

Coaching Moments



A Collection of Articles About
Coaching in Everyday Life

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These articles previously appeared between June 2006 and March 2008 in Janice's **Coaching Moments** column in VOICE, the official newsletter of the International Association of Coaching.

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Introduction and thanks ~

This is a collection of articles I wrote for my 'Coaching Moments' column in VOICE, the monthly newsletter sent out by the International Association of Coaching. (www.certifiedcoach.org)

What helped me get IAC certified was an unshakeable belief that my *life* is the 'exam' I want to get a passing score for. Even when I wasn't able to produce masterful coaching in my recorded sessions, I took comfort in knowing that I was able to integrate Thomas Leonard's CoachVille Proficiencies© and other coaching skills into my everyday life.

As I enjoy passing on what I've learned, as well as sharing my experiences with others, it felt natural in these pieces to combine practical tips, coaching insights and thought provoking questions with my personal musings on family life, coaching and IAC certification.

Writing for the IAC has blessed me with some of my happiest moments and for that I'll always be grateful to Barbra Sundquist, the editor of VOICE in 2006. She was the first to recognise how my love of coaching, writing and family life are inextricably interwoven. Together we came up with the concept of the 'Coaching Moments' column. She's always believed in me and has helped me to believe in myself.

I'm also grateful to my coaching buddy, Angela Spaxman, who took over as VOICE editor when Barbra left. She, like Barbra, has always made me feel that my writing is appreciated and valued. I'm lucky to have had editors who allow me to write about whatever moves me. (Except once – when I wrote a *real* rant.)

Many of you share my love of writing and connection, and the feedback I get every month has amazed, delighted and inspired me. As well as sustaining me through some difficult times, it's kept me brave and authentic, reassuring me that I'm on the right road. Coaches are fantastic champions!

My deepest gratitude, as always, goes to my husband and children. Loving every detail of my life with them is a constant source of inspiration - they keep me open, aware and present.

Wishing you lots of coaching moments to savour and to learn from on your *own* coaching journey!

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Laura Wasilowski is the artist whose quilt appears on the front cover. I am hugely grateful to her for allowing me to use thumbnails of her beautiful quilts to illustrate my coaching projects. Synchronicity sent me to her website, and every visit to her online gallery warms my heart. I would encourage you all to visit Laura at www.artfabrik.com and buy one of her beautiful Art Quilts or her inspirational book on quilting! (Please don't reproduce her thumbnails without her permission.)

champions ~

Sometimes I feel like throwing in the towel, abandoning IAC certification and simply going back to reading inspirational books in cafés. This usually happens when I'm tired and overwhelmed by the workload I've set myself.

When I passed Step 1, my colleagues congratulated me online. My husband and kids presented me with Sicilian red wine, scented roses and black chocolate - even a small carved statue of a Christmas angel with outstretched hands to remind me that magic happens all year long - but something was missing.

I'd learned how to harness what used to be terrifying technology. I'd studied alone for months while raising our kids and struggling with health problems yet no-one asked me how passing made me feel or what it had *taken* for me to pass.

I needed everyone in my world to realise how passing would impact on my BIG picture, my goals, long term plans and dreams. The confidence I got from passing was like a halo around me for days and everyone who came near me benefited. I championed myself in my journal but I realised I needed to create a new environment to sustain all the changes I was going through. If I didn't, I felt I risked becoming distant from the people I loved most. I realised I needed championing, good old fashioned championing, the way coaches do it.

So, I taught my husband to champion. At first he teased me mercilessly, using formulas at every opportunity: "What did it take for you to create this delicious chick pea soup? What strengths did you tap into? What does the success of this salad mean to you? How will these nutritious home cooked vegetables impact on your vision for the whole family?" But then I watched in amazement as he started to get it. Really get it. The more he practised, the more subtle he became.

When I was asked to write for VOICE, he didn't just say 'Wow! That's great!'. He asked me what it *really* meant to me and what it said about me as a person. He could have stopped there but he didn't. He simply asked: "So what does your big picture look like now?" Then he smiled. Watched the look on my face and smiled some more.

Last week, he coached my son's football team to county championship victory. No certification in the world could have given me more pride and pleasure than their beaming smiles as they burst through the front door with that trophy.

We all need championing, especially when we're overwhelmed, down or just plain stuck. We all need subtle reminding of the unique contributions we have to make to the world. So go ahead, champion your loved ones, champion your clients, champion the world! And don't forget to champion yourself. Often.

when the birds come ~

Coaching moments have a wonderful habit of finding and inspiring us in the most unexpected of places; last weekend I learned an important lesson about certification at my kitchen sink.

I love the view from our kitchen window and often linger over the dishes, my hands dripping floral scented bubbles. Beyond our tiny strip of laurel covered fence, crows circle and roost in ancient Scots pines that sway in the breeze, revealing glimpses of heather clad hills and open sky beyond.

The laurels are usually teeming with birds and I've grown to recognize their voices. I could watch for hours as they party in the dripping branches after warm rain on summer days. In the winter, I'm very choosy about the wild bird food I put out and my kids tease me mercilessly. But the robin definitely prefers the fat and berry food! I swear he looked annoyed when I changed to a seed mix. Wouldn't touch it. Some days he sits on the window ledge as he eats breadcrumbs and bobs his head at me if I'm standing very still. On grey days, he appears like a flash of Christmas in the bushes if I'm jaded or sad.

But last Saturday, we had terrible frosts here in Scotland. The garden stood white and silent, the ground hard and unforgiving. My son had to do some weekend bird spotting for one of his Cub Scout badges. One hour and a list of boxes to tick off. But no sight of the plump blackbird with his yellow beak or the dunnock scurrying in the undergrowth like a little brown chicken. Even the woodpigeons must have been cuddling up somewhere else. I felt almost let down by the bully boy starlings who usually arrive in a squawking gang and the brave little blue tits who swing on the peanut feeders and do dog fight manoeuvres to avoid the starlings. But most of all, I missed the robin. Freezing or not, I'd expected him to appear on the fence and was disappointed because he didn't. I felt cheated because he spends hours there every day, long, undocumented hours convincing me that being present in the moment is the key to all my joy and wisdom. My whole view of the world changed because my son had some boxes to tick and a one hour session to do it in.

They came back on the Tuesday, dozens of them so my son was happy. He reckoned that handing in a full list a few days late was better than handing in an empty sheet. I was critiquing a colleague's exam tape the other day and thought of my boy and the robin. When we're recording sessions for an exam, sometimes

our coaching proficiencies simply don't show up. Maybe that's because we're bird watching with a tick sheet and a clock. My robin would probably just tell me to wash dishes and enjoy the garden. That's when the birds come.

heading for home ~

Yesterday as I was driving home from the supermarket, winding my way through the hills listening to Jose Gonzales' haunting voice and guitar chords, I felt more at peace than I have for months. I'd finally allowed myself to envision our summer holidays by the sea – far away from IAC certification, recorded sessions, triads, teleclasses, marketing emails and coaching sites.

My kids hate shopping for clothes – I don't know how long that will last – so into the supermarket trolley alongside the broccoli and bananas went bargain T shirts, suntan cream, mosquito spray, antiseptic wipes, books and some beaded, jewelled sandals for my daughter, who's caught in the tweenage years between pretty pastels and peer pressure. I even surprised myself and bought a black and white polka dot dress – with frills.

