupid.
—Albert Einstein (or maybe not)