

Coaching to the Human Soul

Ontological Coaching and Deep Change

Volume III: The Biological and Somatic Basis of Ontological Coaching

By Alan Sieler

Introduction

As the third volume in the *Coaching to the Human Soul* series, this book provides a detailed articulation of how Ontological Coaching incorporates biology and the body into a practically powerful methodology for the constructive transformation of being, or deep change. How we think and behave exists within our being (or Way of Being) and different thinking and actions inevitably involve a shift in our being.

The book is based on two major premises:

1. All learning and change occur in the nervous system, which is throughout the body and involves more than the brain.
2. Of the three ontological domains of language, emotions and body that constitute Way of Being, the body is the slowest to change. But change in the body can be the most profound, as it is “locked in”, thus ensuring it will be sustainable.

Applying biological fundamentals and the role of the body to facilitate the transformation of being are integral components in developing competence as an ontological coach. Ignoring the crucial importance of biology and body in the change process and coaching runs the risk of significantly limiting how people can be assisted to expand their ontological security and enhance their adaptive resilience.

Our existential challenge

Although people in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries were constantly dealing with significant social, economic and political change, life at our

time in history has arguably become even more existentially and psychologically complex. Despite significant advances in the last two hundred years in health, education, technology, income distribution and material wellbeing that have greatly enhanced the quality of existence for many, the following factors, among others, play a role in the increasing uncertainty and complexity of contemporary life:

- continual rapid technological change;
- the speed of information dissemination;
- constant workplace change;
- a more tightly interconnected and interdependent global economy, with breakdowns in the functioning of national economies significantly impacting on many other national economies and consequently the livelihoods and wellbeing of individuals, families and communities;
- greater exposure through media and personal interactions to other cultures, and their fundamentally different world views and unfamiliar ways of living;
- breakdowns in the effective functioning of traditional systems of authority, such as the family, the school, the law, the Church and religion, the political system and the financial system, which have provided background stability and shared meaning;
- the possibility that global warming is a significant threat to the future of humanity and other species;
- the feeling that the fast and complicated pace of life leaves too little time;
- the emergence of highly complex problems that are referred to as “wicked problems”,¹ some current examples in Australia being indigenous development, climate change, obesity, unhealthy use of non-prescribed and prescribed drugs, environmental degradation; and
- impatience and frustration with, and growing mistrust of, political leaders, who wrestle to find ways to make progress within a complex political, economic and social landscape.

The dynamic interplay of all of the above aspects of our existence constitutes a backdrop against which we go about everyday life. All too frequently, for many of us the relatively smooth flow of living that we desire, spiced with appropriate challenges and opportunities, is interrupted, even significantly disrupted, by occurrences in the technological, economic, social, cultural, political and environmental dimensions of our ex-

istence. The frequency and nature of such disruptions can mean that we are constantly challenged to effectively deal with them; perhaps we are successful and perhaps we sometimes have to live with a background dissatisfaction that we can never “quite get on top of things”. What can be at stake is our individual and collective wellbeing (mental, emotional, physical and spiritual) and effectiveness in daily living.

Persistent difficulties and frustrations in our individual and family lives, workplaces, communities and societies can point to a breakdown in the usefulness of traditional and habitual ways of thinking and taking action. Freeing ourselves from ineffective and outdated modes of thinking and behaving can be a major learning challenge. This learning endeavour is not just individual, it is collective, requiring the development of conversations that co-inspire us and generate ideas (which would not be available from solitary thinking) that translate into effective individual action and collaboration.

Developing new and more effective ways of thinking and taking action is much more than learning new techniques and skills, or different systems of thinking. *What is required is a fundamentally different “place” from which to think.* From an ontological perspective, our thinking is intertwined with our manner of being, or *Way of Being*, which is the dynamic intersection of the linguistic, emotional and somatic spaces we live from.

The challenge of escaping from habitual ineffective thinking and developing more productive thinking is an issue of our manner of being. If very different ways of thinking are called for, not just variations on existing ways of thinking, then perhaps what is called for is a transformation of our being – or *Way of Being*. A different and potentially more fruitful place to think from occurs when we experience a transformation of our being, known as an ontological shift.

As biology and the body are inescapable aspects of our manner of being they are inevitably involved in the transformation of our *Way of Being*. While different language (listening, speaking and writing) and moods and emotions are integral parts of the transformation, so are shifts in our biology and the body.

