ALCHEMISE YOUR DEVELOPMENT:

THE JOURNEY TOWARD COACH MASTERY

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INTRODUCTION:

The quest for coaching mastery is widely recognised as challenging. One of the authors lived the journey to become a Master Certified Coach (MCC) with the International Coaching Federation (ICF), describing the process as anything but "instant pudding." It unfolded as a sustained period of unlearning, relearning and undoing during which she questioned deeply held assumptions about herself, professional practice and purpose.

This paper discusses how evolving worldviews, described through stages of adult development, interplay with a coach's changing relationship to themselves, their practice and approach to coach-mentor dynamics. Through the twists and turns in the coaching journey, the narrative traces movement from Opportunistic to Alchemical approaches to life and reflects on what might lie beyond development driven by either the pursuit of knowledge or exploration of own ways of being.

We highlight a "third way:" a narrative that amalgamates tangible goal pursuit with flights of intuition and imagination. This story of development does not disregard earlier worldviews or life experiences. Rather it poses the question; how can we alchemise them, let them come together? While discussion is primarily oriented towards coaches and coach mentors, it may be of interest to researchers and those who support the development of people in learning contexts. At its heart is a second inquiry, can we stay alert to the shape of our thinking and remain open to the many perspectives that continually flow towards us?

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ELAINE'S STORY - A TALE OF TWO BIRDS

Let's begin with two coaches, Blaze and Ash, both registered on the coaching mastery programme. Each imagine coaching differently; one is driven towards a goal, seeking more knowledge through practice and guidance to achieve the standard, while the other turns inwards, leaning into states of deeper understanding and personal awakening. Stimulated by an image of two birds, one earthbound, one airborne, interconnected, (Loon and Fish by Jackson Beardy), [1] we suggest coaching combines both dimensions into a third way.

What if Blaze and Ash (see figure 1, "Two Birds") were to mix it up and integrate the other's orientation as they continue their journey towards coach mastery? The two then are interconnected yet in a state of ongoing, dynamic tension, one that carries the potential for continual growth. From this perspective, there is no finishing line to development, rather we move through recurring cycles of dismantling and rebirth. A never- ending story.

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FIGURE 1:

The "Two Birds", from the work of Elaine Herdman Barker, serve as symbols for the tension inherent in development. The grounded bird represents rationality and the pursuit of tangible goals such as success, knowledge and power. The airbourne bird embodies psychological exploration, spirit and intuition. The tail of one connects to the wing of the other illustrating how these two forces are both interconnected yet in a continual state of dynamic tension. The swirl symbolizes cycles of growth and regression, showing how active inquiry facilities a more fluid relationship to reality.

How do we stay alert enough to find our way in coaching without a finishing line? How might Blaze observe and be more aware of the environmental pull to prioritize knowledge, reason and practical solutions? Similarly, how can Ash notice the temptation to draw further within potentially jeopardizes his appreciation for what the world is requiring of him? Surprisingly, grabbing onto a handrail[2] (Leishman),like developmental theory can help us to open up, surface lopsided thinking and question our seemingly, unquestionable "truths".Even when we feel at our most vulnerable, and wobbly, a developmental handrail can help steady us in uncertain times. It helps reveal what we focus on and what we overlook. For instance, are we, in developmental language, becoming preoccupied with fitting in (the Diplomat worldview), viewing life through binary distinctions such as knowledge versus intuition (an Expert worldview) or getting stuck in a loop, considering the endless complexities inherent in generalisations (the Redefining worldview)?

We are not suggesting developmental theory is a fail-safe, nothing is. Yet, when combined with its twin, developmental inquiry, (Herdman Barker & Torbert, 2023), we do not stay stuck for long. By posing questions like, *what am I listening out for*, we find ourselves at the beginning of change. This pause, gives way to intentional and active shifts within our inner world. Action Inquiry is, quite simply, what it says on the tin: ongoing, timely, curious and active investigation, "inquiring into what is taking place right now" (Erfan & Torbert, 2015). It supports enhanced alertness to our behavioural habits and prevailing worldviews. We become better spies on ourselves! And can better recognise when we overplay our preferences or abruptly swerve into old habits. The consequences of which, we'll learn from Aman's story later, may even be positive!

1. in von Franz, M.-L. (1980). *Alchemy: An introduction to the symbolism and the psychology* (p. 127). Inner City Books.
2. Leishman, K. (n.d.) speaks of boarding a ferry from the west coast of Scotland to a remote north western island. Grasping the handrails, she felt grateful for their solidity. They gave her courage to lean-into the edge of the storms and salt dash of the waves on her face. *Vertical leadership development: Action inquiry & the GLP program*. Global Leadership Associates. (https://gla.global/the-glp-overview/)

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THE JOURNEY TOWARD COACH MASTERY

Expanding our understanding of life – and by extension, coaching requires more than just gathering information or engaging in self-reflection. We need an approach that, whatever our worldview, integrates both inner and outer perspectives (our two birds) and helps us to recognise and evaluate where we place attention. We could also do with assistance in grasping the ongoing transitions between various worldviews instead of viewing them as isolated developmental jumps (Herdman Barker and Wallis, 2016).

