

Poem As Coach

A Plank Laid Over

The Lion's Den

By Dale Biron

Unleashing The Self-Coaching Power Of Poetry In Our Personal and Work Lives To Help Us Change, Grow, Succeed And Remember Why We Get Up In The Morning And Do What We Do

I've pretty well stopped reading business books. The "blockbuster!" mentality, the "hottest new idea" approach turns me off. In the past five years, I've found myself reading a lot more fiction and poetry. It feeds my heart better than business books, and the business world is seriously short of heart these days.

— William Bridges internationally recognized authority on managing change in the workplace in an interview with Management Consulting News in 2003

Does the title of this article give you pause, perhaps a slight nudge of skepticism? I can imagine the questions that may be cropping up in your mind, especially if like most of us your primary encounter with poetry was long ago in a middle or high school English class. A place where the poems you studied may have felt more like a trip to the dentist than inspiring art. (Note: to all you wonderful, passionate teachers of poetry, forgive my generalization.) Given this common experience many of us have had with poetry, a healthy skepticism and certain questions are only natural. For example: Am I suggesting that poems could have a real and practical purpose in your life? That poetry could actually be put to work for a living? Do I actually believe that poetry could help you with important changes and transitions in your life both at home and work? And can I be talking about the real world we seem to be experiencing these days where we're constantly fretting over one change after another? Could I be saying that poems can even help us navigate the politics and sometimes-difficult relationships in our work lives? Or with our steroid-laden to-do lists? Can I possibly mean that poetry could act as an effective self-coaching tool in and

*Everywhere I go, I
find a poet has been
there before me.*

—Sigmund Freud

among the impossible deadlines and challenges that seem to keep coming faster than speeding bullets? Can poetry be freighted with all these heavy demands?

In a word: **Yes**. And I say that with considerable gusto. I say yes and if you'll stick with me for these next few pages I promise to give you a taste of what I mean. In fact, I hope to provide, even in this brief essay, some sense of the powerful self-coaching possibilities that great poetry can provide. For me, one of the first seminal poems to enter my personal self-coaching kit was [*Asphodel, That Greeny Flower*](#) by the wonderfully talented poet William Carlos Williams. As you read a portion of his famous poem below, notice the beautiful way the poet rubs up against our mind, turning our assumptions upside down:

*My heart rouses / thinking to bring you news / of something / that concerns you
/ and concerns many men. Look at / what passes for the new. / You will not
find it there but in despised poems. / It is difficult / to get the news from poems /
yet men die miserably / every day / for lack / of what is found there.*

I remember the first time I heard this poem. (By the way, if you'll read this passage several times out loud, you'll find the power will intensify.) I thought who could write such preposterous lines. News from poetry? Are you kidding? But clearly I also felt a resonance with the poem. The words spoke a much deeper truth than I was used to hearing, a truth that was exhilarating. Just like a good coach will make statements or ask questions to have us *see* the world in a fresh way, this poem was doing the same. I began to see poetry from a larger and more expanded perspective. Over time as my coaching experience grew, I noticed I frequently referred my clients to poems as tools for their journey of change. I could see how the poems magnified, clarified and intensified the coaching experience for my clients. Each poem introducing powerful new metaphors, images and ideas that seemed just right for the situation at hand. That's when I began to more fully see poems as surrogate coaches, providing serious self-

*Yes indeed. For
poems are not words,
after all, but fires for
the cold, ropes let
down to the lost,
something as
necessary as bread
in the pockets of the
hungry. Yes indeed.*

—Mary Oliver, Pulitzer
Prize Winning Poet

coaching support. Assisting in ways that were highly motivating, idea rich, emotionally complex and heart-felt. But how does this work?

The Characteristics of a Great Coach

Have you ever had a good coach? Someone you could consistently trust to tell the truth? Someone who reflected back a larger more capable image than the one you may have held of yourself? Someone who focused on your strengths and possibilities rather than your faults and weaknesses, yet who never shied away from giving you honest and even at times difficult feedback? A coach that held a deep and abiding respect for your inherent ability to work out your own answers and solutions, your own internal wisdom and skillful ways in the world? A coach that wasn't interested in *fixing you* or with having you conform to some pre-determined cast. A coach that asked powerful and provocative questions, providing both empathy and wake-up calls on an as needed basis.

In fact, for many years my business partner and I have asked those who attended our coaching-for-leaders workshops to list the key characteristics of a good coach. We wanted to know precisely what their coach actually did. As time passed and the number of business clients who answered the questions grew, we noticed some distinct patterns. All during this period we expanded our research by asking our one-on-one life-coaching clients the same question usually in a context of trying to understand what kind of coaching they desired. There again, we recognized patterns. With little variance, the characteristics hundreds of people ascribed to their "best coaches" included the following.