The essence of the transformation of our being is the expansion of *ontological security* and the enhancement of *adaptive resilience*. Ontological security is feeling solid, assured and secure about our being, our place in the world and what we want to create in life. This is not about being arrogant, but of having a robust sense of self, in touch with our dignity

and legitimacy, as well as open to being vulnerable and embracing new learning that challenges habitual perceptual and thought patterns.

Adaptive resilience is the ability to deal with both the unexpected and adversity, to recover a sense of balance in life, learn from experience, and constructively move on. Adaptive resilience is the ability to utilise the plasticity of the nervous system to be a learner, being prepared to question conventional wisdom, and develop new forms of wisdom by transforming our very being and for a new quality of thinking to arise.

Habitual modes of thinking are not simply individual, but can be cultural. These are ways of thinking that are systemically entrenched as a core aspect of culture.

At some time or other we all face existential difficulties and challenges. Unfortunately there are some who experience intense existential difficulties that require the skilful and caring support of a range of health practitioners, including doctors, nurses, psychiatrists, psychologists and counsellors. However, it is possible that cultural ways of thinking can perpetuate and compound existential difficulties, seriously compromising the opportunity to develop ontological security and adaptive resilience, as suggested in the following commentary.

The eccentric loner, the incomprehensible maverick or the shy stranger lacking in social skills have become candidates for the psychiatrist's couch.

Those of us who are lonely are not just faced with an existential problem, we can now be diagnosed as suffering from chronic depressive disorder.

Virtually every bad habit now has a psychological label. ... The proliferation of mental health diagnosis has important consequences. It has helped create a worldview where increasingly *the problems of everyday life are interpreted as expressions of mental health deficits.*

The manner in which emotional problems have become diagnosed as a form of disorder raises questions about the ability of the individual to deal with disappointment, misfortune, adversity or even the challenge of everyday life. And when people are continually invited to make sense of their troubles through the medium of therapeutics *it severely undermines their resilience.*

Once the diagnosis of illness is systematically offered as an interpretive guide for making sense of distress, people are far more likely to perceive themselves as ill. ... *The explanation for this trend lies not*

*in the fields of epidemiology, but in the realm of culture that invites people to classify themselves as infirm.*² (Italics added.)

In the face of what seems like an increasingly uncertain world, the constructive transformation of our being and the development of ontological security and adaptive resilience are not trivial matters. *What is at stake is the soul* – our mental, emotional, physical and spiritual wellbeing – and the quality of our individual and collective existence. The transformation of our being is central to how we can be open to co-inspire each other, collaborate and collectively develop satisfactory resolutions to our individual challenges and complex social problems.

How we perceive, think and act is much more than an intellectual endeavour. Our perceptions, thinking and behaviour reside within our biology and body. Perhaps the transformation of our thinking and the expansion of adaptive resilience require going beyond the existing paradigms of change, which appear to be dominated by the role of the intellect, to embrace scientific, philosophical and pragmatic frameworks that incorporate biology and body in the transformation process. *The purpose of this volume is to articulate such frameworks and illustrate their relevance to the skilful application of the methodology of Ontological Coaching to facilitate deep change.*

Biology of Cognition

Living, learning, working and coaching are inevitably biological and somatic. Our biology and our body go everywhere with us and comprise the inescapable foundation from which we perceive the world and engage in life. Coaching seeks to support people to improve how they (i) function in their everyday personal and professional life and (ii) can build a constructive future. Coaching that does not incorporate biology and the body in its conceptual framework and methodology runs the risk of ignoring a crucial component of perception and behaviour, inadvertently denying clients the opportunity for profound learning and deep change.

Part I of this volume presents a unique perspective of human biology. Based on sound scientific research, it is highly relevant to understanding the nature of being human, the process of change and, therefore, coaching. This unique perspective is known as Biology of Cognition.

Developed by Humberto Maturana, arguably one of the most important thinkers of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, Biology

of Cognition provides a scientifically grounded and logical explanation of how humans come to understand themselves and their world, and how this understanding shapes the relationships they have with each other and the world they live in.

Maturana developed a number of fundamental principles about the nature of living systems that had not been previously identified by biologists. These biological principles are articulated in chapters 3 and 4 and relate directly to:

- perception;
- consciousness;
- behaviour;
- communication;
- culture;
- change; and
- coaching.