Separating things out, creating divisions, is what many of us do only too well. We draw lines between good and bad action, prioritizing rational arguments over imaginative ideas, principle over relationship and vice versa. Yet as Hillman (1996) points out, even Descartes so well known for separating out inner and outer realities, between the "thinking mind and the extended space", left a little room for something else. By placing the soul in the pineal gland, he gestured towards a third logic: a unifying seed between two opposing giants.

It's this space for something else, this third way, that interests us. We turn to developmental theory, specifically the Alchemical worldview, to help inquire into this "seed" and loosen habitual patterns of knowing and experiencing life.

Aman will build on the story of Blaze and Ash by detailing her own personal journey to learn and get Coach Mastery 'right' by Alchemising her experiences. She highlights the significant roles adult development and active inquiry played in her transformation. Throughout, her penchant for inquiry and gritty self-examination, keeps her moving. Even when imagining dark forces rising within and around her, she asks herself and the outside world difficult questions, broadening her view.

ALCHEMISING EXPERIENCE

The willingness to forgo certainty, revealed by Aman's journey is a defining feature of the Alchemical worldview, which represents the most complex action-logic currently addressed in our developmental taxonomy (Herdman-Barker & Torbert, 2012) the journey from Opportunist to Alchemical worldviews reflects an ever-deepening commitment to re-evaluate what we know to be true rather than simply re-enacting old patterns.[2] (Torbert's Four Territories of Experience, in Torbert, 2004). The process is less about unlearning or forgetting and more about cooking[3] or confronting our conscious and unconscious thoughts. Coldplay's Chris Martin, talking about the song track Ghosts, puts it another way; "how do you let the things that happen to you in the past, your ghosts, how do you let them affect your present and your future…… sit with them to let them alchemise" (Radio 1, Zane Lowe, April 28th, 2014). It seems he's suggesting we acknowledge past experiences, (which include, in our terms, early worldviews), letting them come together rather than running away from, dismissing or avoiding them. By integrating past experiences, we uncover new insights.[4] Another way is to imagine ourselves embodying the process, much like a chameleon, with eyes swivelling, working independently, looking within and without. And skin colours that change. We learn to self-regulate, better communicate and adapt to our environments (see figure 2, "Chameleon as Coach")

FIGURE 2:

"Chameleon as Coach", from the work of Elaine Herdman Barker & Aman Gohal symbolises a coach with one eye outwardly observing the client and the other inwardly focusing on presence and awareness. It's extended licking tongue represents a "third eye," evoking the ability to "taste one's taste," to integrate both inner and outer perspectives, attuning to the relationship between coach and client. Its skin, changing colour to match its environment (consciously and unconsciously), mirrors the fluidity of action-logics or worldviews. Its shadow hints at the hidden sometimes duplicitous self. *Do you see your shadow?*

2. See Appendices A & B, this paper
3. Von Franz, Alchemy1980
4. see also Breitbart, W (2017) Alchemy and Psychology

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Aman begins her story by examining both the potential and seductive power of experience.

AMAN'S JOURNEY:

I start with discomfort, as usual - to include both the "show offy " hubris and vulnerable nature of highlighting my own experience. And, I do so anyway to offer a space for coaches to explore adult development through the coach's experience versus focusing on the client which can be an unconscious seduction of the craft itself. On the path of integration, where conscious and unconscious meet, coaches do more than observe from the balcony view. Like an x-ray, they pierce the surface of the dance floor, tracing not only the rhythms of the outer world but also the quiet choreography of their own inner coach and the inner stories of their client. The movement is dynamic while simultaneously holding ethics as thread in both coaching and developmental moves in which we raise awareness on how a leader is making-meaning (Gohal & McCormick, 2023).

The coach, like a chameleon sustains a sharp awareness with one eye directed outward, attentively scanning and observing the client, while the other turns inward, grounding presence and self-awareness. Beyond these, a third eye opens to the relational field itself, sensing the subtle dynamics between coach and client. The chameleon offers a fourth dimension too, of changing the colours of its *selves* to match its environment. And if this imagery feels overwhelming as a coach, rest assured: each terrain is not abstract, rather alive and palpably felt in the moment. The strength and beauty of the chameleon, when brought to conscious light, displays the fullness of each dimension.