As I contemplated some San Francisco crime thrillers to read on the balcony in those peaceful hours when the children are sound asleep and the crickets are singing, I remembered in amazement how I'd studied a different Proficiency every day of our holidays in Greece last year. It's been a roller coaster of a year.

I thought back to the past few frazzled weeks of unsuccessful recordings, studying, buddy coaching, email correspondence, doing critiques and writing feedback. I'd burned meals, fed the kids junk food, watched the house get grubby and struggled to remember all of their after school arrangements. My days grew wearier and I looked on sadly as my husband kept the family together while I drank too much coffee at my computer.

The day I stunned my Sensible Self and recklessly sent in the only two recorded coaching sessions I'd done unselfconsciously, I bought myself ninety days of peace. Ninety days of enjoying my children. Time to relax in our garden and take trips to haunted Scottish castles and dark lochs; time to make memories in the local park; time to fall over in turquoise waves and drink Greek coffee in seafront cafés. Ninety days of salads and wine, jasmine scented evenings and candles.

My *life's* the session I want to get a passing score for and when I'm not grounded in my daily rituals, the simple, joyful details of my life – a jug of freesias on a scrubbed wooden table, a hearty meal served on a mismatched collection of crockery, a new book, a furtive kiss on a teddy bear's nose as I make beds – my

intuition withers and I struggle to create anything at all. Bad news for a coach, especially one who loves to write.

Driving home from the supermarket, windows down, savouring the smell of drenched earth in the rain, I turned up the music and decided I'd wear my polka dot dress on the day I get my exam results back.

the sound of music ~

I love hearing silence used beautifully. The perfect pause that reaches out like ripples around a pebble in a dark pool. A poem where the unspoken word can say more than the most carefully crafted chapter. The silence between the notes that makes the music.

I went to a Scottish folk concert last night and sat in awe as the fiddles and pipes had a spirited conversation, the flute became a voice, the guitar wrapped itself around them all and the drumbeat turned into a heartbeat, a handclapping, footstomping hall full of joy and applause. As I sat listening to the band, watching the stage lights pick out their foot tapping, swaying forms in beams of changing coloured light on the dark stage, I remembered how I used to feel performing my own songs in the heat of the lights, savouring the silence between the fading of the last note and the start of the clapping.

I sang my way around Europe when I worked as a language teacher and translator; my voice was a vital part of who I was and what I did. After I had my kids, I moved back to Scotland and slowly, imperceptibly, I stopped writing, stopped singing, stopped playing the guitar and even stopped speaking the foreign languages I was fluent in. Silence gently settled around my soul like snow.

When I drifted into life coaching, on my journey out of what I now realise was low grade chronic depression, my passion to tell the whole world about it bubbled up, spilled over and finally gushed out in the torrent that helped me rediscover my voice.

Meeting other coaches in teleclasses and online was a bonus, like watching a film with a cast of wonderful, colourful characters. I have a colleague who coaches with the quiet, understated elegance of a Grace Kelly. One coaching buddy has the gentle strength and loving radiance of a spiritual leader – I've never met her but I just *know* she has a twinkle in her eye! Another has a voice like hot chocolate; her coaching sessions are like a studio where you turn yourself and your life into a work of art. And we all know someone who coaches like Bette Davis on a bad day, right? So who would *you* be?

I suspect I'd be Maria from The Sound of Music, twirling around on a mountain top, squashing innocent edelweiss underfoot, tripping my way clumsily through

cobbled streets and coaching sessions oblivious to the fact that I was knocking people over with my swinging guitar case as I sang "I have confidence in sunshine...!"

It didn't surprise me when I failed Step 2 of the IAC exam. I gush, I interrupt inappropriately and I have this overwhelming urge to fix things, to make children's clothes out of curtains and get people singing about their favourite things.

Can I see myself ever getting certified? Well, Maria never did make it as a nun, although, thanks to her Mother Superior's glorious rendition of "Climb every mountain", she got the handsome husband, the home full of happy kids and found her dream. Am I glad to have my voice back, a spirited, life loving, world worshipping voice? Oh yes. Oh, dear God, YES!!!

'tis the season to be coaching....

There are two ways of spreading light; to be the candle or the mirror that reflects it.

~Edith Wharton

Thanksgiving, Hanukkah, Winter Solstice, Christmas, Kwanzaa - rituals of love, faith and gratitude that bring light and warmth, celebration and festive fun into the weariest corners of our winter hearts. But for me, if ever there was a coaching season, a time for coaches to really shine and co-create miracles, this would be it.

Winter can be cold and dreary here in Scotland. We're sometimes lucky enough to get a crisp, white Christmas, but most of the time we trudge our way through damp, dreich days, biting winds and a cold that cuts through to the bones. But wherever you live, whether you're in the north, surrounded by people snowed under by stress or in the south where families are frazzled by the heat and preparations for family feasts and festivities, this is when we as coaches can truly thrive and come into our own.

Our common aim is to help people remember what their hearts already know.

By being authentic and generous, we can fan each spark of human kindness into a flame that warms whole communities; we can help our families and friends to pause and take a breath; we can share a smile with the strangers we meet every day. In the brightly lit streets, crowded shopping centres and bustling department stores filled with the sound of carols and holiday favourites, we can still cherish the spirit and wonder of childhood and use it to fuel our fight against the soul destroying consumerism that threatens to wipe out our world.

If we can share the precious gift of our time, gladden the heart of a single child, make a homeless person warmer, a vulnerable person feel a little safer, a hungry person nourished, an older person feel like a cherished treasure trove of wisdom, experience and memories - then it adds a new perspective to our anxieties about how our internet marketing is doing, how many e-books we've sold today, how many email addresses we've garnered, how many teleclasses and phone clients are on our books and whether or not we've been certified by strangers.

What better time to listen carefully to the voice inside us that first led us into coaching and other caring professions.

What better time to share our gifts.

We've been lucky enough to learn the skills of knowing how to love without judgement, how to bring out the greatness in everyone we touch, how to get to the heart of what's important. We know how to help people focus, to get centred in the present, to build glorious futures on the foundations of past achievements. We know how to help people discover their authenticity and contribute their unique gifts to the world. We know the power of serene moments of silence, of gratitude for the single breath that means our soul still has a human home. If we only have time to say one prayer for the joys that have been revealed to us as coaches, let it be "Thank you!"

I thought I'd be tempted to write this December column about homely rituals that make my simple life seem rich and abundant, like my special winter mulled fruit juice for kids and drivers - apple, blueberry and orange juice spiced with cinnamon, cloves and nutmeg.

I thought maybe I'd wax lyrical about creativity, making our own crackers and Christmas cards or that I'd describe in detail every glittery gold, green and red treasured bauble in my home.

I half wrote an article about my favourite heart-warming holiday films, tales of childhood faith, second chances and integrity like *It's a Wonderful Life*, *Groundhog Day*, *Prancer*, *Scrooged* and *I Believe*.

I thought of sharing the story of how my nine year old son finally asked for the truth about Santa last month; there was no consolation for him in my explanation of Santa being the holy spirit of love in our hearts that makes every day feel like Christmas.

I thought I'd share my musings on the innkeeper's wife (did she bring snacks and blankets?) and my curiosity about what was going on in the minds of the mystical Magi as they travelled with trust towards strange lands and the promise of a new life filled with hope.

