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## *Coaching for Performance: A Conversation with Sir John Whitmore*

Interview Conducted by Agnes Mura

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## Coaching for Performance A Conversation with Sir John Whitmore

### Interview Conducted by Agnes Mura

*"In a one-to-one, person to person context, we help people develop themselves and their own sets of personal values, and there couldn't be anything more direct than that. So I believe that coaching people is service to the individual but it is also service to getting this planet well."*

**A.M.:** Your foundational and widely read book, "Coaching For Performance" is in its third edition. The most significant addition this time is, I think, the aspect of coaching for purpose and meaning. What did you see in organizations today that made you think "there's a key coaching aspect missing that we need to add to the book"?

**J.W.:** It rather came the other way around, because when I started coaching originally with the Inner Game, when I was first trained by Tim Gallway and began to develop a bigger picture about what was behind coaching, I was already looking to see how we could accelerate the evolution. But what I didn't want to do is to go too far in the first editions of the book, because it was so all new that I didn't want to turn people off. As soon as the next door opened, then we walked on. I have been traveling on a progression, and I even wanted to go further than my publisher, but he said "now wait a minute, little careful here, hold back a little bit more."

**A.M.:** Maybe we can follow your trajectory a little more clearly then. People in the coaching profession know your book very well, especially this journal's constituencies - executive coaches, corporate coaches, coaches working in organizations both in the US and abroad. But in the United States, we knew little about you before its publication. I was fascinated to find out about your race car driving youth and then your involvement in business, in sports and in the Inner Game. There is always great interest in understanding your multi-disciplinary roots as a coach, so typical for many of us.

**J.W.:** The sports route is an interesting one, my first lifetime was in professional sports, and then I had a short second lifetime running businesses, I had three businesses. I began to feel there was something more to life than just running a business. That was just material success and I had already satisfied my ego in sports, a successful business, and now where is there to go from here?

**A.M.:** Too young to settle for what's easy...

**J.W.:** Too young to settle down too much, too. I think perhaps the wisest decision I ever made in my life, was the recognition that I had to look inside not outside. So instead of buying more businesses or more airplanes or more cars or more houses in the Caribbean or something like this, as many rich people do, I thought, "No, I have to look inside." It's not more, not quantity but quality. And so I went to the Esalen Institute in California in 1970 when no one from England had been there. This was completely crazy, I'd read about it in *Time* magazine which said this is a very subversive place and a very bad thing! So I went there not knowing what to expect at all. What I found was the birth of Humanistic Psychology as opposed to the traditional, behavioral, cognitive psychology, on which sports coaching had been based in the past, because *sports coaching* was not really coaching at all, it was *instruction*, based in cognitive and behavioral modification principles. So here was something very different, and I got immersed in that process: turns out we have emotions that are allowed to be there, and all these exciting things, that weren't even considered before. But having the background in sports, I was always looking for some applications of this.

**A.M.:** So how do you think developmental coaching transcended sports coaching? And then we can talk about other roots that have informed your coaching philosophy.

**J.W.:** I met very early on with Bob Kriegel who was the co-author of the Inner Skiing book later; but this was four years before he wrote that book. He's written a book called "If it Ain't Broke, Break It!" and also something called the "C-Zone" or something like that. But anyway, he was a skier and I was a skier also, so we were talking about how we could apply this in sports, and then from that I met Tim Gallway, and suddenly I could see *the relationship between humanistic psychology and performance*. And so I was very excited by that and

I trained with Tim and, under license, I started the Inner Game organization in England, which in the first instance was not a business at all, it was a ski school and a tennis school, and that was all I was interested in. Very quickly, business people who came on our ski courses recognized how valuable this could be for business, and so they kept asking us: “can you do something with our HR people?” and that sort of thing.

**A.M.:** Okay, let’s stop there for a second. What do you think they saw? What was that essential component?

**J.W.:** I think what they saw was something more real than what they’d done before. I think our understanding of human beings is still very much in its infancy; psychology is a new science. And so you have the first wave of psychology which was around Freud, then you had Watson and Skinner with their behaviorism and then the next wave is Humanistic Psychology. And so each wave is kind of a deeper understanding of how human beings work, and so each one takes us a bit closer to what is human nature. We have a long way to go but at least one has more understanding. And when people come in contact with this work, they generally feel that there is a ring of truth here.

**A.M.:** If they notice that it’s truly shifting them...

**J.W.:** Yes, at a deep level, they relate to it, and I think it makes sense. They feel comfortable, they feel at home with it, this makes sense. I had a lot of people say to me that they were reading “The Inner Game of Tennis” and they were saying ‘yes, yes, yes’, and they said “I could’ve written that book.” So I think what we were doing made such obvious sense ... and it was all about improving performance.

