

Academic Paper

Peak moments: the experience of coaches

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Abstract

Peak moments include peak experience (Maslow, 1964), peak performance (Privette, 1983) and flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). Research of the literature revealed that peak moments are an under-researched phenomenon in coaching. This paper addresses the imbalance, and reports on a heuristic study (Moustakas, 1990) undertaken with ten experienced coaches in the UK. Analysis revealed five core conditions which increase the likelihood of the occurrence of a peak moment in coaching. The implications of these findings relate to the joy and engagement of coaching as a vitalising, aesthetic experience, adding richness through the connectedness and collaborative engagement between coach and coachee.

Keywords

peak experience, peak performance, flow, intuition, transcendence

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Introduction

I first experienced a peak moment during my fourth year at music college. I was playing the flute in an orchestral rehearsal, watching the conductor closely and following his lead, eyes locked during the timeless passage of the solo which seemed to go on forever, hanging suspended in the air yet supported by the orchestra. It was as though I had been transported into another world, a world of transcendence and stillness. We finished playing the piece and the conductor put down his baton. The experience of that moment has never left me. It was a peak moment.

My second experience of a peak moment in music was playing the second movement of Beethoven's Pastoral Symphony, a unison solo with the first oboist. We played the solo and a quiet energy prevailed, an ethereal quality, time standing still yet connected to an energy that tingled. We looked at one another in total silence, somehow afraid to speak but then almost simultaneously said, 'what happened there?'. I can re-live that peak moment, retrieving and visualising the same feelings, thoughts and colours.

Such extraordinary experiences have also happened in my life as a coach. I was working in a triad with two experienced coaches during a programme to study coaching with Neuro Linguistic Programming (NLP). I acted as the coach and asked a question. I cannot recall what the question

was, nor where it came from, but I do remember that it was not premeditated but seemed to emerge in the moment. The person acting as coachee paused, reflected, and a stillness of an intense magnitude was created while she appeared to consider the question. She answered after what seemed like an eternity but in reality it was probably only seconds. The phenomenon was experienced by all three of us, including the person acting as the observer. We looked at one another in disbelief and amazement. The coachee asked 'how did you do that?' I remember her words distinctly, as it struck me as odd that she asked me how I had created the moment, rather than 'what happened there?' Perhaps it was the first time she had experienced the phenomenon and therefore she attributed it to me, but it seemed to happen in the moment, when we three were able to 'go with the flow'. Something occurred which gave a sense of timelessness, silence, and stillness, similar to my experiences as a musician. Tindall, a renowned oboist, observes that 'anyone who has felt it knows it's as addictive as a drug' (2005: 180).

There are examples in popular culture too. The Gallagher brothers, creators of Oasis, describe their experience as one of connectivity and relatedness between themselves as artistic siblings, saying 'when he turns to me and I turn to him and there's only me and him who will ever get this, and that's what it's all about for us' (Oasis: *Supersonic*, 2017). These musicians describe further the magic that can be felt in music, contagion that connectedness can bring between two entities, observing 'there's a chemistry between the band and the audience, there's something magnetic drawing the two to each other' (Oasis: *Supersonic*, 2017).

There are also contemporary examples in sport. Jonny Wilkinson, the British rugby player who scored the breath-taking drop goal in the 2003 Rugby World Cup, reveals:

I actually got lost in that moment, I didn't know where I was [...] it felt like a surreal, dream-like situation [...] I want to keep it exactly as I remember it, which was one hell of an experience (Wilkinson, 2003, quoted in Bech, 2013).

These quotes from a renowned classical musician, contemporary artists and a sporting hero highlight the prevalence of the phenomenon of peak moments. Such peak moments create a frisson, are almost magical, and provide a memory that never fades.