Instead, I found myself remembering a serious wee Scottish girl wearing the cowgirl outfit Santa had brought her, chewing on a brand new pen and dreaming of being a writer some day. She would like to say thank you to every

single one of you for reading this far. Every word you read creates a miracle and breathes life into her childhood dream of touching people with her words.

My thanks go to all of you who've sent emails and overwhelmed a forty seven year old mother of two with your kindness and appreciation. Thank you to those who've volunteered to be recorded clients for me and given me the chance to serve you until some day I stay silent long enough to stumble across those two frustratingly elusive passing sessions I need to become a certified coach.

I mentioned two passing sessions to a friend in an email the other day and found myself humming it to the tune of The Twelve Days of Christmas - you know the one, five gOlden RINGS! (...and a partridge in a pear tree!) So here's my gift to all of you coaches going for two passing sessions, hoping to make this the year your certification dreams come true. Sing along with a smile before you tackle the rest of your email inbox!

In my last days of taping, I'll give the IAC...

curious exploring

honing in and sharing

relishing the silence

questions bold and daring

fun and provocation

love, support and caring

feeling what is perfect

5's for most things!

team work design

perfect time

not a single '3'

and a pass that's agenda free!!

Wishing you what you'd wish for yourself this coaching season ...

skin deep ~

We enjoy some precious coaching moments at our kitchen table which I'd really miss if my kids were more tactful!

I cooked one of our favourite meals the other day, a homely pasta dish made with a rich sauce of olive oil, mountain herbs, oven roasted peppers, baby tomatoes, garlic and onions. As we were sitting laughing and chatting at the table, out of the blue, my nine year old son said: "Mum, are you still using that stuff from the telly on your face? I think it's working. Your spots have gone and you're looking younger."

I was still smiling at this when I went shopping yesterday and slipped the eye cream from the same skincare range into my trolley. One of my goals for last year was to boost my confidence with a clear, glowing skin but I hadn't shared it with anyone, not even my family.

My weight and complexion are triggers in the minefield of my self esteem. I have a medical condition which went undiagnosed for years, resulting in confidence crushing symptoms like chronic fatigue, fluctuating weight gain and skin problems. Since I began treatment, waves of returning good health have made me feel unstoppable! A grubby, football playing nine year old boy telling you your skin's looking younger is an unexpected but welcome way to measure the results of a goal you're achieving slowly but surely!

And it's a goal with great knock on effects. Over the past few months, I've cleared out my bathroom cabinets, bagged up and binned the Big Me clothes from my wardrobe and started tackling scary bits in every room, even the dark side of the garage. My creativity and coaching confidence have blossomed and my communication is cleaner. To be honest, after months spent buffing myself up, gutting the house and paring back our life to the basics of simple abundance, I don't know which came first, the clutter clearing or the coaching confidence.

With the help of my mentor coach, I've been peeling away my coaching sins, upgrading my defaults and letting my natural skills shine through. A couple of weeks ago, I did a call I was thrilled with, full of silences that resonated and questions that tapped into a deep, clear pool as I just relaxed and enjoyed being present with the person I was coaching. Moments like that I can score.

But today, as I applied the eye cream that's so expensive it had better miraculously attract George Clooney into my life, I remembered how important it is to make sure my non-coaching goals are measurable. If we lose track of how we define and measure success in every aspect of our life, in the details of our day, then we run the risk of never feeling truly happy or satisfied. What will have to happen in *your* day for you to go to bed tonight feeling like a happy, successful human being?

EPILOGUE:

Richard Carlson, author of the hugely popular 'Don't Sweat the Small Stuff' and countless other books including his latest, 'Don't Get Scrooged', died suddenly last month at the age of forty five. As a tribute, I'd like to leave you with a quote from 'Don't Sweat the Small Stuff'; it comforts me to know that even though we lost him early, he left behind a family, friends and fans who loved and appreciated him. He touched lives and made a difference.

"I find that if I remind myself (frequently) that the purpose of life isn't to get it all done but to enjoy each step along the way and live a life filled with love, it's far easier for me to control my obsession with completing my list of things to do. Remember, when you die, there *will* still be unfinished business to take care of. And you know what? Someone else will do it for you!" ~

Richard Carlson Ph.D

shaking off the shoulds ~

The notes I handle no better than many pianists. But the pauses between the notes --- ah, that is where the art resides. ~ Artur Schnabel

I opened the kitchen curtains this morning to an eerie brightness and snow falling silently outside.

My kids' delight in the snow is not contagious. After I packed them off to school, wrapped up, laughing and excited, I sat down at the kitchen table, hugging a steaming mug of coffee as I remembered my own childhood winters, trudging through blizzards to school, with frozen, aching fingers and toes, breathing in damp wool from the scarf I'd been mummified in.

So, no ski slopes, toboggans and brightly coloured bobble hats for me, I'm afraid. Snow's for Christmas, when the tree tops glisten, Bing and Dean croon, fairy lights twinkle outside on snowy conifers and I snuggle up in front of the fire with a feel good film and something yummy. Today I'm having a snow day. No ice-dancing with other cars on roads like ice rinks; I'm staying in and going nowhere.

It's all too easy to let the shoulds gently freeze out the To Be list, the fun and the wants, till you can't even remember what they were - but today I'm giving myself a day off.

A day off from self imposed routines and unquestioned obligations; a day off from marketing emails designed to make me feel anxious and lacking. A day where no-one cares whether I have a niche or not.

But having a snow day doesn't mean that nothing gets done. It's often in moments of silence, idleness or mundane activity that inspiration and creativity take us by surprise.

I've whizzed through the cleaning and clutter, choosing to tackle the windows to let in more of the bright snow light. I've ignored the ironing but cleared out an entire kitchen cupboard instead, just for that glorious feeling you get as you bag up objects you neither love nor need. I've listened to an inspiring audio clip from Byron Katie's new book, 'A Thousand Names for Joy' and I've done some chatty email coaching, slurping hot chocolate with whipped cream, marshmallows and

chocolate sprinkles, glad I've not got a webcam. And the avalanche of marketing emails in my inbox? *To unsubscribe, click here* Click.... Click....Click....

While I've been sitting here writing, it's stopped snowing and some of the snow has thawed. I've just watched a laurel branch bounce back from under its burden of snow, launching it like a catapult.

That's how I feel as I shake off the shoulds, the rest of my snow day beckoning me like our snow covered front garden, silently waiting to share its treasure when the kids come home.

I might be tempted to build a snow wolf or make some snow angels with them. Or most likely, I'll put on the kettle and watch them through the living room window, daydreaming of a new year stretching before me like an empty beach full of promise, a cinema's COMING SOON trailers, a tempting pile of unread books, hyacinths hidden in a bowl, a brand new journal to cuddle up with and bustling pavement cafes full of people to meet and delicious treats to tempt the senses.

A year of choices, not shoulds.

the gunless game ~

*The woods were made for the hunters of dreams
The brooks for the fishers of song
To the hunters who hunt for the gunless game
The streams and the woods belong. ~ Sam Walter Foss*

A few weeks ago, my widowed mother-in-law phoned to tell us she'd got engaged on a dance floor to the lovely man she's been seeing for a long time. I was delighted!