Biology of Cognition provides the coach with a substantive body of knowledge to practically appreciate the biological nature of change, which is embedded in effective coaching. As coaching is about supporting people to develop (i) more constructive perceptions of themselves and their circumstances and (ii) more effective behaviours, understanding and applying the principles of Biology of Cognition is an essential feature of the ontological coach's competence.

An initial glimpse of some of the central ideas on Biology of Cognition can be gained by considering the following three statements.

- Everything that is said is said by an observer to another observer, who could be him or herself.
- Everything changes around what is to be conserved.
- Our manner of living is shaped by our preferences and desires, not solely by rational thinking.

As we shall see in chapters 2–7, there is a substantial depth of thinking behind these seemingly straightforward statements.

Practically understanding Maturana's ideas, which means intellectually grasping and having an emotional and somatic feel for them, can be a challenge. Developing a sufficient understanding of Biology of Cognition

to enable its application in coaching may require careful and thoughtful reading. Constant reflection, discussions and rereading may be required to deepen your learning. This is because Maturana has intentionally developed a “new language” of biology that our everyday language does not readily accommodate. He explains the purpose of the language of Biology of Cognition by recalling what his Professor of Neurobiology said to him when he was a student at University College in London: “If you want to say something new, you must change your language. *If you do not change your language, your listener hears himself [or herself], not what you say.*”³ (Italics added.) (A Glossary of important distinctions, or terms, in Biology of Cognition is included in this volume.)

If the changing nature of our global, international and national circumstances requires the development of different forms of thinking, new language will be required that enables the development of new perspectives to open pathways for effective action. As a new paradigm for understanding the nature of human existence, communication and change, Biology of Cognition is a significant contribution to the development of a new language for co-inspiration, collaboration and transformation.

The domain of the body

The role of the body in perception, thinking, learning, emotions, the overall mental functioning of humans and change has long been neglected. Even in the field of neuroscience, where important new discoveries about the functioning of the brain are continually being made, there is omission of the significance of the body. One prominent neuroscientist, concerned at the almost exclusive focus on the brain in neuroscience, has been moved to write that humans are not embrained beings but are embodied beings.⁴

As biology occurs in the body, the inescapable role of biology in perception, cognition and behaviour means that the body is always involved in how we perceive, think and behave. The body is inextricably intertwined with the nature of our thoughts and our emotional experiences.

Because our habitual ways of thinking and doing things (practices) are learned and learning occurs in our biology, the body is inevitably involved in our manner of coping. Coping does not only mean “to get by”, it includes how we flourish in circumstances through highly effective ways of adjusting our selves and organising our actions to be appropriate for the requirements of a situation. The effectiveness of our coping practices is intimately bound up with our ontological security and adaptive resilience.

With increasing uncertainty and unpredictable change there are occasions when our habitual coping practices do not work and we are faced with the challenge of learning new ways of coping. The body is inescapably involved in such learning.

Just as the existential domains of language and emotions are domains of learning, so the existential domain of the body is also a domain of learning. While the body may be the slowest to change of the three existential domains of language, emotions and body, it is probably the most profound, as change becomes consolidated through being embodied.

Part II of this volume establishes a solid philosophical, conceptual and pragmatic basis for the inclusion of the body in Ontological Coaching. While the body has not featured much in the writings of philosophers, careful reading of a number of major philosophers (including some whose ideas underpin the language and emotional domains in Ontological Coaching) reveals a clear recognition of the place of the body in the nature of our being and quality of existence. The well-considered thoughts of these philosophers are articulated in chapters 8 and 9 as a philosophical foundation for the place of the body in coaching.

In chapters 10–12 the ideas of a number of highly regarded somatic practitioners are drawn on to present a conceptual somatic framework for Ontological Coaching. These practitioners created specific disciplines to utilise the power of the body to enhance physical and emotional well-being and facilitate perceptual and behavioural change. The purpose of the framework is to ensure that the coach has a minimal background awareness of important physiological considerations that are relevant for coaching to the body. This framework is based on the concept of a “physiology of doing”.

Humans are always beings in action, which can include mental action (thinking and listening), speaking and writing, as well as postural positions and physical actions with the body. The conceptual somatic framework in chapters 10–12 considers:

- important components of a physiology of doing;
- how we can have formed a compromised and less than expedient physiology of doing; and
- the development of a more expedient, or poised, physiology of doing, which enhances mental, emotional, somatic and spiritual wellbeing and greater effectiveness in different areas of life.

