



Coaching through Story

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Who am I & why I lean into a story coaching model?

I have been a professional storyteller and storytelling teacher for decades and have forged scholarship of research through story across the last decade (See Phillips & Bunda, 2018). So naturally, my storied mind has sought to craft a coaching model through story. I agree with many renowned philosophers (e.g., see Arendt, 1958/1998; Benjamin, 1955/1999; Nussbaum, 1997) that people make sense of the world through stories. And that the language of story offers layers of symbolism to locate patterns in the characters/roles we play (archetypes), the quests/journeys we take (plot genres), and the actions, places, and resources we engage with (motifs).

Story and narrative approaches to coaching

In coaching, David Drake (2010, 2017) has developed ‘narrative coaching’, and Lisa Bloom (2020) has argued for the story advantage in coaching.

To Drake, ‘narrative coaching’ is a person-centred approach with a focus on identity and applies literary metaphors, models, and tools as means to facilitate personal change. He proposes that narrative coaching “can be viewed through two lenses in terms of change: authoring, how and why people tell their stories (function) and emplotment, how people form and frame their stories (structure).” (p. 299). When authoring, the coachee is the teller. In emplotment, the coachee is an actor in the story told. Identities are shaped by these two often-competing orientations of the identities that people present to be socially acceptable and functional, and their embodied identity which is their authentic self. Drake proposed a coaching process modelled on the four-act structure of narrative, as he saw that they correspond to phases of change or transition.

Act 1 focuses on the coachee’s situation or context.

Act 2 attends to searching, to locate what is sought.

Act 3 is about what is shifting for the coachee.

Act 4 centres on how to integrate and sustain the transformed coachee and their new story back into the world.

Story coach Lisa Bloom (2020), asserts that storytelling is key to engaging, inspiring, and empowering the people you serve. She draws from the rich legacy of folklore tales as provocative catalysts to unpack embedded layers of symbolism with resonance in coachees' lives and desires. She works with coachee's stories to transform them into lessons that shape their business growth.

Coaching through story: how it works

Following from reading David Drake and Lisa Bloom's ideas on narrative and story coaching, I propose a Coaching through story model.

The use of the preposition 'through' is purposeful, as in my approach to coaching I see story as the means to understand 'what is going on here', to rethink or reconfigure identities and paths forward. I see story as both the key concept and the process. As a concept, our problems and growth are framed through story. The language of story provokes deeper meaning-making, drawing from the wisdom of human storytelling passed on across hundreds of generations. At the start of every story, the scene is set, such as 'In the dark, dark woods'. In coaching, this is important work to understand the coachee's situation. Images of place motifs can be shared to provoke the coachee's symbolic descriptions of their situation.

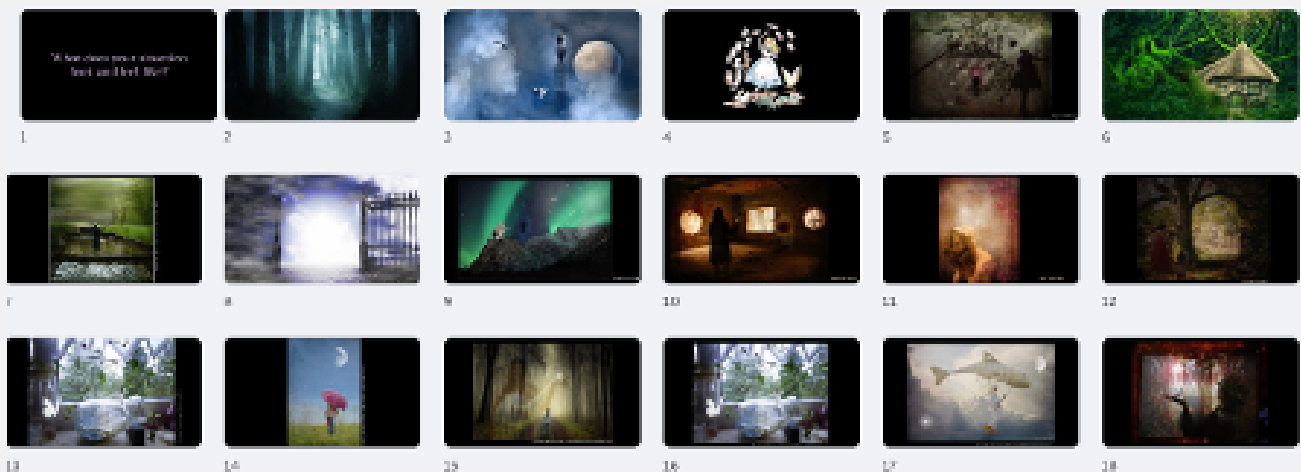


Figure 1 What does your situation look like?

Philosophers, storytellers, psychologists and psychotherapists across have recognised patterns in the roles humans play in stories, referred to as archetypes. These are universal primordial roles, such as the hero/heroine; the magician; the altruist; the caregiver; the ruler; the shadow; the lover; the creator; the innocent; the explorer; the sage; the outcast; and the trickster. Different theories and sources define and list slightly varied lists of universal archetypes. In coaching through story, questions can be asked about the archetypes at play in the situation of inquiry.