One of my biggest coaching challenges over the past few years has been trying to improve the fragile relationship I have with her. Fortunately for both of us, the more I evolve as a coach, the easier it gets. Twenty years down the line, I no longer feel the urge to slam the door and storm off cursing. At best, we've enjoyed an uneasy truce spanning two decades but I really want to make our relationship the best it can be for all our sakes.

I've tried to do the work on why I let her affect me so much, constantly asking myself what my feelings say about *me*. What am I scared of? What do I dislike about myself? How can I get rid of the shoulds, accept what is and change my thoughts? She is, after all, a decent woman, a good woman who in addition to raising a family, has had a challenging life, devotedly looking after her wheelchair-bound husband until he died. I keep coming up with the same answers; the sad truth is we're both judgemental and I can't be my best self, my authentic, creative self with her. We simply wouldn't have chosen each other even though we both love the same man - my husband, her son.

It's a drizzly, damp, grey day today and I've been daydreaming at the kitchen sink, remembering one of my mother-in-law's visits a while ago.

She'd travelled the length of the country to visit us. As I couldn't do any coaching, I'd decided it was a chance to practise at home instead, getting rid of old stories and any stuff of my own that had been stopping me from moving forward. Here was my chance to communicate from a clean place, relish her as the woman who gave birth to my wonderful husband, respect her humanity, her limits and the difficult, stressful life she's had. I decided to say less, listen well and use my intuition to hone in on her needs.

If the first few hours had been a coaching session, I suspect I would have excelled at silently relishing the truth about fraught relationships with in-laws, but not much else. I would have failed Step 2 of the IAC exam miserably, and not just for having an agenda and trying too hard!

So my husband decided we should all spend the day at a deer and falconry park. His reasoning? Plenty of open space to wander around in, lots of things to see and do and game wardens with tranquiliser guns close at hand.

After some hot Scotch broth in a café with tartan tablecloths, I found myself relaxing as we strolled around and encountered all kinds of deer. In one enclosure, I sprinkled some dried food pellets on the ground for a small Muntjak deer and couldn't resist stroking her rough coat as she ate. Suddenly, she stopped eating and reached her head up towards me. As I stood there stroking the soft, beige fur under her ear, the world stood still. Nothing mattered except two creatures gently breathing - connecting silently on a grey day in a damp Scottish field. I have no idea how long we stood like that until, startled by the arrival of another family, she bounded off.

I smiled gently to myself and the whole weekend took on a warmth and connection I would never have dreamt possible. The universe always makes sure we get what we really need. All we have to do is reach out and trust that we'll find perfection in the silences.

saving more than money ~

Tell me what you eat and I'll tell you what you are. ~Anthelme Brillat-Savarin

I shop on Mondays. Every Monday, same supermarket, same basic aim. Feed the family healthily, save as much money as possible and build a coaching business. And a blog. Only it never used to be like that.

Was a time when I just filled the trolley. Then came the personal development books. Half an hour's reading or writing in the supermarket café became a date with myself every Monday. Sometimes it was an exercise in celebrating simple abundance, at other times just extreme self care, time away from homemaking while turning a chore into a pleasure.

Because of the books, I started to enjoy the actual shopping. My 'choice muscles' got a workout as I filled the trolley. Is this bottle of wine getting me closer to my goal or further away from it? In went washing powder that smelled of jasmine and made me look forward to the laundry. Filo pastry inspired me to recreate the hours I spent chatting with my Greek godmother while we made massive spinach pies after a morning squeezing and prodding produce in the noisy street market. Bargain books screamed synchronicity as they reached out to me from the shelves. I even bought a lipstick once because I loved the name Charisma as much as the colour. (Well, some of us stay-at-home mums need all the help we can get...)

Later, when I was focusing on getting ready to send in tapes for Step 2 of the IAC exam, my shopping evolved.

I started seeing the perfection in all kinds of empty shelf disappointments and trolley collisions. I found myself communicating cleanly if I had an issue at the customer service desk and it got easier to respond appropriately when I could see that checkout staff were overwhelmed. As I worked my way around the supermarket, I found myself enjoying the humanity of it all, indulging my curiosity and wondering what the story was in every trolley.

Now that I'm certified, I'm working on ways to pass on my experience and share the joy I've had in every phase of my journey. Ideas flit in and out of my mind like small birds; if I don't capture their fleeting presence in a note or a sketch,

they take off, no doubt to bring flashes of colour, pleasure and inspiration to someone more receptive.

When I'm not at my kitchen table, I seem to get strangely inspired in the self-service supermarket café, scribbling away as I slowly sip my way through a pot of mediocre, lukewarm tea. It's like being in an anonymous motorway service station, a Formica filled truck stop far away from the attractions and distractions of my own home. I find it easy to sit and reflect on how far I've travelled and to plan where I'd like to go next.

When I write, it helps me to become mindful and aware, to be still and silent enough to see everything, every detail, every sensation as meaningful. My life becomes one big haiku. When I put down my pen and get ready to focus on the shopping, I usually start my week feeling lucky to have a family to shop for, the money to feed them and the time and means to cook healthy meals.

But today I'm dreading the shopping. Spring usually lightens my heart with the fragrance of hyacinths and the sight of jugs of tulips and golden daffodils but not this year.

The supermarket has stacks and pyramids of boxed, foil wrapped, huge, chocolate Easter eggs and golden bunnies atop every aisle as well as in an entire dedicated aisle. In our house, we dye hardboiled eggs red and decorate the house with bowls of them. The Greeks believe they symbolise renewal and the blood of Christ.

For me, many chocolate Easter eggs symbolise something entirely different.

This year is the 200th anniversary of the Abolition of The Slave Trade Act. It effectively ended Britain's role in the transatlantic shipping of human beings, although no restitution was ever made to those who suffered. Sadly, statistics show that human trafficking is now the fastest growing crime problem in the world, second only to drugs. In West Africa, especially in the Cote d'Ivoire, young boys are trafficked into slavery to work in cocoa production. Many major well known manufacturers buy their cocoa from there, citing consumer demand as their reason for persisting. Fair Trade companies and producers of organic chocolate don't. My children will be receiving fewer chocolate eggs this year and they won't be their favourite, cheaper brands.

I'm concerned with what my shopping will cost me at the *final* checkout.

all kinds of gardens ~

I love our garden in May. Last spring, I spent hours outside with an MP3 player, relishing the coaching sessions my colleagues had sent me to critique. This year, I've been blessing the person who invented the wireless laptop that allows me to work outside on ebooks, websites, teleclasses and articles and to correspond with friends and colleagues from all over the world.

Scotland's not renowned for its glorious weather – it's lush and green for a reason! But when the sun comes out, there's a flurry of activity as people celebrate the chance to spruce up and preen their front gardens. Lawnmowers rev and back gardens become relaxed outdoor living spaces where laughing neighbours, friends and families spontaneously gather around sizzling barbeques to chat and drink beer. As I sit on our back steps with the sun on my face, gently crushing the fragrance of rosemary and mock orange blossom between my fingers, my garden always reminds me of my coaching.