**A.M.:** It was about improving performance in a more organic, natural way...

**J.W.:** Yeah, and business is very much about performance, so that’s what they’re looking for. They could see it work when we were on the tennis court – “get this to work in my business and I’ll be successful!” So I moved into business and I still kept the ski school because I enjoyed my skiing and I love teaching skiing and then eventually I had to let that go and focused entirely on the business world. I then met up with my two current colleagues, David Whitaker and David Hemery, both Olympic gold medalists. The three of us were very concerned about how badly coaching was done in sports. They didn’t really know what the solution was but they knew there was a problem. So in our conversations, we felt that very clearly that this was the way forward. So we started working, initially to try

to persuade the sports governing bodies in England to change their method of coaching. That was very hard work and...

**A.M.:** ...not too successful?

**J.W.:** They are very conservative, very, very conservative. I don’t like pushing at a door that is closed. So we found what you were saying earlier, that now coaching in business is about 15 to 20 years ahead of coaching in sports.

**A.M.:** Right, right. When I teach coaching, I emphasize the distinction between performance coaching and what people see as sports coaching, because when managers only relate “coaching” to sports, they are underestimating and misunderstanding our profession.

**J.W.:** Well, absolutely. Because if they have had some experience of coaching in sports for themselves, then they probably had a bad experience.

**A.M.:** And they say, “The coach doesn’t consult with the players before he calls the play!”

**J.W.:** Yeah, that’s right, he doesn’t. So we just moved in the direction where the doors were open...

**A.M.:** Right. So “Coaching for Performance” was born of the transfer of the tools and approaches of humanistic psychology as used in sports to the world of organizations. That’s why it made sense to even borrow the term ‘coaching.’

**J.W.:** Remember, when we started the Inner Game organization in the UK, we were completely unique; we were the only people in England doing anything like this; the only people in England applying humanistic psychological principles outside therapy. I was one of the first Englishman to go to Esalen.

**A.M.:** I bet.

**J.W.:** But quite early on we recognized that there was a problem with the name, the Inner Game, because it sounded like some sort of *American* cult, something limited. So we wanted to use a generic term that described it more broadly, and that’s why we chose the word ‘coaching.’ In hindsight, I wonder if it might not have been better to invent a new word, because you don’t have the baggage or a narrow definition of what it had meant to people before.

**A.M.:** I think we’re getting around that handicap very fast, and I think the business coaching context has broadened the concept of coaching immensely.

**J.W.:** Yes.

**A.M.:** Is it your sense that you were the first one to use the word coaching in this meaning? Who else were you aware of working in this vein 10-15 years ago?

**J.W.:** Well, when we started in England, we had 6 or 8 people who trained with Tim Gallway, and when we stopped the Inner Game company itself, we all went into business, but not all working together. So now we're about four or six different organizations, all doing Inner Game coaching in business, but all of us used the term coaching because we all wanted to drop the name Inner Game. It was not any kind of negative break-up that we went in different directions, we were all friends, but I wanted to keep skiing, and others pursued their own interests.

**A.M.:** How much did you follow what was occurring in the States?

**J.W.:** Tim also began quite early to work in business but he worked in a different way. He worked more with the top executives and so on. The development of coaching in Europe and in America went in two different directions.

**A.M.:** Say more about that.

**J.W.:** The reason for that is that it really started in the USA around Life Coaching, that's what I feel.

**A.M.:** Let's say the expansion of coaching into more of a mass phenomenon certainly began with personal coaching.

**J.W.:** There is an explicit reason for that; in America people were quite comfortable with talking about their psychoanalyst years ago and then about their psyche. They also could afford to pay these people to come and work with them. In England, we're much more reluctant to talk about any kind of emotional needs in that way. An English person would be very embarrassed to talk about their analyst. There was that problem but also, we also have socialized medicine, so people expect free service. So the profession of coaching couldn't grow the same way, because people were just not accustomed, they didn't have the expendable money and there were not accustomed to pay to take care of a personal need like that.

**A.M.:** So there was the health system and there was the culturally perceived stigma. I did some work in Germany with some senior banking executives and I had to go to their home and write to their private emails when I did assessments or coaching sessions with them. It was very hush-hush, even four or five years ago.

**J.W.:** Yes, I think Germany has been a bit slower to change. In Scandinavia for example, or Holland or England it probably started about 10 years ago. So the cultural factors were one reason for the difference. There is another thing, too. We did not start out by coaching private individuals first. The way we all worked was teaching managers to manage using the principles and in the style of coaching. So the coaching throughout Europe has integrated coaching much deeper within management behavior. Although we do now have executive coaching, and certain specialized people within organizations who may have acquired special coaching skills, much of the work we do is still changing the management style, the management culture of the organization by integrating coaching. So the organizations that bring us in are often looking for culture change.