My continuous path in coach mastery has been shaped not only by a deepening grasp of the ICF competencies, but also by the gradual loosening of the inner actors that once took hold of my inner terrain. As I gained clarity about their solidity and influence, I began to recognize them in many forms: parts, energetic complexes, archetypes and action-logics[5]…each offering a different texture for what stirred within me and directed life. This gave way to a new territory, the aware ego process (Stone & Stone, 2011) that explores the nature of the selves and colours of the chameleon. Sitting in the aware ego as introduced to me by Rev. Silvia Behrend and and Sri Sri Ravi Shankar, an experience of dexterous relating with the selves becomes possible. In this reflection, I will share how I have come to understand and engage these inner dynamics in the coaching journey through the lens of action-logics, embracing Opportunist to Alchemical.

Moment of Reflection:

As a coach on the journey, who stirs within you? Disclaimer: Answering this question can be both exhilarating and equally disturbing.

Much like Joseph Campbell's archetypal Hero's Journey, the path toward coach mastery (specifically, the ICF Master Coach Certification, MCC)[6] has led me through rugged terrain, moments of breaking and reintegration, and the inevitable summons of a mentor. In my own experience, there were three ICF Mentor Coaches as I am a bit of a tough nut to crack. Each mentor awakened within me the conscious life of different action-logics, their strength and limitations. Drawing out the necessary wisdom of all the action-logics to bring coaching alive. I will be walking through the journey with mentors using a similar arch that Dr. Barrhonda White and I constructed, reground, release and re-emerge." (White & Gohal, 2025, Spark Wisdom)

5. In drawing from Torbert and Herdman-Barker's research, specifically the Global Leadership Profile and the My Worldview Assessment, the terms action-logics and worldviews are used interchangeably. Both rest on the same developmental roots: they illuminate the structural ways adults make meaning and navigate increasing layers of complexity. See Appendices A & B, this paper

6. See Appendix C this paper

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THE 3 MENTORS

THE FIRST MENTOR

REGROUNDING AND LAYING THE BRICKS

This mentor invited me to ground myself in both ambition and discipline. She urged me to lean into my interest, the vision of becoming an MCC, and to protect that desire with clarity and resolve. In this, I touched the strength of the Opportunist action-logic: the unapologetic claim of one's own desire, the insistence on bringing a fully present "I" to the table, and the willingness to follow through with what "wanting" truly demands. So, you want to be an MCC. Why? *Just because* is not going to cut it. Preserving the integrity of oneself and the solidity of that core is impossible without the awakening of the Opportunist that swoops in like an eagle focused with sharp vision and claws. The raw power of the Opportunist is part of the life force of any directional choice. The ownership of the "I" that can get both over- and underplayed also holds the light of clear assertion.

At the same time, this mentor reminded me of the necessity of structure, learning to "play by the book." Here surfaced the Diplomat action-logic: the capacity to recognize and respect the rules of the game, in this case the ICF competencies and the need to honour the form before reaching beyond it. Did I fully know what I was reaching toward? Did I understand the structure of this container – and its "rules"? Although I was Adjunct Faculty of a coaching programme, I found it humbling how much I thought I knew was enough to teach yet not close to mastery. A deeper appreciation of the structure is required for engagement in a particular craft.

Like the discipline of martial arts, coaching also requires correct form and precision before one can move fluidly into personal style. A true master has a beginner's mind, honouring the basics, embodying both the humility of the beginner and the discernment of the expert. Here lies the strength of the Expert action-logic: the standards are the standards; the work is to continually comb through them with care, honouring the craft in the pursuit of mastery. This mentor re-grounded me in the journey of the competencies, reminding me to engage with them carefully, even if clumsily at first, because conscious practice is the foundation of unconscious mastery. While we don't aim for perfection, the perfectionist standards of the Expert action-logic play a role and exist for a reason. There are standards and metrics to differentiate the field and understand how coaching is constructed by this particular body of practice. The difference between beginner and master is not the move; it is the amount of presence and precision in each moment.

When a coach can breathe life into the earlier action-logics, most of the journey toward mastery is already complete, for it is the firm foundation that steadies the ascent. Mastery is not about being otherworldly, having psychic abilities, or dressing the work in glittering flair. It is the deeper act of "eating the dragon's tail", a conscious return to the source, ouroboros as depicted by Elaine (see figures 3 and 5), where one awakens the living essence of the competencies and, at the same time, the very core of the self as coach. For me, it is not a one-and-done. It is an on-going process of differentiating and re-integrating self-alongside coach competence. Even when it felt constraining and tedious, I had to steady myself in the diplomat and expert action-logics to start coaching there, almost as though learning to crawl again. This required that I let go of my puffed up sense of success as a coach.

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Elaine:

A moment for Inquiry – What you might ask of your Opportunist, Diplomat & Expert Selves?

Am I acknowledging my base desires and instincts for survival? What am I desiring (vs greedy for)? Which needs am I satiating?

"Look after me, let me belong!" When does this craving for the comfort of rules arise? Is it during difficult times or is it prompted by familiar surroundings? Can I be comfortable without losing myself?

There is order here and knowledge to ingest. Am I seduced by the sense of control – the chance to be-in-the-know?

