

In focus

Stepping into the future

Chair of BACP
Coaching **Jo Birch**
on vulnerability,
humanity - and her
leadership journey

Barefoot... I feel my toes curl and fold against the cold, wet plinth marking the foot of the doorway. I look around and see the doorway is cut from deep, blue ice. Dense wisps of vapour rise from the ice wall and obscure my view into the beyond. I'm afraid... and yet I am excited and drawn to step through. I know I can't stay on this precipice. It's time to choose - forward or backwards? Staying still is not an option for long. What will be through the ice door? I squint... forcing my eyes to locate shape or form. There is none. The mist conceals the future. I begin to imagine challenges, dangers, questions... how will I navigate? My heart beats... I feel the pressure against my ribs. I am hopeful it will be an adventure - a place of wonder, stretch and inner fulfilment. Dare I lift my foot and take the step...?

When this image came to me some time ago, I was stepping forward into the next stage of my leadership journey. I was on the edge of discovery, noticing the paradoxical place I was in - both fearful and yet so completely ready.

When does a leadership journey begin? Arguably, the moment we draw breath to engage with the world. Everything I have done, everything I have grown through, has been part of my path towards this moment. Twenty years ago, as a nursing sister, I was first drawn to counsellor training in a quest to be better equipped in conversations with patients about death. I found the answers to many of my questions... and, as you might expect, they weren't the ones I expected. Ten years ago I began coaching in the inner city - teaching coaching skills to local people and public sector leaders in order to develop a coaching culture across our 'patch'.

Much of my experience in both disciplines has been in working across cultures - in communities and in international corporate settings, with a diverse range of people from varied ethnic and social backgrounds: people with severe mental health issues, addictions, low confidence; people who have lost their way or their focus for whatever reason - from unemployed people through to the most senior people in our organisations. At the end of the day, I believe our humanity is what connects us

to each other through our lives and our work. Very often I am asked to define my speciality... I find the question difficult. People... I work with people - all trying to live fulfilling lives while navigating the challenges of their worlds. I work as a counsellor and coach at all levels within the system - close to home and in the complexity of leading within organisations and communities. I am also passionately committed to supporting the development of practitioners, coaches, counsellors, psychotherapists and a range of health professionals, through providing supervision at a deep level of engagement.

I apply similar principles in my individual work and in my work with organisations. I have often been asked to step into teams and organisations that feel stressed or distressed in the same way that an individual client might. When I work within organisational systems, I immerse myself in the new world, often moving between many levels and dimensions to feel my way into the territory. I watch for the system to reveal itself to me. Alongside formal and informal documentation, the narratives of the people and my own observations, I work with those in the system. Together we begin to make sense of the parts and the whole, illuminating broken connections, re-connecting and re-aligning people, processes and purpose to liberate flow.

In my leadership roles, I have often found myself standing on the threshold - as in the ice door, in the image above - tempted to take the step backwards into safety. I have come to know the moment and trust the importance of moving forward, knowing that with each step I am living my life more fully, with a richness brought about by my intention for honesty, and for deeper connections with others. I make mistakes. I am still learning. I believe we all are. Sometimes I feel successful in my intention... at other times I see I have been misunderstood and I consider how I can be clearer next time, or more compassionate, or more congruent.





I've been reading *Daring Greatly* by Brene Brown.¹ Brene speaks of vulnerability being our greatest measure of courage, and her words resonate for me: 'As I look back on my life and what *Daring Greatly* has meant to me, I can honestly say that nothing is as uncomfortable, dangerous and hurtful as believing that I'm standing on the outside of my life looking in and wondering what it would be like if I had the courage to show up and let myself be seen.'

Sometimes I am out in front, easily seen, a figurehead for our organisation. Yet very often I am supporting the organisation by navigating from the rear, holding a line within a bigger context, sometimes imperceptible to those facing forward, making decisions as to when to be bold and assertive, judging when to trust others to lead me, our team and our organisation.

As leaders in our profession, we are all in new territory... all with the potential to dare greatly as we step forward to be seen, as we create knowledge and record our experiences within the coach-therapist framework. Research in this area is limited. We are leading the way, learning from each other as well as from our own unique experiences, finding our own way to shape and define our work and our profession. We have the ability to work with people through both distress and discovery, through the actions towards personal goals and the exploration of emotional blocks. We hold a unique position in the experience of human connection, entering relationships with an ability to move into the darkest corners and also to stand in the fullest glory of the light with our clients. We are trained and skilled in noticing, moment by moment, our own inner world - while fully walking alongside another in theirs. This is our collective professional journey together and it is through this, through our writing, researching, recording, discussing, sharing, practising... that we will discover new ground and make new pathways.

In our division and our profession, I want to create the climate in which many are able to step forward to lead and influence, a climate in which we focus on inclusion and service, one in which we ask not 'What can BACP do for me?' but 'What can I do for others and my

profession?'. That's where I believe our vibrancy lies - in the expression of our difference, our individual talents, passion, skills and knowledge, and in our contribution.

Martin Luther King spoke so passionately back in 1968 of a kind of leadership that is characterised by serving others not 'self'.² We have seen much about 'self-centred' leadership in our world in recent times. Sometimes we are seduced into believing only certain people can be leaders, only those who have the 'answers'. King suggests otherwise: 'Everybody can be great, because everybody can serve... you only need a heart full of grace, a soul generated by love.' This means we all have the capacity for greatness - to be leaders; we all have the capacity to look beyond ourselves and be of service to others.

I am holding the space in our community for the next leader to emerge. Until that time, I will play my unique part fully, daring to fail yet striving to succeed, ensuring that we deliver on our promises, enabling others to step forward to fully shine, and building a strong and resilient system for the coming years. Together as a community, we are forging new paths that extend and grow our profession so that we stand confidently in our unique place in the field of coaching.

References

- 1 Brown B. *Daring greatly: how the courage to be vulnerable transforms the way we live, love, parent and lead*. New York: Gotham Books; 2012
- 2 King ML. Drum major instinct sermon. Ebenezer Baptist Church, Atlanta; 1968. http://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Martin_Luther_King,_Jr. [accessed 21 January 2013]

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