**A.M.:** You do that by training broad layers of management.

**J.W.:** But not very deep training, because the two to six days we offer are just sufficient for them to start using this behavior in their management behavior but not sufficient for them to become a great coach.

**A.M.:** Of course.

**J.W.:** But that is what we prefer to do and I think it has a much bigger impact than individual coaching. Because what they are trying to do is really change the culture. Now England is much more compressed in the sense that communication is much easier. So with five of our organizations doing this kind of thing...

**A.M.:** There was a big impact.

**J.W.:** The influence was substantial. Not only in England, but my book was translated into several languages quite early and is now in 14 or 15 languages. So the same thing began to happen in Europe, and not just our organization "Performance Consultants", but the group of people who were involved with the Inner Game in the beginning really have influenced the whole of the way coaching developed in all of Europe. I still argue a little bit with Tim Gallway because he uses more the American approach, as one would expect.

**A.M.:** So in America in a sense there have been two things happening. On the one hand there is mass availability of personal coaches who do telephone work, and who were trained in programs like the ones Thomas Leonard initiated, like CoachU. And even the roots of the International Coach Federation ultimately go back to personal coaches. And then separately at the top of organizations executive coaching started being more overtly and widely used, particularly in the last ten years

during the 'war for talent'. It became harder for management to dismiss people who had a flaw or who were not growing fast enough for the new challenges, but who were otherwise high performers. So they started investing a few thousand dollars in an executive coach to salvage or accelerate the growth of key contributors. At times, I see the pendulum swing in the States in accordance to economic cycles. When business is slow, people get dismissed more easily and we see more demand for reactive, remedial coaching. When things are good, there is much more proactive leadership development of entire senior teams, there is much more individual and team coaching.

**J.W.:** That's interesting. I think in England the amount of work we get goes up and down according to the economy, which is just based on how much training they can afford, it doesn't change in nature. But I also think that there's influence both ways, because I think that life coaching is getting more accepted in England, people are more open to acknowledge that they can use this, there's not such a stigma. That's true also for executive coaching, it's quite a big thing now!

**A.M.:** So we have personal coaching, executive coaching and that high-leverage piece in the middle: management training in coaching skills, which is how coaching can become the key dialogue and feedback modality of the organization.

**J.W.:** And that is happening more in the States now also. IBM has used my book for five years; as a mobile organization they have an online training system. They have a simulator where the staff can go through coaching exercises online. After they've done this, there's work to complete properly, then they all go to Atlanta to the training headquarters of IBM for a week: ½ day on coaching, ½ day on teams, ½ day on leadership, etc. but they've done their pre-work on the simulators. The fact that it's been five years since IBM has been doing this is a good indication, for example, that they are looking to integrate coaching into the management culture of their organization. I think that the boundaries that existed between the UK and the US are blurring. As I said, Tim Gallway and I have sort of a friendly debates about the difference in perception between management and coaching. And there is obviously a convergence as time goes on.

**A.M.:** So let's go back to why it was particularly timely now for you to add these issues of personal purpose, meaning, corporate values, culture in this edition?

**J.W.:** It is a convergence of the external need and my internal sense of progression. So, talking of personal purpose first: the next step beyond humanistic psychology is transpersonal psychology, which sort of

came on to the scene almost in parallel to humanistic psychology. The leading transpersonal psychologists like Carl Jung and Roberto Assagioli actually started before the humanistic psychologists.

**A.M.:** But they weren't actually publicly accepted.

**J.W.:** The public wasn't ready yet. The public was more ready for humanistic psychology and so that had to come first and then transpersonal psychology built on that. That was an obvious and rather natural progression. It was a question just when do we introduce the transpersonal principles. Anyway, and my wife, whom you met, has the biggest training school for Psychosynthesis in England. She did that for 22 years; she and I both knew Roberto Assagioli before he died. For us that was a very familiar territory, but just when do we introduce it? It was too soon for the 2<sup>nd</sup> edition but not too soon for the 3<sup>rd</sup>. What we also noticed is that when we did practice-coaching exercises with people in groups and they brought up what they wanted to be coached on, we were noticing, increasingly, that people had concerns about meaning and purpose in their life. In the past, they would get coaching from one of their colleagues on company matters, but they couldn't touch on meaning and purpose when it might have possibly meant they may have to leave their company because they find their work meaningless or unsuited for them. They were, however, happy to have the opportunity to speak with us as an external facilitator about these topics. I thought this was interesting: people seemed ready for this. Of course, if you are going to be a coach, you need additional level of skills if you are going to get into these areas.