THE SECOND MENTOR

RELEASING: CONFRONTATION AND RUDE AWAKENING

After falling short on my first submitted records for the MCC exam in 2021, I felt lost and decided to not give up because Mastery requires both perseverance and vulnerability. I engaged a second mentor on my journey who was tough, with a capital T. More than a disciplinarian, he drew sharp red lines through my unhelpful coaching habits, calling out dead ends, while at the same time encouraging me to find a clearer, more grounded voice. A beginner coach; is learning to do something, a coach leaning into Mastery is learning to do no-thing. Though he never raised his voice, my own projection often turned his feedback into something greater. I had to confront my defenses, my subconscious tendency to slip into victimhood, my impulse to appease, to sit on frustration or listen to the spiral of self-doubt whispering, "I have no business being a coach".

This mentor advised that I engage the conscious strengths of the Achiever action-logic. It required deep reflection on my patterns, emotional awareness, and, above all, my agency in the coaching process. Returning to the chameleon, I realized that if I remained rooted in the Opportunist to Expert logics, my gaze would remain outward in the shoulds and musts for the client as well as ICF standards. By consciously engaging the Achiever I could build upon the competence and confidence developed in my coaching training. There was strength in the Achiever action-logic, that confidently embraced and raised the bar of coaching. My Achiever felt *I've got this*.

And through Redefining action- logics, I began to turn my vision inward examining my assumptions, and my ways of showing up. The second eye of the chameleon.

Now coaching deepened the inner journey and terrain. What was the inner work that called for loosening the necessary rigidity of outer structures? Redefining brought its own set of sandpaper-like questions deconstructing conditioned thinking: *What does it truly mean to be a coach? What is a concise powerful question? Where am I merging or being too rigid? What does partnership really look like? How do I navigate the tensions that emerge between myself and the client? Who am I as a coach beyond ICF?* These deconstructions and inquiries reshaped my identity and loosened the temptation to treat the ICF competencies as a rigid checklist, reminding me that mastery is not compliance rather a step toward inner dimensions.

Elaine:

A moment for Inquiry – What might you ask your Achieving and Redefining Selves?

Wait, what am I being asked to "get better at" and who is really asking? Is it landing with me as a pressure?

Am I even awake? Am I learning in my own skin or someone else's?

Where am I right now? Am I pausing, progressing, squeezing, standing still or spiralling?

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THE THIRD MENTOR

RE-EMERGING TOWARD THE SOUL OF MASTERY

While my previous mentor reawakened my sense of agency and helped me deconstruct the coaching landscape, I still felt something was missing, like a spark. It was then after consulting with trusted peers that I engaged a third mentor, whose presence radiated what I can only describe as coaching bliss alongside the acceptance of an imperfect journey. It wasn't merely her decades of experience or the indigo, mandala-covered walls of their office coupled with their over sharing of personal flaws. She held a paradox of a presence that was both gentle and piercing, a clarity in coach assessment that struck my heart like lightening.

This mentor was self-admittedly a recovering perfectionist, fully accepting of her flaws as she went through their decades of mastery and several personal shortcomings. She framed coaching not as a performance rather a path of spiritual unfolding, the way in which we are all unfolding…rupturing our limitations and rapturing in grace. And yet, beneath her mysticism lay an astute, razor-sharp assessment that deepened and widened my practice with clear precision through subtle nudges. Her approach was timely and dynamic it was palpable in the space between us the relational field that she also pointed to in the coaching. Through this mentor, I was encouraged to lean into the conscious use of the Transforming action-logic: a focus that encompassed both inner and outer landscapes: coach, client, and the relational field together three dimensions of the chameleon now inter-weaving.

This mentor held me accountable to the micro-moments of coaching. She redirected me again and again: Go where the client wants to go. Leave what you think you know. Widen the space. Dig into the essence beneath. With her, the journey shifted it was no longer about the MCC credentials or passing an exam. It became about mastery itself and the essence of it.

The inner transforming action-logic within me was emboldened to press further. Frustrated by their steady evaluations: 8 out of 10, on my recordings I would ask what it would take to experience a 9 or even a 10. Her response stunned me: "Sorry, Aman, I don't give those. No one does. You're passing the exam at this rate, isn't that what matters?"

The Achiever in me bristled. I could feel an Opportunistic like surge through the action-logics like a kundalini shock popping a light bulb. I became drowned by my own Transforming complexity and self-righteousness as I started missing the point entirely. Movement now required the chameleon to look at is own shadow...and the residue of shadow from earlier action logics: the heroic overplays, the over-adaptation to comply with standards, the people pleasing on steroids until one's own essence is grated down. It also meant that I had to confront an unconscious truth I held which is that chameleons really bother me! Their beauty is in their adaptation to their environment? Give me a break, how codependent! How absurd! Where were some of my hidden dependencies that had suffocated my voice in striving? More so.. proving!