The mossy, winding path of weathered paving stones we laid years ago leads into little secret patios inviting me to pause, still my thoughts and enjoy the birdsong or a breeze rustling through the branches. Bordering this path is a tall, dense patchwork of planting which pretty much takes care of itself now. I'm not the world's best pruner or weeder so I play to my strengths and plant evergreens, easy perennials and ground cover. Reliable old favourites and the odd surprising newcomer. As I'm a coach who talks too much, it'll come as no surprise that I'm a gardener who plants too densely. My narrow strip of garden's always teeming with birds, bugs and grubby kids and you never know what you'll discover next!

Slim, blue-green conifers, purple tipped hebes, laurels and rhododendrons form the evergreen backbone of the planting. Softening the hard edges of the paving are delicate pink flowering alpines, fat green elephant's ears bearing spears of mauve flowers, burgundy heucheras and deep purple daisy-like blooms set against a crown of arching, russet cordyline spikes. A few well chosen plants, but all working hard. Flowing colour harmonies, contrasting heights, leaves and shapes all combining to serve more than one purpose in a small, confined space. Over the years, I've learned by trial and error what works and what doesn't and now I just trust my instincts, have fun and play it by ear when I plant. I've learned to do the same with my coaching.

Everywhere I go in my garden, every day, every season, even in the winter as I gently brush the snow off branches bowed and about to break, I hear, see, feel and smell something different, something perfect. Every coaching session has its own rhythm too, its own harmonies and unexpected treasures, just as every coach has their own reliable evergreens and well trodden paths.

Many coaches are anxious about whether their coaching style is a 'fit' with what the IAC is looking for in a thirty minute exam submission. Yet, while each of the IAC examiners must wander through all kinds of 'coaching gardens', savouring sounds, silences, shapes, colours, movement and fragrances that resonate with their own unique perceptions, we all know that true beauty can show up in the smallest of spaces - and when it does, it's unmissable, carrying with it the power to unite hearts and minds across time and space. A truly masterful coaching session can do the same.

missing the boat ~

The power of words never fails to thrill and stun me. I started reading a paperback last night and finished it off this morning as a break from working on half a dozen coaching projects; by the end, I was sobbing into balls of sodden tissues, my throat aching, my eyes stinging as I sniffed back and swallowed tears.

If I'd read the blurb more carefully, I would have got to the bit where it was described as a 'tearjerker'. I usually avoid anything labelled 'heart-rending', 'harrowing' or a 'tearjerker'. Because of my age, I'm already at the mercy of the mood swings my young son calls 'horroremoans' – weeping one minute at anything that involves bereft parents then snapping murderously at my kids the next.

Tiredness doesn't help, but it's my own fault I ended up in bed today, an exhausted, frazzled, biscuit-eating mess – like a small child who's had too much excitement all at once and can't cope.

I committed a real coaching sin after I passed Step 2 of IAC certification; I didn't give myself time to bask in the glow of passing before I moved on to a flurry of activity and exciting new projects that answered the question "So what next?". I'd hooked up so many of my Big Picture dreams to becoming certified that suddenly I found myself working from morning till midnight, desperate not to see the energy and momentum dissipate.

The coaching world often leaves me with a sense of anxiety, feeling like I'm about to miss the boat without even knowing what the boat is. But now I have the feeling that if I don't act soon to create multiple income streams based on what I can offer as a certified coach then somehow my training and IAC-CC designation will simply evaporate.

I love coaching one-to-one as well as coachwriting, but I often feel like I'm treading water, trying to keep up with business trends, networking, marketing strategies, web building techniques, blogging and multiple streams of income simply to stay afloat. Hard work doesn't scare me and I truly believe that marketing can be approached as a form of coaching; I also believe that we attract what we need if we believe in ourselves and in our products but sometimes the ratio of coaching related work to actual coaching just feels overwhelming.

So too are the paradoxes - passions pulling me apart like dogs yanking on a choke leash till I can barely breathe: wanting to contribute to the family income but spending less time with my family and being less present than ever before; working at home to follow the principles of 'right livelihood' yet becoming more of a mediocre marketer than a masterful coach; loving my homelife coaching yet shelving my own creative projects and clutter-clearing to find clients I can help with *theirs*.

Getting the balance back and dovetailing my goals would be smart, I know, but another symptom of being out of whack with myself and permanently attached to a computer is the dialogue my ego has with my Wise Best Self: "I hear you, WBS, but I'll get back to loving the details just as soon as I finish reading this email about reducing the time I spend reading emails."

The main character in the book I read worked so hard at building a business to provide for her children, using innate skills discovered through tragedy, that she missed sharing the wonder of their childhood with them and never fully appreciated her husband till it was too late to tell him.

Maybe it's OK to miss the boat if it's the wrong boat.

when the heavens open ~

I'm sitting at our wooden table, my hair wrapped in a towel. Driving rain is drumming against the window in sheets, rushing down our road in torrents that have turned the front lawn into a boggy water feature and the pavements into streams. In all my life, I have never seen rain like this in Scotland, not even in winter.

Ten minutes ago I was standing on the terracotta tiled steps of our recessed front porch, watching the water bouncing six inches off the ground and pounding the roof of our car, parked in the drive a few feet away. As I stood, mesmerised by the sound, my bare feet getting splashed as the gutter above started to overflow, the overflow became a cascade and our front door became the dark entrance to a secret haven behind a waterfall. My young son joined me, his eyes huge and longing to venture out. "Off you go then." I said. "Just take off your T-shirt first...."

He stared at me in amazement, stripped down to his football shorts, then ran squealing around the car, splashing in the pond that had once been the drive in front of our garage. He stood giggling under the gushing gutter hopping up and down and flapping his arms, pretending to sing in the shower. I looked on with longing.

My husband brought him a warm towel when he came in shivering but beaming, dripping pools onto our wooden floor. "You should try it Mum!!!" So I did.

I ran out of the kitchen door onto our back patio, lifted my face to the heavens, raised my arms, smiled, turned a slow spiral and got soaked to the skin. Surrounded by the dense green of rain-battered bushes, hair clinging to my face, the rain streaming down my cheeks like a warm shower, my T-shirt and jeans growing waterlogged, I stood sodden in splattering, gushing water up past my ankles. A prayer rose unbidden as I looked upwards and tasted the rain. Breathing in the heavy perfume of rain-drenched branches, soil and air, I felt connected to life itself, alive, lucky, blessed...

A hot shower, some warm towels and a change of clothes later, I'm sitting at my laptop, thinking, as I write, of parched lands where the rain never falls and of flooded fields, farms, villages - even city streets in wealthy countries - where wild winds, rivers and tidal waves have washed away life itself.