**A.M.:** And that's why external coaching and executive coaching is catching on so much, because there is a limit to what you can discuss even with an internal coach, who is an HR professional.

**J.W.:** Although I have to say that there are two companies, both relatively small companies, that I am working with at the moment. One of them is a restaurant chain, so not that small, but we are working at this transpersonal level from the board right into the whole organization.

**A.M.:** Are you doing the coaching?

**J.W.:** No, we are training them to begin using some of these processes themselves. Well, then we get to the next point. When you want to develop your ability as a coach or indeed a coach-manager, how much of this can be accomplished by training people in coaching behavior methods, and how much of this is about their own "stuff"? There is a substantial personal development requirement at this stage. What do you

need to be a good coach? Well, you need above all to deal with your personal development, otherwise there's a limit to the depths you can reach with the colleague you are coaching.

**A.M.:** Some manager-coaches are seeing their coach training as the transformative process it is. It's not about what they are doing for their staff but who they are becoming.

**J.W.:** There's another thing too, when you start looking at meaning and purpose, one question is, "What does my work give me?" If I'm doing a job from which I can derive a sense of self-worth and self-belief then my being there has meaning, because it's developing me. But at a certain point, I'm going to look outside that and say, well, my activity on a day to day basis is merely reading some signals on a screen or pushing paper across desks to other people. That in itself doesn't have any great value but if they have to do that to produce service, then it does. My next question then is: "am I happy with the service or the product that my company is producing?" And clearly there are some activities people are happy with because they feel they're doing good, and others who may feel "this is an activity that makes a lot of money, but I don't feel very good about it, because it's not very ethical or it's not useful." And more and more of people are beginning to question the values of the company they're working for. And that comes up because meaning and purpose come up, so there's a relationship between *meaning, purpose, value and ethics*. At the same time, we are in the middle of a corporate crime wave. And I'm not saying that corporate crime is dramatically worse than it was before, but more information is available through the Internet. People before did not have the courage to complain about corporate crime because they wanted to keep their jobs and now there is much more public exposure. Therefore people are recognizing a degree of corporate crime that's largely been there, but they hadn't known how bad it was. A lot of eye-opening stuff. But under the Bush administration public discourse is actually diminishing. Democrats don't even dare say 'boo' to Republicans now. We shouldn't go there... As a European I'm just horrified by what I'm seeing over here.

**A.M.:** You mean the conformity of thinking?

**J.W.:** The conformity of thinking and the unwillingness of people to challenge a corrupt establishment. I think one of the benefits of coaching is getting people more in touch with themselves and their inner standards and therefore enable them to be more critical of unethical behavior.

**A.M.:** And that's not a values conflict, it's truly finding meaning in your own activity. Do you think that we're doing a reasonably good job as coaches in improving the emotional intelligence level in organizations? I don't know how much in touch you are with coaches in general, whether you interact or go to conferences...

**J.W.:** I'm co-chair of the European Mentoring and Coaching Council which is looking Europe wide at providing some sets of standards, but not to police them as such.

**A.M.:** Is that analogous to the ICF?

**J.W.:** ICF itself is likely to become a member of this eventually bigger organization, which is not to try to undermine the ICF but to be very broad and to include a lot of things that maybe ICF does not include, like coaching schools or application of coaching...

**A.M.:** But you're also looking that this organization will certify people and such?

**J.W.:** No, it would look at other certification programs and make some suggestions saying that you are a little bit out of line, etc.

**A.M.:** So it's more like accrediting the training institutions...

**J.W.:** It's not saying you're bad if you don't do it, it's just making recommendations more than anything else. We're looking more for collaborative relationships.

**A.M.:** So in that context, how do you think we're doing?

**J.W.:** One thing that impressed me recently at a meeting we had on standards of this group was the degree of cooperation. We invited quite a large group of people because they were coming to a conference the next day of one of the organizations. So we had about 70 organizations represented there, it was incredible and there was no conflict there the whole day. Theoretically, these were competitive organizations with each other but we were all looking to collaborate and there was a high level of agreement to what we were doing. We all shared disappointment that we are not having more of an impact on the corporate world. I mean, we're clearly having an impact but you're never satisfied, there's always more. Because of the obvious pressures of their monthly figures – I mean we are focused on the human side and they have a lot of other things they have to take care of. We would like to have them pay much more attention to the human side.

**A.M.:** Well, for those of us who speak direct to corporations try to make the argument that the two are inextricably connected...



**J.W.:** But the trouble is the time frame... "Well, I have to get my figures right this month..." The impact that we are having is that they see more long-term.