Chapter 13 provides a specific set of cues or distinctions, in the form of A Basic Somatic Framework,⁵ to support the coach in respectfully observing the specifics of unhelpful postural configurations of coaching clients and in working with them to develop more helpful ways of holding themselves and using their body.

Throughout chapters 8–13 you are strongly encouraged to be a somatic learner. Somatic Learning is inevitably experiential and conceptual. Being introduced to new ideas and perspectives on the body can be invaluable for gaining a meaningful appreciation of the essential place of the body in our everyday functioning and the development of more helpful perceptual and behavioural patterns. However, Somatic Learning inevitably involves “doing the body”. This means:

- engaging yourself to acquire a first-hand physiological feel through the direct experience of how you hold and use your posture; and
- exploring and experimenting with somatic shifts to continually move towards a more poised physiology of doing in your everyday personal and professional life.

It is through the personal engagement of his or her body in Somatic Learning that the coach begins to literally embody a deep appreciation of the significance of the body for facilitating deep change for clients.

As with volumes I and II of *Coaching to the Human Soul* many examples of Ontological Coaching in action are provided in this volume, as well as an extensive range of Reflective Activities that you are encouraged to engage with. Unlike the two previous volumes, this book includes Somatic Activities that you are urged to participate in as part of being a somatic learner and ensuring that your relationship with the domain of the body is not only conceptual but includes first-hand experiential involvement. The purpose of the Somatic Activities is to provide a minimal set of experiences for:

- exploring your own dynamic posture and physiology of doing; and
- experimenting with somatic shifts that may open up new and constructive ways of perceiving your self, others, the world, and new possibilities for engaging in life.

Finally, Chapter 14 provides a comprehensive model of Ontological Coaching, expressed as The Existential Context of Ontological Coaching. Way of Being and the existential domains of language, emotions and body, the specifics of which have been covered in all three volumes, are central to the model. The overall existential context of the functioning of any individual, which includes their encounters with others, is the intersection of the following dimensions of existence:

- the Ways of Being and behaviour of others;
- the social and cultural contexts of daily life; and
- the biosphere.

Because human living in families, communities, organisations and societies occurs as the dynamic interaction between the above three dimensions, it can be crucial that the coach is alert to the relevance of each dimension to support constructive change for the coaching client.

Reading Volume III

While it is not necessary to have read volumes I and II of *Coaching to the Human Soul*, it is a distinct advantage to have done so as constant reference is made to aspects of the coaching methodology covered in detail in each volume. Nevertheless, in the absence of having read the previous two volumes you will still benefit from ideas and activities presented in this volume.

As noted earlier in the Biology of Cognition section, you may find parts of this book challenging, whether it is the way language is used or the nature of the ideas presented, which could be unfamiliar and possibly uncomfortable. You are encouraged to notice any tendency to dismiss ideas and frameworks without lengthy reflection and due consideration, not because the ideas and frameworks are “right” or “better” than anything else but to check your openness as a learner. It is suggested that you continually reflect on yourself as a learner in making conceptual and practical sense of what is presented and in this process:

- be open to noticing and constructively questioning your own responses to what shows up as being unfamiliar or disagreeable;
- identify important questions that may be within your responses; and

- be open to “remain in the question”, that is, to hold things in “suspension” and not rush to judgements that may condemn ideas not resonating favourably with your habitual understanding.

Welcome to Volume III of Coaching to the Human Soul and best wishes for gaining practical value from your engagement with the material!

Notes

- 1 Australian Public Service Commission, *Tackling Wicked Problems: A Public Policy Perspective*. 2007. <http://www.apsc.gov.au/publications07/wickedproblems2.htm>
The notion of a wicked problem is that it is a problem regarded as being so complex in nature, with many interdependencies, multiple causes and multiple stakeholders with different views held with high emotional intensity, that solutions to satisfy all concerned parties are not clear, making resolution extremely difficult and seemingly impossible.
- 2 Frank Furedi, “Individual difference suffers in the never-ending explosion of mental illness”, *The Weekend Australian*, 18 February 2012, p. 8.
- 3 “Unitary Epistemology: The Origin of Everything in Humanness”. 2011. Matriztica Institute brochure, www.matriztica.cl/eng/
- 4 Antonio Damasio, *Descartes’ Error: Emotion, Reason and the Human Brain*, p. 118.
- 5 Just as the language domain has Basic Linguistic Acts and a Basic Typology of Conversations, and the emotional domain has Some Basic Moods of Life, it is appropriate that the domain of the body has A Basic Somatic Framework.