The mentor punctured my transformative spasms of over-thinking. "Enough. Submit what you have. You're driving yourself to madness. Who within you is coaching who within them?"

Pop!

Who within me was waiting to be known? I couldn't listen into the dark (Torbert, 2013) while being judgemental. How could I remain curious about Who is the chameleon really? The unconscious selves each wanted their own turn to prove themselves to try at reality with their own strategies that had after all worked at some point in life. Without conscious use of the chameleon's colours, I was like an uncontrollable lit up Christmas tree!

Conscious presence is much different than manipulating reality with an old worn-out script or the knowing of mind.

All colours were simply attempting to do their job and right on cue. My heart melted. How could I have been so judgemental of my sincere attempts? I felt that same melting in the coaching. I could see the client more clearly and I started to understand the alchemy of doing no-thing while confronting the shades within me.

My mind has many layers of trapping. As C.S. Lewis writes, "Hell is a state of mind…and every state of mind, left to itself, every shutting up of the creature within the dungeon of its own mind, is in the end hell. But Heaven is not a state of mind. Heaven is reality itself. All that is fully real is Heaven." (C.S. Lewis, 1946). What does it mean to be in reality versus all the constructions of the mind?

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The chameleon can ease down a leaf in the wind like a coach can find ease in the moment. I was astonished and in awe of the range of colourful action-logics brought to light. The joy of trusting that comes from letting go of the mental states that can be a prison and obstruction in coaching. It was in the reverence for what I judged as madness that I felt the soul of mastery. It was not just letting go of what I knew, as holding on to knowledge is valuable – it was letting go of the judgments that are the shadow of knowing. How my own mind also has the capacity to create so much suffering and added complexity. When a powerful coaching move could be four words or fewer. The chameleon simply is a chameleon.

Elaine:

A moment for Inquiry – What might you ask you're Transforming and Alchemical Selves?

Am I seeing the four "corners of the room:" representing inner life, relationships, the outer world and subtle realms?

What is the driving force here, can I work with it, "cook" with it?

Where is the absurd in this moment?

Aman:

It might be a pretense to say being scored for the MCC didn't matter because to some colourful part of me it did matter. Yet holding on to it so tightly is where I lost sight of what it means to become a coach in mastery versus trying to pass an exam. Letting go is how…ironically, I was able to surpass the mark in 2022. The more I dove within to listen to myself while evolving alongside the competencies the more palpable the connection became with the client. The bird in flight and the bird on the ground are of the same nature, following instincts and most importantly experiencing life. As Elaine would often ask, "I wonder what it is like to be a bird? Does a bird "think" about flying or does it just experience flight?

The journey to becoming an MCC, more demanding than earning a PhD, will remain unforgettable. Academic degrees may allow the mind to cognitively bypass what lies beneath the surface; In my experience coaching does not. Coaching asks the whole of you for soul and standards to move together. It is both discipline and surrender, the paradox of holding on and letting go, and the quiet art of presence found between the two.

I have cherished every step of this path, and I continue to. The standards evolve and so do I – so will you. The process of being and becoming will go on for all of us. Walking alongside the action-logics of adult development gave me a compass and a language for discovery, a map to navigate the shifting terrains of self and practice. Yet, it also gave me freedom to release the map, to trust the living moment vulnerably and the buoy of something deeper.

In the end, mastery is not a destination or a journey it is a rhythm honouring and releasing, flowing between structure and song. And sometimes, art is knowing when to hold … and when, joyfully, like my favourite chameleon, to let go.

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ELAINE:

TIMELINESS & TASTING ONE'S TASTE[7]

From "Laying the Bricks", through to the "Soul of Mastery", Aman established a new order in her world, one that allowed her to survive the dismantling of old worldviews while refiguring them into a broader field of vision. Furthermore, she became increasingly alert to fluidity in her conceptions of life, as, like whiffs of smoke, different worldviews puffed into play, offering momentary aromas influencing her reactions.

FIGURE 3:

Dragon-Logics, our different worldviews puff into play like dragon smoke. From the work of Elaine Herdman Barker.

The Achieving and Opportunistic scents breezed through her Transforming moments (see also figure 5, Appendix A; Dragon-Logics). Would she, instead of ignoring or arguing with them, face into and alchemise them? It would be understandable that, as a coach aspiring to mastery she could easily get drawn into the fantasy of being exalted; in-the-know, *simply Transforming*. We can probably all identify with that seduction but it's a troublesome one. It leads us to ignore scents such as the volatile aroma of Opportunism, which we might rationalise away as "You are jealous and simply don't appreciate the complexity of my perspective. You just don't get me!" Aman, however, was *getting* herself and she chose to do a crazy thing, she experimented with her own reality.

Her mentors also played their part in helping her to meet herself. Each mentor brought substance, their words were meaningful, their impact significant and, together, they appeared to mirror Aman's inner struggles.