**A.M.:** What I'm seeing with my coaching clients that burn-out is becoming, at least in the United States, a huge problem. A lot of the productivity that's being squeezed out of organizations comes in part from technology but it also comes out of just increased productivity from individual people through extra hours. I find that I have to coach people just to stay alive, survive, keep your performance up, day in day out, under such extraordinary pressures for many years, as the analogy of athletes running Olympics all the time. So those pressures are enormous, so the only way we can bring in coaching is to say to the organization is that we're hoping people become more efficient and in addition more effective because the demands are so enormous.

**J.W.:** In a coaching organization, when I look at it more at the integration coaching as a manager, one of the advantages that accompanies is that they keep their staff better, because they want to stay, they want to be an organization that respects personal development and gives them opportunities, etc. Many of our clients have said themselves that their staff turnover has improved.

**A.M.:** Do you think we are also improving the emotional intelligence level in organizations? Are we facilitating new philosophical and spiritual perspectives in organizational life?

**J.W.:** That's what I call the transpersonal dimension. First of all, I don't think there's any magic in emotional intelligence in the sense that when I was in Esalen in 1970 that was what we were doing. And we knew then that at some time in the future this was going to reverberate in society beyond some retreat on the Big Sur coast. I sometimes describe EI as simply the underlying "being" behind the "doing" of coaching. The doing is the behavior - asking questions - and the being is where you come from; and that is emotional intelligence.

But spiritual intelligence, as an avenue for dealing with meaning and purpose is very important. In a sense, if you look at the books that have the world spiritual in their title - like *The Spiritual Audit of Corporate America* is one, or Danah Zohar's book (editor's note: *SAM: Connecting with Our Spiritual Intelligence*) - all of them define very quickly, that they're not about religion, but about meaning and purpose. Religion's original function was to provide a sense of meaning and purpose to people. In our secularized society, that no longer happens in the same way. I won't get into some of the

right-wing approaches to utilizing religion, but I think they're very dangerous. The fact is that most people are beginning to look for meaning and purpose wherever they spend their time, in sports or in recreation or in their work place, way beyond religious practices...

**A.M.:** They're looking for avenues for creating meaning without obtaining it from an external source. That's what religion used to do for you - it defined who you are. Because most external sources of "truth" are in question, we are forced to provide some for ourselves, which is a bit of a post-modern "aha."

**J.W.:** With the possible exception that behind all religions, there are some common pictures of how the universe works. There are models if you like, which are not dogmatic and ritualized like the religions, but they are models of the sort of evolutionary journey of human existence that are consistent in a spiritual sense.

**A.M.:** And they translate into values that a lot of people would agree on.

**J.W.:** Yes, they are the common ground. So I'm saying that our values aren't entirely self-created. I would say that the best transpersonal coaches do have some maps and models. Now they don't impose those maps and models but it certainly helps, as a coach, to understand something about the evolutionary journey. If I'm an ordinary surface level coach and I'm coaching you to perform a task well today, I can look at that purely in terms of my frame of reference about the task. Or I can try to develop this person so they can not only perform this task but other tasks in the future. Or I can go yet another step and say: "here is a person on a life journey and here is a life obstacle to overcome as part of their learning process on their journey." It's about getting a little bit further behind that and having a bigger vision of the person sitting in front of me. My feeling is that the best coaches are those who are in this position and have this big vision.

But I do think we do get close to other types of counseling or therapy in some places here because there are signals that people are giving, that if you have some transpersonal, spiritual knowledge you can immediately recognize patterns and see where this person might be operating from. I'm not saying that a coach wouldn't get there in the end anyway, but you can save a lot of time and energy if you have broader understanding.

For example, an ordinary coach - let me be a bit unfair - perhaps quite a competent coach, might see somebody who is stretched at work. Their exploration work may be around too much work, prioritizing, delegation, etc. Stress, though, is very often a signal of lack of meaning

and purpose. But you would have to recognize that to move beyond just trying to help them prioritize.

**A.M.:** It almost feels like there is this level between just efficiency coaching and before it becomes a spiritual issue: the issue also has a psychological aspect, because people have a choice to interpret what happens around them in a way that stresses them, and that can be learned and unlearned. Beyond that, the stress may certainly also be looked at as a spiritual opportunity.

**J.W.:** Absolutely, I couldn't agree more. The only thing is that I don't see a dividing line between the psychological and the spiritual. It's simply a continuum. In Eastern philosophy they don't have a division between psychology and spirituality.

To me, for example, when you get into the area of creativity, inspiration, aspirations and things like that ... are they spiritual or psychological? There's no line.