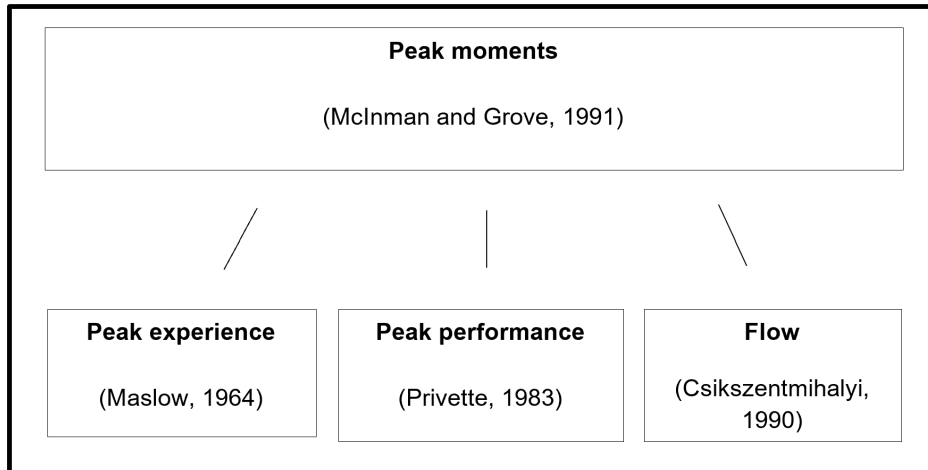
My research into peak moments began with peak experience (Maslow, 1964). I soon discovered, however, that there was overlap with other peak encounters. This led me to widen the subject matter to include peak performance (Privette, 1983) and flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990), under the collective term 'peak moments'. McInman and Grove (1991: 334) suggest the term peak moments as a panacea which 'should be regarded as a global entity'. The three constructs comprising peak moments are illustrated in Figure 1.

The aim of the study was piqued by my curiosity to ascertain if coaches really do experience peak moments. My experience as a coach had left a deep impression on me. There is no reason to assume that coaches do not already experience peak moments since Maslow (1961:10) suggests that peak experience is not limited to a particular type of person, and that they occur 'in practically everybody although without being recognized or accepted for what they are'. 'Practically everybody' may include coaches too.

The fact that there is a paucity of literature about peak moments in coaching is reason enough for this research to be useful. As argued by Longhurst (2006), the phenomenon of peak moments sits within the realms of insight psychology and therefore warrants exploration and research. My intention was to critically review the coaching literature in relation to coaches' phenomenological experiences, interview coaches to find out their responses, analyse their experiences and make an original contribution to the professional coaching literature, where there has been little or no research on the phenomenon. Coaching is a growth industry and as such, coaches need to be mindful and vigilant of new developments, discoveries, and phenomena to broaden their knowledge base and resources. Nash and Collins (2006: 474) suggest that 'the old system where

coaches succeed through luck' will continue unless coach education embraces all elements of coaching.

Figure 1: The relationship between peak moments and the three constructs



In the next section, I give a brief overview of the extant coaching literature on peak moments, followed by the findings from my research. I finish this article with recommendations for future and additional research needed to add depth and richness to the profession.

Literature Review

Peak moments share common qualities and display similar characteristics to one another (Privette, 1983) with reoccurring themes of stillness, happiness, enjoyment, fun, timelessness, self-awareness, focus, connection, and human achievement. Peak experience is attributed to Maslow (1964), described by him as a moment of transcendence, a mystical experience, and an altered state of consciousness. Peak performance is defined by Thornton, Privette and Bundrick (1999: 254) as a construct which is 'convenient for studying heightened human functioning that may provide insight for behavior enhancement and for personality development'. Privette (1981) informs that peak performance is defined by clear focus between two entities, the self and object, and the ensuing relationship that evolves. The object of clear focus, she explains, 'may be anything to which the person can be deeply committed or that truly fascinates' (1981: 64). Csikszentmihalyi (1990), the author of flow, suggests that individuals in the flow state are also in an altered state of consciousness and completely engaged in activities that are intrinsically rewarding.

Privette (1983) alleges peak moments can be found in activities that seek excellence, including the creative arts, as espoused by Dewey (1958). With the creative arts in mind, and due to the lack of coaching literature, I engaged in research in other fields such as music, sport, education, business, and nature and the wilderness which revealed the nature, essence, and presence of peak moments. This research added value and helped to bridge the gap in the coaching literature on peak moments. A more in-depth coverage of this literature can be found in Weijers (2021a).

McInman and Grove allege that characteristic of all three constructs of peak moments is 'the feeling of performing or experiencing without consciousness' (1991: 343). This philosophy resonates with Gallwey (1987), the sports coach, who was influential in shaping coaching as we know it today. He introduced a simple formula that defined the Inner Game, a methodology for maximum performance in sport: 'P=p-I; performance is equal to potential minus interference' (Gallwey, 2000: 17). By 'interference' Gallwey (2000) recognised that the intrusion of conscious thought was a hindrance to success in sport. The concept of an unconscious state leading more

often to successful outcomes, without the interference of conscious thought, is also evident in the flow experience identified by Csikszentmihalyi (1990). Gallwey's (1987) methodology was so successful that it was adopted in business and executive coaching and brought to my mind that an awareness of conscious thought may inhibit a peak moment.