Some were strict and parental, directing her path. Her last mentor moved in an additional way, creating different conditions for growth, holding a place for revelation. As Aman candidly observed, during our work on this paper, the mentors provocations often created spaces that were far from pretty. On hearing her story, I occasionally imagined her in serene spaces, seated on neutral toned sofas and meditating by the ocean. However, these peaceful impressions sat alongside moments when her ego-crackled as it cooked.

Did Aman's choice of mentors consciously or unconsciously reflect her evolving needs? Her timely selection seemed intuitive, almost magically mirroring her stumbling blocks and changing needs. Was she, at each turn, Alchemically, listening out for something new? Torbert, in his work on Action Inquiry, (Torbert and Associates 2003) speaks of a person's capacity to act in a timely way as a criterion for transformative action. (Erfan and Torbert, 2015).

The alchemy, the magic, the third way, or "tasting one's taste", as Bill Torbert put it, seems to lie in ongoing inquiry and listening ever more deeply to the connection between things, to our relationships and environment. This all sounds very golden but, as we may sense, it's not easily translated into embodied experience. Aman's relationships with her mentors and her route to passing Coach Mastery required perseverance. Sandpaper questions and micro moments were often experienced as abrasive and frustrating. Yet Aman, while complaining about "their truths," stayed committed to her course, she "pressed further". And, through "discipline and surrender" transmuted pain, purpose and habit into something fresh. Sandpaper did not serve to smooth her into shape. She used friction and revelation to deeply and repeatedly inquire into the heart of herself, to her inner voices. She also listened to what her environment asked of her; she was, after all, being assessed.

7. Torbert W. R. personal communication used the phrase "tasting ones taste, " see figure 2

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Aman wanted to step into Coach Mastery. Yet would "mastery" matter as it did at the onset of her journey?

That step meant traveling up and down different developmental roads at the same time, embracing seemingly contradictory perspectives. Even when one of those roads felt uncomfortable, forgotten or on the horizon; distant. (see figure 4, "Three Roads").

FIGURE 4:

Three Roads, from the work of Elaine Herdman Barker, represents the capacity to walk up and down developmental roads at the same time. On the left, we walk in Opportunistic, Diplomatic and Expert shoes, each symbolising foundational action-logics. On the right, a parallel but opposite road, is walked in shoes of Achieving, Redefining and Transforming, representing, more complex, mature perspectives. Although the roads appear separate, they are connected. In the middle the coach Alchemises all orientations. The image invites reflection: can you walk up and down these roads simultaneously? Do you tend to wear one pair of shoes? Are you noticing how your client walks?

Not easy! It took devotion to something beyond learning for her to hear the "pop," and transform a yearning to belong and get things right (Diplomat) into a deeper sense of fellowship, shared humanity and overarching purpose (Transforming). I understand Aman's "pop" as touching the pulse. There are many ways to grok pop! Aman uses words such as, "gaze", "unfold" and "soul" to describe her experience, yet spiritual mysteries may not resonate with everyone. For me, touching the pulse also represents moments of twinkling awareness for what is motivating us, our social context and how we are approaching each other. It's an instance when we alchemise life experience.

BECOMING CLOSED IS NEVER FAR AWAY.

"And yet, the ways we miss our lives are life"
Randall Jarrell, "A Girl in a Library"

In this line Jarrell seems to speak to the bittersweet nature of life. I read it as the most tender observation. We all, at times, create distance from the world and become distant from ourselves. And that's life. Coaching and attaining MCC Mastery requires becoming ever more sensitive to what we are missing, and listening out for what we have not yet imagined. Thank you, Aman, for sharing your story.

AMAN:

CALLED TO A NEW TERRAIN OF COACHING

We as coaches are being called to new terrain
where the map is still forming,
where the shadows await integration,
and the compass of ICF competences
are evolving beneath our feet.

The world we navigate now speaks in many new codes
AI bots and climates,
data and soul,
urgency and wonder.
Who among us can confidently say what our shared reality will look like?

Our edges are alive
stretched by new generations rising behind us,
their consciousness braided with technology,
their questions sharper, their pace swifter.
How will Gen Z and Gen Alpha meet coaching as a practice,
and as a path of becoming
where they meet one another in both possibility and polarization?

Neurodivergence, AI-driven, trauma-aware,
politically charged are co-existing daily

Where will we be called
by science that measures,
and by spirit that moves?

Where will compassion for humanity stay at the forefront? In our phones – linked to cobalt mining and in our presence with one another?
Who will be the next generation of coaches and teachers that illuminate a path of love in an era of technology?

In the many circles of coaches I've met at ICF conferences, in local chapters,
in communities of practice pulsing with inquiry
I see us adapting like chameleons,
changing colour to meet the moment,
and also finding ourselves anew in every shade,

While grounding in our essence,
One that believes people are wise,
creative and whole

Perhaps that is our art
to keep finding, to keep unfolding,
to keep becoming.