**A.M.:** Going back to the coach who doesn't have psychology training. At the moment, in the States, the self-imposed ethical guidelines of the profession require that we delineate between the two and not practice psychotherapy and coaching at the same time with the same client; and yet all coaches who are worth their salt understand quite well the fundamentals of human behavior and the general psychology of normal people, or they couldn't be doing their work. We are trained to watch out for signals of very strong resistance, or patterns of the person sort of unraveling at the same place ... and then we refer them to a therapist, if needed. Since you have the double background, do you feel that you are doing both, or coaching primarily, with moments where your psychology background is helpful?

**J.W.:** I would say that in anything that I do I use all the resources I have that are available at the time. I'm just as concerned as you are that we are clear about the limits, though.

**A.M.:** You're concerned about the fuzzy boundaries?

**J.W.:** I am concerned that coaches should have the self-discipline to know when they personally need to stop. I myself don't believe, although some people do, that if I'm coaching somebody and it begins to go into an area where I have sufficient skill, I should avoid going there because that is not in the contract. Some people say that at such a time I should put on a different hat, make another appointment with you tomorrow under a different fee structure... That sort of thing doesn't work for me personally.

**A.M.:** At the minimum you might alert the person being coached that you're changing your approach.

**J.W.:** But almost any performance limitation issue has a history, and where does it come from? In many instances, it comes ultimately from childhood anyway, so at which level do you work with this? I'm going to work at a level that I'm comfortable with, that I think is going to be most helpful. I'm not going to automatically say "what happened when you were two years old?" But if it leads that way I would go in that direction.

**A.M.:** The question this begs relates to the training of coaches? You've probably seen Steven Berglas' article in the *Harvard Business Review* about the "dangers" of coaching.

**J.W.:** Yes, and I completely agree with him.

**A.M.:** I assume then that you expect a good coach to have a solid foundation in human development and behavior. As a practical matter, there are also a large number of psychologists moving into coaching and thinking they can automatically coach, given their studies. Even the articles on executive coaching that appear in the American Psychological Association's review tend to say that, while coaches ought by definition to have some training in psychology, therapists ought to learn something about business and organizational dynamics and systems, if they want to do coaching in that environment.

**J.W.:** Well, there is always a question: what are you absorbing? Are you just studying and learning, or integrating all this? Studying for years may still not make a good therapist out of some people. So it's not just about the qualification in that sense, it's really where the person is coming from inside. I don't think there is a fixed answer here! Because I think there is a great deal of personal responsibility on the side of the coach.

The problem is that if the coach has a big ego and thinks "I can solve anything" –and then there's a problem that goes a little bit out of her range, she's not going to want to admit that it is a big problem.

**A.M.:** The competency required here has to do with personal development and where you are as a human being, because you need to have the self-awareness to know that you don't know what you're doing.

**J.W.:** I say to coaches, "If you are working with someone and you become at all uncomfortable, then you have reached a limit. Because the mere fact that you are uncomfortable will in any case distort the way you coach that person, because you have some fear there, and you



will go onto your own agenda for self-protection, thereby your own fear will distort your coaching.”

**A.M.:** And you’re going to be all about assuaging your fear, rather than about the person you’re coaching.

**J.W.:** Exactly. The other boundary I point out is: once you get a clear recognition that the client’s issue is a life-long one rather than an immediate one, pay attention! In our organization we now have a three year degree, an MSC degree in coaching and personal development.

**A.M.:** In your organization? You provide the training?

**J.W.:** My organization in England. We provide the training up to MSC (Master of Science in Coaching) in coaching. One year gets you a certificate, two years a diploma, three years an MSC degree. But I’m not saying that everyone who is a coach has to go to an MSC degree. It depends on the coaching application. It is a difficult area because in the end it is dependent on the honesty of the individual himself. That comes down to personal development.

How you train a coach to be safe in this area is to work on their self development. I certainly don’t think I want to put down any hard rules because someone else is going to put them in a different place, since we’re all coming from our own experience.

**A.M.:** Can I take you to one more place, which has to do with culture and cross-cultural coaching? I don’t know whether you’ve worked much outside of England?

**J.W.:** Yes, we do a lot of work abroad. This year alone I’ve worked in Russia, Bosnia, Sweden, Spain, Italy, and now I’m going to Australia to speak at the ICF conference; I’ve worked in India.

**A.M.:** India is the first country you named that falls outside of the individualistic and utilitarian-oriented countries. The reason I wanted to discuss this is that the whole empowerment concept that lies behind coaching appears to clash with the expectations people in hierarchical and more collectivistic societies have of their teachers and bosses. They expect those in power to also have knowledge and “know the answer.” I wonder if you’ve coached in Asia or Latin America or in parts of the world where if you call yourself a professional, an expert, you better have the answers. Asking empowering questions may work so well. Have you observed such differences?