Much has been written in coaching about cognitive experiences for coachees. These significant experiences are variously called 'critical moments' (de Haan, 2008a; 2008b), 'aha' moments (De Vries, 2013), and 'breakthrough moments' (Moons, 2016). Studies by these authors have identified coachees' cognitive experiences suggesting they contribute to meaningful life changes for them as a result of coaching. However, little analytical attention has been paid to coaches' experiences of peak moments. This article will extend the work of other authors and furthermore, shed light on the phenomenological experience of a peak moments for the coach in an attempt to fill this gap in the coaching literature.

According to Maslow (1959), peak moments simply happen. We can neither make nor command them, which infers something spontaneous and intuitive. Maslow (1961:17) pointed out that for a peak experience to happen there is a need to behave instinctively, trusting one's senses and intuition:

All these involve an ability to let go, to let things happen. Will power only interferes. In this same sense, it begins to look as if the intrusion of willpower may inhibit peak-experiences.

De Haan (2008b:124) also addresses the notion of intuition, advising 'in short, coaching will remain a largely intuitive area of work until it can be demonstrated conclusively what works in what circumstances.' This philosophy concurs with the possibility of coaches experiencing a peak moment when they acknowledge and trust their intuition. Nash and Collins (2006: 486) recommend that when coaches operate instinctively, sometimes called 'gut feel', they are in fact taking advantage of their tacit knowledge 'which can be abstract and unarticulated'. For a peak moment to emerge, it could be that coaches may need to be guided by their intuition. Intuition is preceded by tacit understanding, the sense of knowing something before it can be articulated (Polanyi, 1967, Moustakas, 1990). This is the kind of knowing that guides the brush of the painter, a largely unconscious knowing that the coach can become aware of too. Polanyi's (1967:108) description of tacit knowledge is simply 'we know more than we can tell' and Cox (2013:21) writes that Polanyi described it as 'consisting of a range of conceptual and sensory information and images that could, in fact, be used to make sense of a situation or event, despite being inarticulate'.

Moons (2016: 55) also explains how intuition can lead to a transformational shift (albeit for the coachee) 'developing and acting upon hunches, holding the silence [...] all seem to be critical coaching interventions.' Moons (2016) points out that to make a transformational shift happen, coaches are not consciously applying any technique or approach to help clients come to their insights but simply using their intuition, which she calls a sixth sense or third eye. Moons (2016) uses words such as 'shift', 'myth' and 'magic' which ascribe peak moments as periods of radical change in coaching and transformational learning. She claims little is known about how such learning could be achieved in practice through coaching, albeit that Longhurst (2010) claims that 'aha' moments impact on individual learning and transformational development.

Murray (2004), too, urges coaches to acknowledge and embrace intuition, which she sees as an opportunity to connect soul-to-soul with coachees. Ignoring our intuition, she advises, risks resulting in a tick-box, evidence-based approach to coaching, losing the rich connections that intuition brings.

There appears to be, however, a shift in the understanding of peak moments in the coaching context. For example, Moore, Drake, Tschannen-Moran, Campone and Kauffman (2005: 3) developed a theoretical model called the intuitive dance; at those peak moments both coach and client are in a state they describe as 'relational flow'. These authors maintain that the use of

relational flow will help to understand and promote mastery in the profession, emphasising the importance of the coaching relationship to promote flow states, growth, and change. They argue that this model builds on Csikszentmihalyi's notion of 'shared flow' by emphasizing 'the relational genesis of flow' (2005: 2).

Kets de Vries (2013: 155) makes the analogy of a problem being solved when, out of the blue, 'a light bulb goes on in our head'. He describes such moments as 'aha' or 'eureka' moments related to insight and awareness for the coachee. Such moments elicit positive feelings of happiness, similar to Maslow's (1962) description of peak experience, 'moments of highest happiness and fulfilment' (1962: 69). Kets de Vries (2013) referred to these 'tipping points' as significant events that contributed to meaningful life changes for the coachee, but not the coach. Furthermore, according to Kets de Vries (2013:5) the phenomenon of 'aha' moments has been described as quantum change. He cites Miller and de C' de Baca (2001) who liken quantum change to a 'bolt from the blue' or 'seeing the light'. Individuals who had such a life-changing experience almost universally described it as becoming aware of a new, meaningful reality.