To keep trusting the inner mystery of the client

So I invite you
walk with us.
Let's explore this evolving frontier together
toward a development of hope,
and the ever-deepening journey
of becoming a coach.

Aman Gohal

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APPENDIX A:

In our work, we draw primarily from Bill Torbert and Elaine Herdman-Barker's research, specifically the Global Leadership Profile and the MyWorldView Assessment. While each instrument has its own application, both rest on the same developmental roots: they illuminate the structural ways adults make meaning and navigate increasing layers of complexity.

For coaches, the deeper invitation sits in their twin companion: **Action Inquiry**. This is not simply a method; it's a stance. A way of living and coaching that continually orients us back to awareness of our interpretations, our assumptions, our impact, and the stories we tell ourselves about what is "real" or "true."

When we engage Action Inquiry as practitioners, we step into a disciplined curiosity. We re-examine our frames, pause long enough to notice the seams of our automatic patterns, and open again to learning. ***Over time, this practice creates a developmental rhythm: noticing → questioning → refining → integrating[7].***

This is the heart of coaching at later stages of development. Not accumulating tools, rather expanding the structure from which we observe and intervene. Not mastering questions and answers but deepening the quality of attention we bring to our inner and outer worlds.

Just as a coach's relationship to mastery may evolve, so too may their own, and indeed everyone else's, relationship to developmental measures such as the GLP and MWV. These tools sit within the wider context of today's culture which often prioritises quantitative metrics and evaluation. Tracking, rating and comparison have become everyday practices, offering potentially rigorous and disciplined approaches to noticing patterns in oneself, others and across society. They may also become a thief, robbing us of common sense and sensitivity if simply inhaled. So how might a coach helpfully lean on these measures? They may do so differently as their experience, capacity and discernment mature. In this sense, just as coach mastery is not something to arrive at, the use of the GLP and MWV may also move from being a source of reassurance or guidance into becoming companions for ongoing inquiry.

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FIGURE 5:

Dragon -Logics, from the work of Elaine Herdman Barker. Thoughts and attention coil like dragon-smoke, fluid and looping; alive. What unfurls could be opportunism, diplomacy , redefinition or something else. The Ouroboros continually meets its own tail. Self recognition is only reached through ongoing active inquiry.

7. see figure 5 appendix A

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APPENDIX A: CONTINUED

DEVELOPMENTAL MEASURES: AN EVOLVING RELATIONSHIP

When Developmental Practice and Action-Inquiry are combined there's no finishing line to growth. The GLP framework arranges a person's response across a continuum comprising seven action-logics: beginning with least complex Opportunist which is characterised by a reactive, instinctive and short-term perspective and culminating in Alchemical, revealing dexterous attention, which is perceived by others as poetry-in-action. Situated between these sit: the Diplomat action logic, oriented to conformity; the Expert, emphasising skill mastery and control; the Achiever, defined by a conscientious drive to succeed, understand why and predict consequences; Redefining, prioritising the capacity to critically test and deconstruct processes and beliefs; and Transforming, characterised by an enhanced awareness of individual stories and global systems and how they give shape to each other.

SEVEN ACTION-LOGICS

To get a feel for how different action-logics show up, please reflect on the sentences below, and imagine yourself in a coaching conversation. Notice how your attention drifts as you touch on different ways of making sense of the world. Do any of these reactions feel familiar? You will have a centre of gravity which may be any of the seven logics (say Expert or Redefining)…..but you will probably also draw on other logics as you respond to your coachee. This will depend on what triggers, inspires or settles you, in any moment.

Imagine your attention as multi-directional, like a wide river delta. Sometimes, as water, you split, merge or circle back. There are moments when you surge forward, and others when you slow down or swirl in place or are pushed back by incoming tides. It's all fluid, all part of the same, living, flow.

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APPENDIX B:

Which of the seven action-logics do you find most familiar and when do you use them ?

SCENARIO 1

Imagine yourself as a coach with a coaching client who is late for a meeting. How do you respond?

OPPORTUNIST:
Who cares if he's late! He's my highest paying client and now I've only got 30 minutes to go now. Winner!

DIPLOMAT:
At least I got here on time. You don't keep the client waiting! I won't offend him by asking why he's late.

EXPERT:
I'll say, "glad you made it!" and then advise him that we won't have enough time to address all my planned points. As the structure is blown, it's best to reschedule.

ACHIEVER:
I'm hacked off. It's so disrespectful and unprofessional. He's not the only one who is busy. To make the best of the time left, I'll focus on business priorities and offer pointers on effective time management. If time allows, we can discuss the impact lateness has on others.

REDEFINING:
Talk about frustrating! Does he really value our conversations, or is he only here because coaching is baked into the culture? Should I call him out on this, share my feelings, and invite his perspective? If I don't challenge him, what sort of coach am I? What would others do? What's good process?