"My best coach," they would say:

- *Helped me raise my level of awareness. She helped me see my larger patterns and the underlying beliefs and assumptions that informed them.*
- *Helped me stay on course with my changes and internal transitions.*
- *Helped me gain different perspectives, and reframe situations.*

*If I read a book and it
makes my whole body
so cold that no fire
could ever warm me,
then I know that is
poetry. If I feel
physically as if the top
of my head were taken
off, then I know that
is poetry. These are
the only ways I know
it. Is there any other
way?*

—Emily Dickinson

- *Focused upon my strengths, often reflecting back to me an even larger version of “me” that I myself saw.*
- *Let me “learn” rather than telling me, find my own answers, increasing my sense of trusting myself, and my own capabilities.*
- *Continually asked me to make commitments, to be accountable, to “choose” and be responsible for my choices.*
- *Encouraged the engagement of both my heart and my head.*
- *Deeply listened to me, modeling empathy and respect.*
- *Called out my creativity.*
- *Encouraged and even cajoled me as needed.*
- *Did not shy away from giving me difficult feedback and the truth as they saw it.*
- *Asked me great questions and knew when to be quiet.*

A good poem helps to change the shape and significance of the universe, helps to extend everyone's knowledge of himself and the world around him.

—Dylan Thomas

Eureka!

Over time I realized two important things about this list of coaching qualities so many hundreds of people had consistently agreed upon.

- 1. The very best coaching (to ones self or to another person) should model these twelve characteristics and qualities.**
- 2. Great poems have many of the same characteristics as great coaches.**

I began to realize that great poems were even alive in a certain way, capable of providing different kinds of experiences (just like a coach does) depending upon who is being coached. And even for the same person, two different readings a few days, weeks or months apart often yielded different levels of experience and support. As I continued to think about poetry in this way, experimenting with using poems in my coaching practice and in special poetry-based talks, I became increasingly encouraged. The poems became a way to “stretch” the coaching, to enhance it, to concentrate and make it last. Poetry, after all could be employed any time, at no cost, and in very brief and convenient

increments. In other words, I began to clearly see that the great poems were a true coaching and leadership tool for the 21st Century.

Tell a wise person, or else keep silent. . .

I often start my poetry talks on the subject of change and transition by declaring that perhaps the first change management coach was Johann Wolfgang von Goethe. After all, in a single poem called *The Holy Longing* (expertly translated from the original German by Robert Bly) we are treated to a veritable workshop on the dynamics of personal change and transition. The first stanza:

One must learn to waver.

—William Stafford

*Tell a wise person, or else keep silent,
for those who do not understand will mock it right away.
I praise what is truly alive,
what longs to be burned to death.*

Here even in the first few lines, Goethe's poem is already hard at work – serving up provocative questions; raising our level of awareness for what's at stake; creating pattern interrupts and also causing us to slow down and think about our actions. To who are you confiding your biggest and most important dreams and plans for transformation? That's what this poem and for that matter any good coach wants to know. And then upon second thought we can imagine Goethe's masterful poem also asking about another naysayer capable of even greater negative influence: the one inside our own head. Then before our attention has a chance to drift for even a moment, we are confronted by the next two strange and mysterious lines. We cock our heads, RCA dog style and wonder what the poem is trying to say or ask. Then we reach the last two lines of the poem and the meaning and questions explode.

*And so long as you haven't experienced this: to die and so to grow,
you are only a troubled guest on the dark earth.*

Too experience **what** we ask? Profound **change** the poem says. Here we begin to see that in Goethe's world to be *truly alive* is to be constantly ready *to be burned to death*. A startling metaphor asking: are we truly ready to allow who we are now to perish at any moment as the necessary price of becoming who we could be? In essence, are we ready to step fully into our greater potential? Here is the [entire poem](#).

One of the best-kept secrets in this technically oriented culture is that simply speaking truth heals.

—Rachel Naomi Remen, M

The Tipping Point of Change

When we set out to make a critical change in our lives we are entering a whole new beginning. Right? Wrong. Or at least wrong for some initial period of time. One of the most critical yet counterintuitive aspects of the change and transition process we all must come to grips with is **loss**. No matter what kind of change we're working with, it's the first stop on our transition journey. Of course when the change is extremely significant and **not chosen**, such as the loss of a relationship, job, or in the most extreme case the loss of a loved one through death, we are able to clearly see how this type of change begins in loss. But what about the changes we choose? Yes they come with loss as well, if nothing else the loss of confidence, familiarity and routine. I recall many years ago just after graduating from college and making the decision to move to the San Francisco Bay Area from North Carolina. Having fallen deeply in love with the area, I was totally jazzed about the move. So what was the loss? I was suddenly thousands of miles from family and old friends. It was still the right move, but the loss I felt was very real. Let's look at the first few lines of Mary Oliver's famous poem called *The Journey* for a bit of fine and skillful self-coaching insight.