For some, the gift of childhood wonder is a luxury in the struggle for survival.

life laundry ~

Pegging out laundry
Damp and fragrant in the sun
She lifts up her face
Listens to the sheets flapping
In the breeze, surrendering
Ready to set sail

~~~~~

What's September like where *you* are? Is it spring? Or has the frazzling heat of August started to fade, leaving you fresher and less floppy? Do you take on new clients, begin new ventures?

September feels like the start of a new year for me, with its promise of exciting new beginnings, classes and semesters. Maybe it's because I've spent most of my life as a student or a teacher or because my birthday falls at the end of August and both my children were born in the autumn. Whatever the reason, this is a time for freshly sharpened pencils, for blank pages and tempting piles of books, something to look forward to on darkening days as the nip of autumn turns into the unexpected bite of winter.

I have a cupboard in the dining room where I store all the Christmas candles, scented oils and festive season bargains bought in the January sales. Wedged at the back are some wooden Shaker hearts, hand-painted a warm, folk art red. They were a free gift with a magazine and I always planned to do something creative with them. Waiting in there, patiently for years, they've soaked up the fragrance of cinnamon, apple and spice. If I'm ever saddened by the fading brightness of autumn, or tempted to see it as a season of loss rather than a time of fruitful abundance, I furtively open those doors and inhale the excitement of another season nestled within, like Russian dolls.

As evolving souls in human bodies, we're meant to grow, to feel the seasons, to surrender to the beauty of each one - but like many people, I'm not very good at letting go. My daughter started high school a few weeks ago and I spent an anxious, distressed day pacing like a caged animal, unable to relax until she burst through the door beaming. My dad is eighty three this month and has started to prepare for a different kind of letting go, sorting through his treasures, putting his life and house in order.

One thing that calms me when the months and years seem to be spinning out of control is to anchor myself in the everyday details of creating a life I love. I try to cultivate gratitude and focus on the people I love, on the things that inspire me and on the thoughts, emotions and details that are within my power to change; then I just do my best to trust the rest to the universe.

Every autumn, I get a craving, an almost visceral nesting instinct to clear out all the debris of an old year. Out go old passions and paradigms, making room for abundance, new experiences, new people and new lessons to flow into my life. Clutter clearing – my own and other people’s - brings me so much pleasure, it should be X-rated. Deciding what to do with every sheet of paper, every object, every garment or piece of fabric is a living, breathing meditation, a tangible way to strengthen my choice muscles and ask some important questions:

- If I had ten minutes to rescue my belongings, would I take this?
- Do I really, *really* love and need this or am I keeping it ‘just in case it comes in useful’?
- Could someone else get more benefit from this or love it more?
- Am I keeping this just to please someone else? Or because it came from someone I care about ?
- Is this anchoring me in the past when I need to be moving on?
- Is this heartstoppingly beautiful?
- Will the kids be glad I saved this in the attic for them or roll their eyes in years to come and wonder what on earth I was thinking about?
- Does this object exude positive, *empowering* energy?
- What does it say about me? And do I *like* what it says about me?
- Does it symbolise a value, something good, something precious?
- Do I spend more time dusting souvenirs than I do making memories?

Every time I shred paper and clear out my clutter, my coaching and poetry get better, the house becomes more spacious and easier to clean, we all have more energy... and I lose weight! As well as space and energy, a cathartic clean-out also frees up time and money. A few weeks ago, we had a family holiday in a small, white cottage by a sea loch; it was funded entirely by what we’d earned from family car-boot sales and by what we’d saved by recycling and re-organising.

What could *you* let go of this autumn to prepare the ground for the seeds of a new season?

## coming to my senses ~

*Not the senses I have but what I do with them is my kingdom. ~ Helen Keller*

How often have you appreciated your sense of smell recently? I mean *really* delighted in its power to evoke pleasure and memories? Have you ever thought about how often it alerts you to danger and keeps you safe?

This afternoon, for two glorious minutes, I was able to smell the rose scented candle beside my bed and I wept with joy. That one, simple fragrance meant that my sense of smell - absent for weeks because of a vicious virus travelling around my Eustachian tubes, bronchial passages and lungs - hadn't disappeared forever.

In the first weeks after the virus struck, I lost coaching clients when I lost my hearing and my voice. Email coaching wasn't an option either, due to dizziness and headaches. A few weeks ago, just as I was finally taking in what the universe was painting in a huge sign above my head - HAVE A BREAK! STAY IN BED!! GET WELL!!! - my daughter came home from school sobbing, announcing the end of her first, tender, special friendship with a lovely lad she'd liked for three years. For ten months, they'd been going to the cinema, going to cafés with friends and sharing family times, in our home and his. On the same day he ended their relationship, he 'asked out' a girl my daughter has always been convinced is prettier and more popular than she is.

As she sat racked with sobs at our kitchen table, all of our recent hormone-fuelled spats were swept aside, forgotten. I listened, hugged and coached. I produced drinks, tissues and an appropriate 'triumph over adversity' DVD. I secretly phoned and asked my husband to buy a tub of ice cream and some chocolate on his way home from work. I could already see her revisiting the past and letting anger and bitterness deliberately erase parts of what she'd previously called the happiest months of her life. The next few days were awful as waves of new pain washed over her and my virus got worse. All that kept me going was the thought we'd be on mid-term holiday in Spain soon, looking for ways to heal.

Lying on a lounge on the beach, the waves lapping a few feet away, I longed to smell the salty sea air. I could barely hear the keening cry of a lone seagull wheeling against the blue sky. The breeze flicked a strand of hair across my face but not even the healing warmth of the sun could breach the distance I was starting to feel between my heart and the world around me, a world whose

scents, sounds and details I would usually devour and relish. Even Pollyanna had packed up and gone home.

I watched my daughter listlessly playing with some shells on the beach, all of her brother's attempts to engage her rejected. I let her sit with the pain, watched her explore a range of new sensations on her journey towards adulthood, knowing that as a talented young writer, she would be able to edit and recreate this part of her life some day.

Reaching into my beach bag for the digital camera I'd been given for my birthday but hadn't mastered yet, I decided to practise and play around with it. I'd had to pay for every photo taken with my old SLR camera, so it took me a while to get used to the idea that I could take, view and delete as many frames as I liked. I snapped away.

I got excited. I got better at it. Without the distraction of sounds or smells, the writer's eternal need to take it all in, I started capturing my daughter from every angle, rediscovering the joy I used to get from painting and photography. When I convinced her that I was deleting as many shots as I was taking, she forgot about me and went back to her own thoughts. I focused on what I could see - nothing else - and rediscovered the joy of framing. I learned how to work the zoom. Blue sky and palm trees, gone. The froth of lacy white waves on the beach, gone. I learned how to trim and clip, getting rid of everything that wasn't important. I wanted to help her see how beautiful she was. Nothing else mattered. I captured the breeze in a strand of wild, golden hair, the sea in her aquamarine eyes. I didn't need to see her smile to capture her beauty. All the beauty I needed was right there, the depth of her soul, her strength and her ability to feel, to hold that awareness in her heart and to explore it - captured in the curve of her eyelashes, the tilt of her chin.

I lost all sense of time. Suddenly, like a sea breeze billowing through a window in my heart, I knew I had a gallery of beautiful portraits, inspired by love. I showed them to her that evening. She looked at them, looked at me, looked at them again with disbelief, surprise, pleasure...

I've learned not to underestimate the power of refocusing, of reframing with love and gratitude whatever life gifts us with.