Similarly, the study by Honsova and Jarasova (2018: 3) also aims at the peak experience of coachees. These authors do, however, acknowledge the construct of peak experience in coaching, simultaneously highlighting the gap in the coaching literature when they state, 'this experience seems not to have been researched in the field of coaching yet' (2018: 3). One of the more interesting aspects of Honsova and Jarasova's (2018: 3) study is their admission that 'emotional experiencing seems little researched in the area of coaching'. The acknowledgement of emotions by coaches to encourage a peak moment is further discussed in the findings of this paper.

This review of coaching literature has focussed on the coachee, but according to Flaherty (2022), the intimacy of coaching is dependent upon the coach's experience. He designed a five-step linear process; an overview of coaching which he names the 'flow of coaching'. His process starts with establishing the relationship with the coachee, recognising openings, observing and assessing, to enrol the coachee which leads to coaching conversations. Flaherty (2022) points out that this framework becomes less rigid with coaching experience and encourages the coach to work with this flow so that there is more cohesion between the stages. He also recognises that his process may be too structured for some coaches, inhibiting their natural spontaneity, and slowing the flow of their natural intuitive responses. He adds that knowledge of this structure gradually fades, enabling the coach to freely respond in the moment, an encouragement to enter the flow state.

As suggested by Flaherty (2022), the success of a coaching intervention rests on the skills ability and accountability of the coach. The coach's awareness of their competencies could additionally include an awareness of peak moments. McBride (2013) endorses this suggestion that the coach's competence is a prerequisite of experiencing flow. She proposes that one of the conditions of flow, an altered state of consciousness, sometimes streams into a coaching session when individuals fail to notice how long they have been coaching. This offers the possibility of a transcendent experience for coaches when their sense of time becomes distorted, flying past unnoticed. McBride (2013: 3) acknowledges this experience retrospectively: 'I have only identified the flow state in my coaching in reflection on a coaching session.' Until her study was published, McBride claims, no one had examined the coach's experience of flow, which embraces the value of peak experience and the behaviour of peak performance. She further maintains that it is valuable to understand coaches' experience of flow, to learn what factors relate to the experience of flow for coaches (McBride, 2013).

Bakker (2005) ascertains that in education, there is emotional contagion between teacher and pupil, which can act as a catalyst for peak moments to emerge. There is no reason to suppose that such contagion does not exist between coach and coachee which could lead to a peak moment for the coach. An understanding of peak moments for a small number of coaches could inform other coaches, offering their practice the benefit of the greater sense of the catalytic effects peak moments elicit, as suggested by Bakker (2005).

In summary, little has been written about peak moments from the coach's perspective. Flaherty (2022) talks of a process to encourage the flow in coaching, and McBride (2013) discusses how coaches experience the flow state. The extant coaching literature implies that studies on peak moments report mainly on breakthroughs for the coachee, particularly when the coach is open to acknowledging their intuition. Maslow (1959), de Haan (2008b), Murray (2004) and Moons (2016) all endorse the importance of the coach's intuition to facilitate a creative environment. The act of letting go to discover what emerges, which involves ignoring our willpower and trusting our intuition, points to a discernible link between intuition and a peak moment.

Methodology

Encouraged by Creswell (2003), I started this introduction with a personal statement, positioning myself as central to the research question. My experiences of peak moments as a musician and coach were central to the need to find a methodology which would reflect my subjective reality yet enable me to explore the phenomenon through other coaches' experiences too.

My experiences of peak moments were as shifting, multiple realities, created and interpreted by me, which informed of my ontological position: interpretivism. Knowledge was constructed through my interpretation of the subjective experience of peak moments by other coaches. Guided by Gray (2009), who suggests that interpretivism is closely linked to constructivism, I realise that my epistemology is grounded in constructivism.