*One day you finally knew
what you had to do, and began,
though the voices around you
kept shouting
their bad advice—
though the whole house
began to tremble. . .*

Often our best coaches help us validate what we are experiencing as we move through the change process. They help us discover the questions and language we need to more fully enter our own unique change process. Do you sense this poem doing that? Do you feel the poem understands something seminal about the change process, especially when the change is of our choosing? Along these lines, what is this poem asking us to consider (by inference) about the pressure we sometimes feel from others who consciously or unconsciously may not want us to change? Because it means they will also be required to change, perhaps in ways they don't want to face? You may consider letting this poem become a wonderful surrogate coach for your own journeys of change to apply generously as needed. See the full text of [The Journey](#). It ends with a profound realization, which leaves us with a burning set of questions and inspirations for our own journey.

Treat people as if they were what they ought to be, and you help them to become what they are capable of being.

—Goethe

*determined to do
the only thing you could do--
determined to save
the only life you could save.*

Poems For Coaching Skillful Transitions

Over the last year or so, I've had the distinct pleasure of sharing a cup of coffee on several occasions with William Bridges, famed change-management consultant, who's written some of the best, most seminal works ever created concerning how we human beings make changes (and more importantly, transitions) in both our work and personal lives. And, of course, what is at the core of all coaching efforts, if not change. One of his more famous and wise statements is: ***It isn't the changes that do you in, it's the transitions.*** What does that mean? Bridges gives examples: *Change is situational; the move to a new site, the retirement of the founder, the reorganization of the roles of the team, the revisions to the pension plan, etc. Transition on the other hand is psychological; it is a three-phased process that people go through as they internalize and come to terms with the details of the new situation the change brings.* The first phase (as

mentioned earlier) is the *ending, losing and letting go* stage. Putting change under the microscope reveals that there is always loss and a need to let go of what was before. The second phase is called the *neutral zone* and is characterized by the **old** being gone, while the **new** has not fully emerged. Because of its *out in the desert* quality, this stage is actually a very perilous period in the change process, one where reverting back to the old way of being and doing is always lurking. And finally the last stage is actually the *new beginning*, which is that time where the new identity is finally in place, the new purpose felt and the new ways incorporated.

*The mind
makes up the
world and then
claims it did
not.*

—David Bohm

Fortunately there are many wise poems for each phase of the change process. Of all the poems I love and regularly use as self-coaching tools for others and myself, the poems of William Stafford for me are in a league of their own. For example, in the first stanza of Stafford's [*An Introduction To Some Poems*](#), he speaks of the dangers for us all in that desert-like *neutral zone* stage of the change process. That place where we can so easily lose our way.

*Look: no one ever promised for sure
that we would sing. We have decided
to moan. In a strange dance that
we don't understand till we
do it, we have to carry on.*

Of course, every person I coach is different. But if I've found any common threads in what people seem to need most while being coached through a significant change and transition, it is having ways to connect (and many times reconnect) the heart to the often long and hard road of significant change. Especially, as the line in the poem suggests, when all we can manage to do standing in the desert of our change process is *moan*. Thankfully we have the big, bold and inspiring language we need in the poems of great artist like William

Stafford. For the odds of people, even good, smart, well-meaning people, succeeding at making difficult changes without an engaged heart is virtually zero.

What About Your Own Changes & Transitions?

So for you what is most in flux right now, your home or work life? Where and what are you changing? If it's at work, does it involve others? Do your responsibilities include helping others adapt to significant changes resulting from shifts in the external world? Changes they want no part of. Or might it be your change effort is more personal, taking the form of a growing recognition that it's time for you to make a significant move, perhaps to a new job, a new company or maybe into a whole new career? Or are your most significant changes happening in your personal life? Perhaps it's the kind of fierce change you didn't choose, having to do with a relationship ending, a child in trouble, a business faltering, or an ill parent. Whatever actual change you're dealing with, the underlying challenge, of course, is always the internal transition (as William Bridges so skillfully reminds us). A transition we must internalize and come to terms with as we work our way through the process from the initial loss, into and through the neutral zone and finally into the new beginning at the end of our journey.

Just remember, no matter how difficult your change process, there are scores of supportive, awareness-building, wake-up calling, healing, cajoling, purpose-reminding, comforting, truth-telling poems available for you 24/7. *Poem as coach. Poem as lifesaving plank laid over the lion's den of change.*

Contact Dale for a content rich, poetry-based presentation to satisfy your group, team or organization's unique needs.

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It is time for all the
heroes to go home
/ if they have any,
time for all of us
common ones / to
locate ourselves by
the real things / we
live by.

**From the poem
Allegiances
—William Stafford**