## a coaching hallelujah ~

Last year at this time, I'd sent in my tapes for certification and was winding down, ready for the Big Wait. These past few days, I've been looking back over what I've done with my home life, my coaching and my writing since then, taking stock of the year's unexpected joys and challenges as well as the dreams I've had to let go of. You may not be a Christian or even celebrate at this time of the year, but please bear with me, stay open and join me in a coach's exploration of a well known story, especially if you're still recording and planning to submit tapes before we say goodbye to the Proficiencies at the end of this month...

Thinking about my abandoned goals usually leads to me moodling about George Bailey from the film 'It's a Wonderful Life'; this time I found myself wondering about Joseph. Were his dreams of a simple family life turned upside down when he heard the momentous news about Jesus? How quick was he to recognise the perfection in the situation or was he simply stunned for a while, following his own instincts as well as trusting the guidance given to him by a greater power? What we *do* know is that he was supportive and loving and that he didn't give up and walk away when things got tough and scary. But in this story, it isn't just Joseph who embodies the coaching qualities that we can use to strengthen our coaching and enrich our lives.

Imagine in the dark, frosty crispness of night, a bright band of angels bursting into glorious song, the most perfect example of matching the radiance, joy and vibrational energy of the occasion. And what a triumph of clear communication and channelling too! In any choir – even the angelic kind – it takes all kinds of unique voices and a love of synergy, resonance and harmony to create the kind of soul music that fills you from your heart to your toes with amazing *Aha!*'s.

Imagine too the humanity of the shepherds, their hearts and minds filled with a tumult of human thoughts and emotions as they grapple with shock, overwhelming panic, awe and hope in the face of an astonishing new reality. Then there's the little shepherd boy, bringing his gift of childlike innocence, wonder and curiosity to the tableau in the stable.

And while the shepherds remind us to love the simple dignity of our humanity, it pleases me to think of the hardworking ox and ass instinctively providing warmth with their bodies and their breath, standing there powerful yet still in the silence, breathing, looking on, listening, understanding...

I also like to think of the innkeeper (and his wife?) contributing practical solutions and resources - shelter, blankets, food, a jug of fresh water and directions to the well - all of this while bustling around, tending to an innful of guests, reminding us that people still need to have their basic needs met, no matter what life changing events are taking place.

And imagine, silhouetted against the starry night sky, gliding along on camels, the three mysterious magi, following a shared dream, a vision, never stopping till they reach their destination and deliver their gifts. Gifts which remind us that value is subjective and that our skills and senses are to be cherished: gleaming gold, bringing with it the power to do great good if it's used wisely and with compassion; frankincense, its heady, smoky fragrance evoking the power of holy places, prayer and contemplation; myrrh, the balm that reminds us to treat our bodies with love and respect and to tune in and enjoy and them while we can. The three kings also bring the gifts of magic and mystery, wisdom and knowledge, intuition and synchronicity. They travelled together, sharing support, solidarity and resources on their long journey towards the unknown, reminding us that if we remain open, alert and responsive, we have a lot to learn from the wisdom and experience of others, from people of all cultures and faiths.

But behind this rich tapestry and the birth of one special child, let's not forget the tragedy that arose from Herod's terrible personal agenda born of power and fear, his quickness to judge and his conviction that he was right. We all have the power to hurt or help each other, to react or respond, to forgive or let ourselves be consumed by fear, pain, bitterness, anger and overwhelm, but we, as coaches, have the power and skills to ask the right questions.

And the answer to them all, the simple answer that glows like a hallelujah in the silence? Mary, serenely holding the greatest gift we've ever been given. Love. Pure, unconditional love.

Wishing you a season filled with miracles and love, wherever you are, whatever you believe in...

## war of the words ~

If you've never argued with your spouse, kids, partner or family members, then I don't know whether to write to you for advice, shout "...pants on fire!" or campaign to get you acknowledged by the religion of your choice! Most of us have hurt others with our words at some time, and even though we may be trained coaches and linguists, I'm convinced that most of us still don't fully comprehend the power of the words we use to shape – or destroy – our lives.

I had a foul exchange with my husband the other evening, but even while I was in mid-rant, our consistent language patterns kept standing out in sharp relief, as if I was watching a soap opera. I drive him wild by constantly analysing, mid-argument, the words and intonation he's been using. He sees it as an annoying diversionary tactic and proof that I'm not really interested in what he's saying. I naively think it might help us see how we're snowballing into hell. We cover lots of unpleasant ground in our arguments, from raising our voices and talking over each other to intensifying the language we use.

My husband's most hurtful argumentative language pattern is to exaggerate his adverbs of frequency and the intensity of the words he uses. "You're *always* attacking me for..." "You find fault with *everything* I..." "*Everyone hates it* when you..."

Most of us crank up our adverbs of frequency to some extent but I've started to notice my daughter doing the same thing, and that really worries me. I've started gently asking her if she knows it to be true when she begins a complaint with "She *never*..." or "You're *always*...". I've also tried to discourage her from answering everything with "OK." So many words available to her in her rich vocabulary, to describe her days, her experiences, her feelings yet how much teenage indifference and misery can be expressed in those two syllables! I've also tried drawing her attention to how often she peppers her speech with sarcastic 'actually's.

And what kind of messages do we send our brains when we dress the relatively undramatic events of our daily lives in the most colourful, intense language we can, convincing ourselves that we're doing it simply to be more expressive? Did he do something without telling you that mildly disappointed you or did he 'stab you in the back'? Did she say something that peeved you a bit and made you vaguely sad or did you 'take great offence' at the way she 'attacked' you? Are

you 'shattered', 'terrified' and 'heartbroken' or simply very tired, a bit worried and feeling hurt and sad?

How often do we torture ourselves with 'should's when a 'could', or an honest, authentic 'want' could turn our lives around?

How often does a sloppily worded email cause unintentional offence?

Another area of language that can truly change lives is first to notice, then change how often we cancel out the best of intentions with a 'but'. "I love you *but* ..." "I'm sorry *but* ..." "I'm good at \_ing, *but* I'm useless at..." Try, just for a week, to listen out for the phrases we tag on after a 'but' - then leave out part two! Let's try loving and apologising unconditionally, or revelling in our strengths for a micro second before we cancel them out with a 'but'!

I created this piece in my head as I stood at the kitchen window, watching the falling snow bend our trees in the eerie orange glow of a street light in the middle of the night. I'd gone to bed mid-argument, couldn't sleep, my husband came to bed, I got up, so I'd decided to go and make some camomile tea. I stood at the window, mesmerised by the swirling orange snowflakes and wondering how something as delicate as a snowflake had the power to bend and break the branches of trees. As I stood watching, I saw one supple branch rebel under the weight of the thousands of snowflakes heaped upon it, catapulting its burden with surprising defensive venom. I went outside in my bare feet and dressing gown and gently swept the snow off the remaining trees with a broom, knowing it was too late to take back the thousands of tiny thoughtless comments I heap on my husband over the days, weeks and months until he feels he has to lash back at me about my lack of appreciation and my seeming obsession with perfecting details. I hoped I could at least save some of our branches.

The morning after our argument – we never usually go to sleep angry - my husband apologised graciously and we narrowly avoided having a fight about who was most sorry! I'd like to leave you with a great tip for apologising. We've taught the kids to do it, and although it's really hard, it can cancel out huffs and resentments with the positive power of language and empathy. We call it the three part apology.

First, we say sorry for what it is we think we've done. Then we try to empathise with how the other person might be feeling; if we get these first two parts wrong, it's still useful because the other person has the perfect chance to explain