When considering the choice of method, I had an implicit sense of knowing something in a visceral way, even before I was able to articulate what it was and how it had impacted on me. I was influenced by Polanyi (1966) who states that such knowledge is part of the tacit dimension, suggesting that to curtail the tacit in research is to limit the possibilities of knowing. By dwelling on the knowing, the tacit becomes real. My tacit understanding became real by keeping tuned into this knowing to understand its meaning, which governed my choice of methodology, and arguably my whole research. Moustakas (1990) emphasises the positioning of the researcher in his heuristic methodology, stressing the involvement of the researcher 'to the extent that the lived experience of the researcher becomes the main focus of the research' (1990: 12).

The heuristic approach is a branch of phenomenology (Hiles, 2002; Sultan, 2018) that facilitates a way of engaging in scientific research through self-inquiry and dialogue with others. The researcher is overtly positioned in the narrative and themes emerge through dialogue with interviewees (known as co-researchers) and interpretation of the essence of their perspectives on the topic 'that would 'retain the essence of the person in the experience' (Douglass and Moustakas, 1985: 43). Sultan (2018) explains that heuristic researchers link and never separate the individual and the experience, internalising the question 'how do I experience this phenomenon?' (2018: 9). Gray (2009: 31) explained that heuristic inquiry 'starts phenomenologically from the belief that the understanding grows out of direct human experience and can only be discovered initially through self-inquiry'. I settled upon this method, heuristic inquiry.

In the context of social science, heuristic inquiry is a strongly subjective approach (Gray, 2009). It is attributed to Moustakas (1990), yet other theorists, researchers and psychotherapists influenced its development (Moustakas, 1990:7). Among these are Husserl (1931), Rogers (1951; 1969), Polanyi (1967) and Maslow (1971). According to Douglass and Moustakas (1985), heuristic inquiry encourages the understanding of a phenomenon from multiple perspectives. These begin as a series of subjective musings, developing into a systematic and definitive clarification through interpretation and the construction of themes by noting hunches, ideas and essences as they emerge. Moustakas (1986) proposed three perspectives. The first, 'being in', is the dialogue between a person and their world, embracing the fullness of human capacity to be in the world; the second, 'being with', involves immersing oneself in another's world by listening deeply and

attentively to enter into the other person's experience; the third, 'being for', supports bringing the full self to the other, through knowledge and experience. These perspectives, together with Moustakas's (1990: 15) definition of heuristic inquiry, affirmed my choice of method:

A way of engaging in a scientific search through methods and processes aimed at discovery; a way of self-inquiry and dialogue with others aimed at finding the underlying meanings of important human experience.

Nine co-researchers were recruited through snowball sampling (Noy, 2008) and invited for a semi-structured, phenomenological interview. I was also interviewed, bringing the total number of co-researchers to ten. The interviews were recorded, transcribed and analysed following the procedures proposed by Moustakas (1990).

Germane to heuristic inquiry is the creative synthesis, the culmination of the research (Frick, 1990). I carefully considered how I could integrate my experiences of peak moments in music and coaching with the transcripts, painstakingly deliberating on how I could synthesise themes which had emerged from the interviews while heeding Moustakas (1990: 32):

The researcher must move beyond any confined or restricted attention to the data itself and permit an inward life on the question to grow, in such a way that a comprehensive expression of the essences of the phenomenon investigated is realized.

Eventually *sprech-gesang* (German: *sprechen*, to speak, *gesang*, song) came to mind, a vocal style between speech and singing, yet without exact pitch. It is attributed to Schoenberg (Scholes, 1992). Inspired to pursue this notion by the contemporary poet, rapper, musician and writer Kate Tempest (2018), I emailed the co-researchers, asking them to highlight and return to me the most impactful responses on their transcripts. Although only two co-researchers responded, the richness of their responses enabled me to compile a prose summarising how peak moments emerge. I then read this prose over pre-recorded background music, *Faure's Sicilienne, Opus 78*, featuring me playing the flute (Weijers, 2001b) with piano accompaniment by Anthony Baldery. The result was what Sultan (2018: 55) calls 'a representative synthesis of the essential nature of the phenomenon.'

Findings

The findings reveal that all ten co-researchers had experienced the phenomenon of a peak moment, physiologically, emotionally, and mentally. Peak experience was more of a rarity, flow happened regularly, and the surprising construct was peak performance. Half of the co-researchers felt it had no place in coaching although the other half felt it was relevant. The perspective of peak performance revealed that the coach is performing well, to the best of their abilities, imbuing them with confidence and a greater understanding of themselves, an affirmation and validation of their efforts, without a competitive element of pitching oneself as a coach against another coach-competitor.