TRANSFORMING:
I'm feeling a sense of freedom from my old, excessive, sense of responsibility to make this situation "right." I do wonder though if his recurrent lateness mirrors something in the system or whether its idiosyncratic?

ALCHEMICAL:
What am I coming to understand by being here?

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SCENARIO 2

How might a client describe a difficult situation or relationship?

OPPORTUNIST:
He's an idiot!

DIPLOMAT:
The Boss is the Boss. She's in charge and knows what she is doing. I don't like it when people question her.

EXPERT:
Unfortunately, he just doesn't get the level of detail required for this project. It drives me crazy how he skips over important detail. He's not interested in data!

ACHIEVER:
To be honest our priorities differ. We don't often see eye to eye, but I always nail the deliveries, so we manage to get along just fine.

REDEFINING:
She's like the rest of the senior team, got a herd mentality. There is some sense in her decisions but it's the problem itself that needs reconsidering.

TRANSFORMING:
In a landscape as complex and complicated as this, he is aware that every decision we make is sending out ripples.

ALCHEMICAL:
I sometimes wonder if we are a delightful mirror of the universe's humour and whether every raw moment, between us, is simply material for life.

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SCENARIO 3

Do you see yourself in any of these questions a coach might ask?

OPPORTUNIST:
"What's the fast move to maximise your advantage?

DIPLOMAT:
"Who *would* question her?

EXPERT:
"Could you provide an example, to your boss, that might substantiate your case?

ACHIEVER:
"What are the outcomes, and I'm deliberately using the plural here, that you want to achieve with your boss?"

REDEFINING:
"In what ways might your beliefs about the system be shaping your views about your Boss and their style of leadership?

TRANSFORMING:
"What might I recognise in my boss that are my own traits reflected back at me?"

ALCHEMICAL:
"What unknown might be present"

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APPENDIX C:
2025 ICF COMPETENCIES:

A. Foundation

1. Demonstrates Ethical Practice Definition: Understands and consistently applies coaching ethics and standards of coaching

2. Embodies a Coaching Mindset Definition: Engages in ongoing personal and professional learning and development as a coach. Works with coaching supervisors or mentor coaches as needed. Develops and maintains a mindset that is open, curious, flexible and client-centered.

B. Co-Creating the Relationship

3. Establishes and Maintains Agreements Definition: Partners with the client and relevant stakeholders to create clear agreements about the coaching relationship, process, plans and goals. Establishes agreements for the overall coaching engagement as well as those for each coaching session.

4. Cultivates Trust and Safety Definition: Partners with the client to create a safe, supportive environment that allows the client to share freely. Maintains a relationship of mutual respect and trust.

5. Maintains Presence Definition: Is fully conscious and present with the client, employing a style that is open, flexible, grounded and confident.

C. Communicating Effectively

6. Listens Actively Definition: Focuses on what the client is and is not saying to fully understand what is being communicated in the context of the client systems and to support client self-expression

7. Evokes Awareness Definition: Facilitates client insight and learning by using tools and techniques such as powerful questioning, silence, metaphor or analogy.

D. Cultivating Learning and Growth

8. Facilitates Client Growth Definition: Partners with the client to transform learning and insight into action. Promotes client autonomy in the coaching process.

Detailed competency list can be found at **coachfederation.org**

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BIOGRAPHIES

ELAINE HERDMAN BARKER

Elaine is Co-founder and Partner at Global Leadership Associates, where she prioritises mutual growth and the ongoing search for the common good.

Together with her dear friend and colleague Bill Torbert, Elaine co-created the Global Leadership Profile, along with its sister instrument, MyWorldView

For nearly thirty years, Elaine and Bill helped establish developmental theory in the world of coaching and leadership. And while maintaining academic rigour translated the work into a vibrant and practical approach beyond the walls of theory alone

The beauty, of the work, in Elaine's view, lies in creating better understandings and forming closer relationships. Honouring each person's strengths while, at the same time aligning with organizational purpose and broader societal needs.

Bill provided a generative home for developmental inquiry. Elaine, alongside many others, continues to learn from, steward and evolve this work.

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AMAN GOHAL, PHD, MCC

Aman Gohal is a Senior Developmental Coach at Global Leadership Associates and Co-Founder of Spark Wisdom: A Journey to Coach Mastery and Water of Life Coaching. She has helped leaders expand their inner architecture so they can meet outer complexity with clarity. She has served as Head of Executive Development for a tech company, Director and Faculty in the Georgetown Leadership coaching program. She has served as coach in the U.S. Presidential Leadership Scholars program, the Yale Women's Leadership Program, and the White House Leadership Development Program. As a coach and coach educator, she loves working on bridges where identity shifts, shadows surface and new choices become available. She also enjoys building communities across industries and disciplines in service of our shared reality.

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