kindly and simply what was going on from *their* point of view! The third part is to ask if there's anything we can do to fix things. So, an example might be: "I'm sorry I criticised you for buying things at the supermarket that I didn't want. It must be really frustrating for you that I didn't empathise with how tired you were and that I mentioned the things you got wrong without praising you for everything you got right. How can I fix it?"

And by the way, bare feet in the snow? PAINFUL!!!

## loving letters ~

*"We lay aside letters never to read them again, and at last we destroy them out of discretion, and so disappears the most beautiful, the most immediate breath of life, irrecoverable for ourselves and for others." ~ Goethe*

I'd like to start this month's article by begging you, pleading with you not to take a moment of your life for granted today, no matter how creatively in the flow you are or how jam packed, bogged down or productive your day is. Don't let one single breath slip by unappreciated, not a smile, or a phonecall, or a scrap of paper from a friend, or a coffee date that you're considering cancelling because of work. If you've drifted away from a loved one because of busy-ness and stress, head for home and find a safe harbour before it's too late. Say thank you, say sorry, say something.

It all started in the attic. I went up to find a map for my son's homework and while I was rooting around among teetering piles of cardboard boxes, I found an old plastic bag with Portuguese writing on it and I knew it must contain something from the time my husband and I spent teaching there twenty years ago. I carried the dusty, musty smelling thing down to my bedroom, spilled the contents onto the bed then gasped with my hand to my face as I saw piles of envelopes covered in my mother's handwriting.

Guilt came first; here were all the letters she'd written to me in my years abroad. So many letters. Most of the time, between brief phonecalls, all I sent my folks were scrawled postcards and clichéd tourist gifts. She ended every letter with "We love you" and every letter was an expression of unconditional love. If she was saddened by the self-obsessed way I neglected my family or anxious about me living alone in foreign countries, she never showed it.

Tears streaming down my face, I realised, for the first time, that my mother had a gift for fresh, immediate writing. I savoured, in a way I'm sure I didn't back then, the details of her everyday life as she described, with a canny eye and gentle humour, the simple goings-on in our Scottish mining village.

I felt her presence wrap itself around me as I laid them to the side, knowing I would keep and treasure them - but I had to read the others now. A window to my past, to another world, to another self had been opened. Like an archaeologist, a time traveller, I kept reading.

I found cards and letters of love and support from friends I'd written to before I went into surgery to have a tumour removed. I suddenly remembered sitting by the hospital bed, writing 'thank you' and 'I love you' letters to everyone in my address book - just in case. How I wish I could turn back the clock now and thank them again, with an older, wiser understanding of how powerful and authentic their messages were. There is deep, raw strength in the honesty that brings us closer together in situations where we feel the wings of death brush past our shoulders.

A pile of flimsy blue air mail envelopes with their red and white striped edging, letters from my best friend in his beautiful Greek script, teasing me and loving me, unaware that in a few short years his life would be tragically cut short by cancer.

A funny postcard in what we called *Portuguenglish* from a linguistically brilliant student of mine who'd become a good friend; he threw away his lonely young life with a heroin needle a few years later.

A bundle of fat envelopes addressed in the small, shy handwriting of a Scottish friend I'd been at university with, envelopes bursting with beautiful, expressive, heartfelt letters to cheer me up and keep me company during many a painful, lonely time abroad before I met my husband. He wrote to me about music, art, books, life and love and it didn't dawn on me until today – so selfish and self-centred was I then – that he was in love with me. My heart stumbled and I wiped my wet face on the back of my hand as I realised that he saw then the very best of me, a glimpse of my real self, my soul, the part of me that has been rediscovered and nurtured by my marriage, my children and my coaching journey. He let me go eventually, "getting rid of dead wood" he called it, and the pain I felt then was excruciating because I didn't realise why he was doing it. I do now, but I can't apologise, can't thank him, can't start again and show him pictures of my kids. And I wouldn't wish this feeling on anyone.

As I sat shredding letters for recycling, letting go of all but a precious few and whispering silent apologies and gratitude for the memories that made me the person I am today, I decided I'm going to write some real letters and notes to the folk I love, something they can hold and choose to keep in a ribbon-tied bundle if they want to; real letters in unique handwriting on scented notepaper or carefully chosen postcards like we sent back then, when people left a part of themselves on paper and thank God they did.

## ebb and flow ~

*We must be open to all points of the compass; husband, children, friends, home, community; stretched out, exposed, sensitive like a spider's web to each breeze that blows, to each call that comes. How difficult for us, then, to achieve a balance in the midst of these contradictory tensions, and yet how necessary for the proper functioning of our lives. ~ Anne Morrow Lindbergh, (A Gift from the Sea – 1955)*

It's well past midnight. I've just looked at my watch and realised I've been working at my laptop - harvesting inspiration, quotes and ideas - for hours. Deep in the flow, I haven't moved, spoken or eaten.

My first thought? I'm lucky that I *love* what I do when my kids are asleep or at school - my writing and my homelife coaching. I love the thought of a life spent helping people create that 'holiday house' simplicity and clarity in their lives and their homes, ridding their rooms, their bodies and their relationships of clutter. I love co-creating design solutions for folk who feel they're suffocating under piles of stuff and paper that leave no room for a breath of fresh air or spirit.

Ah, but then, with the almost audible thud of an email landing in the inbox, my heart sinks. I feel my gut clenching and my spirit shrivelling. I think how much easier it would be to have the funds to pay a professional website designer to sit by me, instantly transforming my ideas into a site that's a joy to navigate and an inspiring haven for weary surfers.

Then I think of the affiliate links I've still to negotiate, the materials and new client contract forms I haven't created yet, the files of resources to be sorted or written and the website video technology I feel I ought to be mastering. The flow dries to a trickle. A sigh followed by the sound of a laptop lid clicking shut.

One of my favourite questions is 'Does it expand you or contract you?' Deceptively simple, but hugely powerful. It works with everything from diet decisions to decluttering, from discovering passions to deciphering feelings. It reminds me of a bush that used to grow in the dusty soil at the foot of a tree in the pavement outside my first apartment block in Greece. It had deep pink and yellow trumpet-like flowers that opened and closed depending on how much light and heat it felt.

I'm back where I was a year ago; writing expands me but feeling I ought to be doing more to make money contracts me.

Surfing through inspiring websites expands me. Always feeling technologically retarded contracts me.

Loving my husband and children expands me; the tiredness that often comes with consistent, conscious parenting contracts me.

Creating an authentic, spirit-filled homelife expands me; trying to explain that 'stay-at home-mum' doesn't mean I'm a constantly available stand-in for every 'working' mum when the school needs volunteers doesn't just *contract* me, it often twists me up into a squirming, screwed up ball of resentment. And so it goes until I feel like I'm cancelling myself out.

In our society, craving 'less', writing to touch people's hearts, staying at home to nurture kids and coaching people for free or for bartered services or affordable fees all have fluctuating value, depending on the financial circumstances and paradigms of the observer.

On the one hand, many people say they wish they could be doing what I'm doing - nurturing my family and others in a small but deeply authentic and satisfying way, yet, when they're tired after working long hours outside the home, 'working' mums often ask me how my husband feels about 'funding my hobbies' and 'paying for me to stay at home all day'.

Many supportive coaches write and tell me they value my Coaching Moments pieces; others write articles about how it's damaging for coaches to undervalue themselves and their products and to give too much away for free.

I suspect a bit of balance and some shadow work would expand me right now. So would a week alone in a small house by the sea, writing at a rickety wooden table overlooking a brooding ocean, listening at night to the sound of the waves, the ocean's sleep breathing.

So, no touching moments of heart captured awareness this month. Just questions, wave upon wave of questions pounding a restless shore.