The term 'peak moment' embraces a multitude of definitions. The overriding factor seemed to be that it was problematic to ascertain which of the constructs were in discussion, as the descriptions were conflated, for example, one of the co-researchers remarked:

Was it because I was in flow and that I had a peak experience [...] or did I have a peak experience because I was at a high-performance level? They are so intertwined, there's so much overlap between them.

The co-researchers clearly had difficulty articulating which of the constructs they experienced, The challenge in making the distinctions is that they have similar characteristics (Bakker, 2005), such as spontaneity, timelessness and an altered state of consciousness.

The importance of a peak moment was apparent. One co-researcher remembered the experience from 15 years earlier, an event which remained vivid in her memory. She clearly felt something important was occurring which echoes Maslow's (1959: 65) words: 'he remembers the experience as a very important and desirable happening.' The rarity of peak moments was expressed through a music metaphor by another co-researcher:

Very like the feeling you might get when playing in a string quartet, one of the odd bars where we just get it spot on and everything works perfectly [...] those feelings are few and far between and when they come, they're absolutely amazing and it's a similar feeling to that.

Another co-researcher admitted that without peak moments, she would have resigned her career in coaching. Such feelings reveal that these co-researchers felt as though they were not only enriched by peak moments but also motivated to continue coaching. Motivation is a common quality to all three constructs (Privette, 1983) and confirms Bakker's (2005) assertions that flow at work, defined as a short-term peak experience, is characterised by three underlying dimensions of absorption, (work) enjoyment, and intrinsic (work) motivation.

Mind and body feelings are often inseparable in the experience of a peak moment, working in tandem, as expressed by a co-researcher: 'the peak moment is a feeling combined with thoughts and emotions and physical sensation,' corroborated by Csikszentmihalyi (1990:95): 'the body does not produce flow merely by its movement. The mind is always involved as well'. Damasio's (1999) theory of feelings and emotions confirms that there is a link between bodily experience and cognition: 'feelings are largely a reflection of body-state changes' (1999: 288). As summarised by Cox (2013:12) 'experience includes bodily sensation, emotions and intuitions, and these are ways of knowing that inform our reflecting and thinking.' By listening to, and acting upon their feelings and emotions, the coach is enabled to respond in a way that creates a breakthrough for the coachee, which in turn produces a peak moment for the coach.

The feelings co-researchers sensed from both inside and outside the body contributed to the possibility of a peak moment occurring. A peak moment emanated from increased energy, experienced as a powerful surge, sensations in the gut, a change in their breathing and intensity of feelings such as hairs standing up on the back of the neck. Their physical sensations were so intense that they re-experienced them again during our interview:

As I'm talking to you now, I can feel that same 'hair standing up' feeling down my spine, sort of butterflies in my tummy and then this feeling of - I don't know if my hair is actually trying to stand on end, but it feels as if it could well be.

Such sensations are intense and real, illustrating the meaningful experience of peak moments. The physiological responses described in the study by Longhurst (2010) concerning 'aha' moments, are not dissimilar to the feelings reported by the co-researchers: feelings in the chest when breathing changes, and a sudden rush of energy throughout the heart, the stomach, solar plexus and the gut, Although the descriptions are similar, the 'aha' moment occurs to the coachee when experiencing an insight. The current study reveals that peak moments occur for the coach when observing the 'aha' moment for the coachee.

Several of the co-researchers experienced peak moments as though they came from outside of the body, as if they were being used as a channel, radar, antennae, or conduit, transmitting a message or insight from outside themselves. It is as though the co-researchers received something from another force, outside of themselves, audible through interpreting and deciphering a phenomenon. They were unable to explain why this happened, but felt it in the moment; a sensation, a sense of

something supernatural which one co-researcher described as 'real, almost bolts from the blue,' which happened without warning; unexpected, unplanned and spontaneous. This experience was felt as a connection to the universe, connection to the self, connection to the other in that space and their system. This undiscovered phenomenon resonates with Maslow's description of a cosmic consciousness experience:

This is a special phenomenological state in which the person somehow perceives the whole cosmos or at least the unity and integration of it and of everything in it, including his Self' (1971: 277).

Research revealed that this concept of cosmic consciousness has already been discussed by Longhurst (2006: 70) who described the concept as 'soul experiences' for those who highlight a feeling of connection with others and the universe.