**J.W.:** Oh yes, there are differences. To me by far the most comfortable area to coach in is Scandinavia, and that includes Holland, because Holland is very progressive. Norway, Sweden and Denmark are very, very open and

I would say England is a sort of about the same. Where it becomes more hierarchical is in the Latin countries, so I would say that Spain and Italy and France are some years behind: more hierarchical in terms of who has the power of what knowledge.

But on the other hand, there is a hunger now which is overcoming those historical restrictions. I’m finding a sort of leap-frogging ahead by some people, for example in Moscow, Russia. They came from a very command and control kind of culture and I have rarely met people who are more hungry for new ideas and new ways of trying to do things. I’m quite encouraged about that.

And I had a very interesting experience in India, working with an oil company there. I worked with the executive team for a two-day “coaching as a management style” kind of workshop. I had a group of their own trainers in the same two-day program with the executives, because afterwards I was going to continue to work with their trainers for another four days, so they could deliver a program inside the company. But after about two days they were all such good coaches, that I got interested in why that was. And so they told me, “Well, in our Hindu tradition, where you look when you have a problem is inside. So when you come along and say we should begin to look inside for the source of a problem, that is quite okay with us, because we’re taught that. What’s very interesting is that the business culture that we have adopted from the West has been saying, ‘look outside for solutions.’ And now, what is so fascinating for us, is that you are coming here, a Westerner, reminding us of the Eastern approach which we had just about given up unilaterally in favor of the Western influence.”

**A.M.:** Meanwhile, the bright Western minds were learning from the Eastern traditions.

**J.W.:** They made me an honorary guru for the day because they wanted to adopt me as an Eastern person, because I was bringing them back the Eastern teaching. That was very sweet of them and very interesting to me. I find that almost regardless of cultures, there is always a way through. I mean, I don’t go in to a culture thinking, “Oh, this is Latin culture, this is going to be difficult!” I’ve not worked in Turkey but I would not go in there with the belief that it will be very difficult. I find that with most people you can find a way around to the essence.

**A.M.:** I often coach people whom others - even colleagues - find difficult, but I’ve yet to meet a really difficult person. It’s all in the eyes of the beholder.

**J.W.:** And to me, if I find a barrier somewhere, I don’t look at them as the problem, I say, “What am I missing

here? What do I need to learn to find a way through here?" A lot of people say to me, "What happens if coaching doesn't work?" and I say, "If coaching doesn't work then I have to look at my coaching." Because I believe the coaching principles are totally adequate and appropriate to helping people become more in touch with who they are.

**A.M.:** And the key principle is that such work generally requires human interaction and dialogue of some deeper kind.

**J.W.:** Yeah, absolutely.

**A.M.:** You studied physics at some point.

**J.W.:** Well, I'm too stupid to study physics in the direct sense. But I have a lot of interest in a much deeper understanding about the universe.

**A.M.:** So do you follow the new physics?

**J.W.:** Fritjof Kapra, David Bohm, you mean? I've been involved with some of them. I didn't study physics in an academic way. What they were talking about, the convergence between physics and spirituality interests me, though. My organization is in fact following the developments in chaos theory, etc. It's on the edge of what we are doing.

**A.M.:** So you are looking at chaos theory in your courses?

**J.W.:** Yes, my wife and I are working together now on the more advanced levels of coaching and transpersonal levels of coaching. She does a whole module on chaos theory.

**A.M.:** Is that the edge for you?

**J.W.:** There's always another edge....

**A.M.:** I would personally like very much to know what interests you and tickles you these days.

**J.W.:** Well, I've been very lucky in that I've had the opportunity to explore very widely. I've been able to have many experiences that most people have not had the opportunity to have. I do have an emerging picture of a purposeful universe. I can see the period of human evolution we are going through now and that coaching is a manifestation of the decline in external authority. I mean it all feeds back into the political arena as well, but there is. The external authorities that we have in our world today are failing us, whether it's the church leaders, the political leaders, the business leaders, they are failing us, they probably always were, but now it is

just more obvious because the information is more available.

**A.M.:** The ubiquity of information is what broke open public awareness.

**J.W.:** Yes, we had Henry VIII, one of our Kings in England, and he was a serial wife killer but nobody said so, probably because they would've been killed, but neither did they have the Internet. We had Sir Winston Churchill, who was supposed to be some great hero, and of course he was, but towards the end of his life, he was a drunk and he had dementia but the papers never wrote about that. So there was a kind of a degree of secrecy. Kennedy was sleeping with everyone he could get with but that was kept quiet. Today these things are much more exposed. What we are seeing is a discrediting of external authority. And you mentioned this earlier. Theoretically, the decline of external authority provides the opportunity for the internal authority to emerge, however, it's not quite as simple as that. Because what happens when the external authority goes into decline, is that the rule makers are also sidelined.