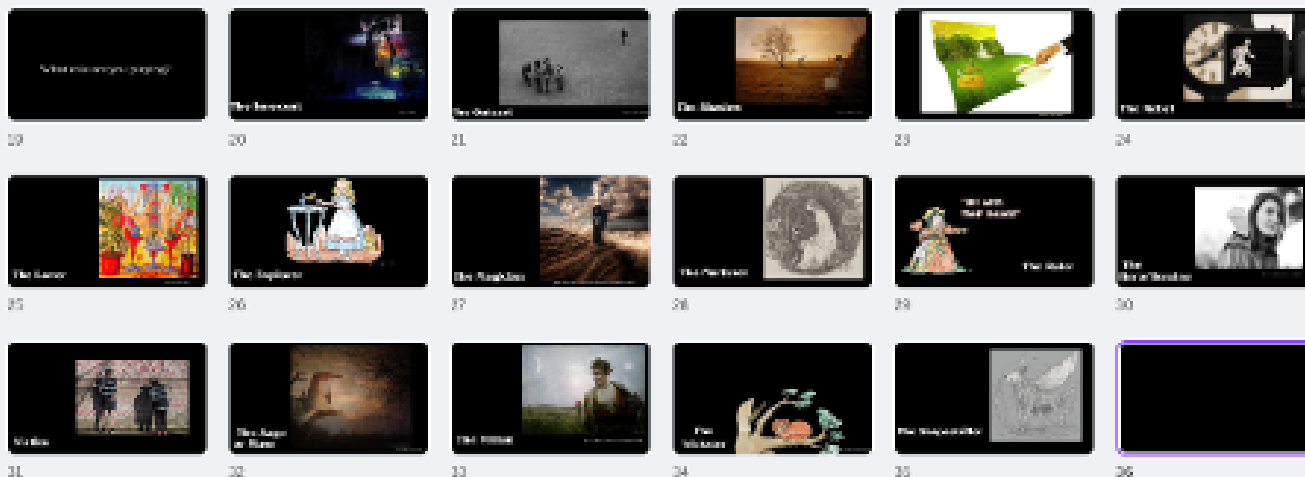


Figure 2 What role are you playing?

For coachees who are more visual thinkers, images of archetypes can be offered for the coachee to choose which archetype captures who they are and who they want to be. The provocation of thinking about a resonant archetype is offered in coaching through story to assist coachees to notice patterns in the roles they play which may be at the core of the problem at hand. In exploring the coachee’s goal, the coach can ask what role do you want to play? (or do you want to be?).

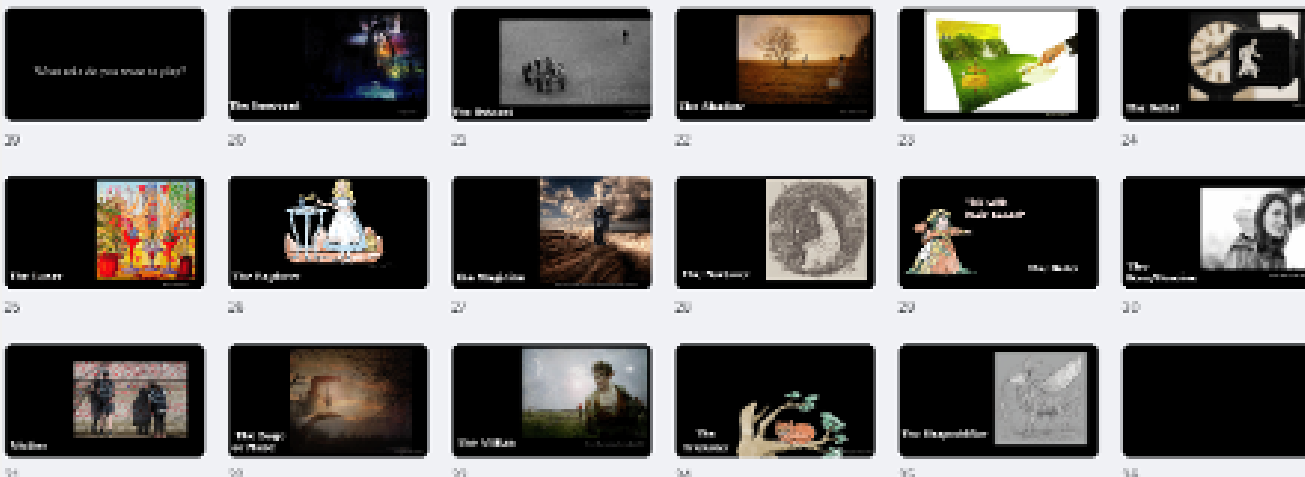


Figure 3 What role do you want to play?

Invitations to consider different roles can summon adoption of new attitudes, approaches and personas. Further, common story motifs (e.g., the wolf, three wishes, golden chalice, insurmountable task) and story archetypal plot structures (e.g., rags to riches; the quest; rebirth; overcoming the monster; comedic; tragedy; voyage and return) also can offer a means to explore patterns in coachee challenges and desires.

As a process, story structure offers a framework to move through. Like many other coaching models this can be named through an acronym.

- S** – Set the scene of problem/issue. (What is going on? What does it look and feel like?)
- T** – Traverse the problem/issue. (Who are you? Which archetype are you playing? Who are the protagonists & antagonists?)
- O** – Options and opportunities are explored. (What does your destination look or feel like? What role do you want to play?)
- R** – Realise resolutions (As a friend, what does this story invite you to do? What is the moral of your story today?)
- Y** – Your path forward (What promise will you make to yourself?)
Likened to the four acts of a story and Drake's four acts in narrative coaching.

I particularly choose the word 'story' over narrative, for 'story' is the word that makes my heart sing and activates curiosity, imagination, playfulness and creativity. These attributes, I see can bring joy and wonder to coaching encounters.

Coaching through story, attends to coachee's different ways of thinking and being, by bringing in symbolism, different communication modes beyond talking (e.g., imagery, sounds, movement), roleplaying, and characterisation. Playing with story symbols can offer anchors for frenetic neurodiverse minds (Arms & Winter, n.d), and open creative avenues for divergent thinking. Coaching through story welcomes and celebrates diversity.

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