As explained by Cox (2013: 76), Damasio's model suggests how 'pre-reflective experience and emotions shift to awareness in consciousness.' Damasio's (1999) theory states that the pre-conscious feeds into the consciousness, when neural messages create feelings which are felt as bodily messages creating the feeling of feelings. Consciousness is the feeling of knowing a feeling. This phenomenon can be understood as a message being transferred from the preconscious to consciousness without the coach being aware that this is happening, stimulating their experiences and knowledge which are lying dormant, waiting to be aroused. As affirmed by one of the co-researchers: 'I didn't think about it before I did it. I just did it, you can't force it,' confirming that the peak moment experience happened, without any pre-conscious thinking.

As one of the co-researchers remarked, the phenomenological peak moment arrives as a 'bolt from the blue.' The question that leads to a peak moment is often random. Flashes of insight gave the co-researchers permission, the go-ahead to ask 'killer' questions, emanating from their experience and knowledge when trusting their tacit knowing and intuition. The timing to pose the all-important question, which releases something in the coachee, is felt intuitively.

From the foregoing, initial analysis shows how the co-researchers experienced this rare, important phenomenon physiologically, emotionally, and mentally. Further analysis disclosed that a peak moment is a co-creation between coach and coachee, but also supported by five core conditions that encourage its emergence. These conditions are:

1. Connectedness

One of the co-researchers gives compelling evidence on the importance of connectedness in the relationship:

Being really, really, connected to the person that I worked with. So it was almost as if, how would I explain it? I feel as if, when I'm working with people, as if I'm absolutely there with them and there's no boundary between either of us.

2. Co-creativity

Something 'happens' in the 'space-between' coach and coachee and emerges from the connectivity and trust in the dyad. Both connectivity and trust are implicit in this co-creation, as stated by one of the co-researchers:

I believe that, coming more from the co-creation of that connection, will enable us to do the work together. I've been a co-creator; perhaps I've given that other person the opportunity to understand the word 'given'. Have I given the conditions whereby they can therefore be created? I don't know if I've done that. Have we created the conditions to do the work? It's very energising, and it's very humbling.

3. Trust

Mutual trust is co-created through the connectedness between coach and coachee, as described by a co-researcher:

It's the trust that's important. She (the coachee) said "why am I telling you all about this because I've never spoken about it?". The trust went very deep, as she's never spoken to anyone about these things before.

4. Asking questions

Listening to one's intuition to ask 'out of the blue' or 'killer' questions is expressed by another co-researcher:

Where the hell did that come from? [...] because that's when it all clicks; and that's when I can get all of the bits of data coming in, and the right question comes out that unlocks something.

5. The coaching approach

Analysis of the transcripts revealed three approaches used by the co-researchers which enabled peak moments. These approaches are not new to coaching, but new in the sense of having been identified to encourage the emergence of a peak moment.

i) *The person-led approach*: to be of service and be led by the coachee's needs, is underpinned by Rogers's (1961) core conditions of congruence, empathy and unconditional positive regard. A co-researcher observed:

I feel that I'm at the service of others doing this work. I forget everything else except from what I'm doing right there; I'm totally focused, letting go of everything other than my trade, my skills, observing and perceiving what is coming from that person. I think it's very important to be really serious and rigorous, the knowledge underpinning coaching, but we shouldn't also lose that indescribable, yes, the magic of it, sort of unexplainable.

ii) *The empty vessel approach*: co-researchers found a way of ridding themselves of daily pressures by emptying themselves of such anxieties before engaging with the coachee without prejudice and judgements, free of personal issues. They do, however, bring their full selves to the coaching session, their experience and expertise. This approach is evidenced by a co-researcher:

I've got a blank piece of paper. I'm going to listen, facilitate, guide back; it's not about me. I'm almost like an empty vessel, I'm literally the conduit for whatever they need to help them move forward. I am simply going very quiet inside myself and letting come up what comes up from me; that is my repository and my experience [...] you will notice a stray thought, or you'll notice a feeling and you'll think 'that's mine, not theirs'. Ok, hiya, off you go, I'll deal with you later.

iii) *The 'in' or 'out' approach*: this concept refers to the co-researchers' being able to both observe the coaching process and simultaneously run the process. This concept of being 'in' and 'out' of the coaching conversation is a major finding, an approach which helps to create a peak moment, as witnessed by one of the co-researchers when talking about the conscious and unconscious minds:

They're working in tandem but not thinking the same things. They're not noting the same things; my mouth was forming the sounds while the witness, the observer, was totally aware of what it was doing. It's not a controlling agent, it's an observer, sensing, noting, not doing, like a hidden camera. But it's more than that, it's all senses. I've used the word radar, antenna earlier.