**A.M.:** Yes, that's what happened in the Eastern block after the wall fell, a vacuum was created.

**J.W.:** So there's a vacuum and there are no rules. The problem with this is that even if we did not agree with the rules that the external authorities imposed, now there are no rules. And so what we have now is rampant liberalism or license, which is people not knowing where any boundaries are, because they are experimenting with no boundaries, so you get a rise in criminal activity, in sexual activity, anything goes. Pornography is an obvious example of it. Technological advance has been driving it a lot. The development of digital cameras has facilitated things, there are huge amount of money in this sort of thing now. I don't know whether you know... but if I was to ask you which is the movie that made the most money, you would answer probably a film out of Hollywood; but it's not, it's "Deep Throat." A very cheap pornographic movie made more money than the best of Hollywood ever. And we don't like to admit that kind of thing. This is the collapse of standards. This continues in the political arena, too. Now, if you imagine you're a moderate Islamic person, and you look across here and you see hardcore pornography that does something to you! Even when an Islamic moderate looks at Hollywood, what they see is to them like hardcore pornography is to us. It looks disgusting to them. Our Western world is in a complete disconnect with where we need to be, in part because of this collapse of standards.

And so the tough thing is that with all the conflict we have in the world today and the enormous power the United States is exercising, the US has to change. A major change in culture is required here. And the degree of recognition of that is almost zero, but this has to change. Yes, Islam has to change, there are terrible things going on there. But when we look at Islam on one side and the US on the other, you see two crazy extremes. It's fairly obvious to us that the Islamic people have to change, but how do you get the Bush administration and every self-satisfied Westerner to imagine that they would have to change? They think they're perfect. So given the decline in standards, the only way we are going to restore our world to some sort of balance, is through the development of inner standards.

**A.M.:** I agree with you totally that we are in a war of civilizations. The historically developed economic and political institutions of the past are not serving us very well, now that the world conflicts are increasingly of a social and civilizational nature.

Perhaps there is also hidden strength in our civilization, because of some degree of personal development, the fact that we have almost 100 years of humanistic psychology under our belt. Perhaps that's where the hope is.

**J.W.:** I couldn't agree more; it's interesting, the spiritual traditions have always said, 'You can't fix the material world down there, you just have to develop yourself.' That's typically been approached in a religious-spiritual way. The advantage of what we're talking about now is coaching going far beyond the religious-spiritual and connecting into daily life. Coaching is not stigmatized; it's not an institution.

**A.M.:** Coaching is in the economic mainstream. When I was a banker - I spent 10 years as an international banker - I always felt that I was a "mole," that I was a secret agent, and I always thought "I have a secret spiritual service to provide." And now coaching has given me this chance of being totally transparent in doing transformational work.

**J.W.:** It's the most direct activity directly addressing what needs to be changed. This is not to invalidate all the other interventions, because there are many ways to influence institutions. But in a one-to-one, person to person context, we help people develop themselves and their own sets of personal values, and there couldn't be anything more direct than that. So I believe that coaching people is service to the individual but it is also service to getting this planet well. To me it's as good a game as there is to. The question is of who you do it with. You could say that the older generation is beyond hope, we

should be doing this with children. Good argument. We can help them not be so damaged when they grow up.

**A.M.:** And, at the same time, you have to work with the people who have their hands on the leadership levers today, otherwise things might get blown up before the evolved kids get a chance....

**J.W.:** Each person will choose where their point of influence is. Some people will want to work in sports, others will be role models, others yet coach young people, and many will continue supporting those who create value in organizations.

**A.M.:** I think we've arrived at a true point of completion. Thank you, Sir John, for this wonderful conversational journey.

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## **Agnes Mura**

**Phone:** 310-450-5035

**Website:** [www.AgnesMura.com](http://www.AgnesMura.com)

Agnes Mura is CEO of her own executive coaching firm in Los Angeles, California (USA).

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"[For] almost fifty years, ... researchers have comprehensively mapped the resilience terrain, delineating the variables that erode resilience and those that function to protect it.

Their work indicates that the process that determines our resilience as adults is a dynamic one - a complex interaction between the elements of a child's external and internal worlds. Many of the early external pressures on resilience ... can never be reversed. But some of the internal causes of resilience, such as thinking styles, can be modified, even counteracted. And, more important, once your thinking style has changed, you can use it to undo the ongoing negative consequences that stemmed from events in your childhood that were outside your control."

-- K. Reivich and A. Shatte,  
*The Resilience Factor*

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