Discussion and Conclusion

When reflecting upon the five core conditions to encourage a peak moment, I came to realise that I had missed a vital point. How did these findings come about? It was then that I realised it is down to awareness. The findings suggest something is created in the space between coach and coachee, where 'something' happens, which brings depth and richness to the coaching experience. It occurs in a space where both coach and coachee are open to the experience, as explained by Desmond (2012: 71): 'the between, where both coach and client are open to what is emerging and what each is, in the mutuality of their dynamic encounter.'

The 'space-between' is a concept co-created in the dyad due to connectivity, mutual trust and engagement in the coaching relationship. This co-creation is frequently the gateway to exploring intuitive thoughts that the coach has drawn from their tacit knowing, their skills and experience. The coach has listened to their tacit knowing and intuition, resulting in them feeling as if they are being used as a conduit.

It was my analysis of the coaches' ability to acknowledge feelings emanating from outside the body, gaining insights as though being used as a channel, radar, antenna or conduit that evoked the conduit metaphor. This perception of something outside of the self was also apparent to Maslow (1959: 52-53):

Peak experiences are [...] also perceived and reacted to as if they were in themselves "out there" as if they were perceptions of a reality independent of man and persisting beyond his life.

The 'conduit metaphor' is an exciting finding as I am unaware that this concept has been explored as a coaching metaphor. It seems a vital outcome of this study and a significant contribution to the literature. The value for coaching is a greater sense of alignment and a deeper sense of empathy in the relationship between coach and coachee .

To illustrate this notion of two selves inherent in the conduit metaphor, there is an enchanting story recalled by one of the coaches about an image in Sufism of two birds in the Blue Mosque, Istanbul, which represent the two aspects of the self. One bird represents the doing, the conscious mind, and the other represents observing, the unconscious mind. They are both present and relate to the concept of being 'in' or 'out' of the coaching process, which arose through the coaches' experience of a peak moment.

I subsequently built on and revised the core conditions to also include the coach's self-awareness, their awareness of the coachee and awareness of their feelings. Awareness has been in every coaching trainee's manual and is probably based on the words of Whitmore (2002: 33): 'I am able to control only that of which I am aware. That of which I am unaware controls me. Awareness empowers me' - or the words of Allan and Whybrow (2007: 133):

In Gestalt coaching the coach will specifically draw on their own awareness (thoughts, feelings, sensations) during sessions to feed this back into the process in order to challenge, support, enquire.

As far as contributions to the industry are concerned, there are several. They say that music feeds the soul, and, I would argue, so does a peak moment in coaching. It is aspirational, aesthetically rewarding, and beneficial to the relationship between coach and coachee. The transcendental nature of a peak moment enables a deeper level of connectivity, through an acknowledgement of feelings. The value to coaching thus lies in a better connection between coach and coachee. Peak moments are also a means of achieving higher levels of self-actualisation (Maslow, 1943) if coaches are aware of the phenomenon.

The combination of the five core conditions, working together in harmony, is a new development in coaching. Individual elements have been presented in the coaching literature, but never hitherto as facilitators and precursors to a peak moment. The research revealed three coaching approaches which encourage the emergence of a peak moment: the 'empty vessel'; the 'person-led' and the 'in or 'out' approach. When supported by the core conditions, these approaches enable the coach to engage with a peak moment. Another contribution to coaching is the role and value of peak performance. The study shows that coaches can be proud and feel buoyant about their success as a coach without criticism and riposte of egotistical behaviour. Finally, there is a contribution to coaching for supervision. This study reveals that the coach has a peak moment when the coachee has a breakthrough. In like manner, it could be that the supervisor has a peak moment when the coach gains a new understanding about themselves or their coach/coachee relationships.

Future research on peak moments in coaching could take several forms. To interview both coach and coachee on their mutual experience would be illuminating. Similarly, research between supervisor and coach could reveal the presence of a peak moment in supervision.

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