

The H.A.R.D. Reality of Relationship Coaching®
By Shel J. Miller, Ph.D.

Coaching? Have you noticed? Coaching is not just for athletes anymore! This past decade has seen a remarkable emergence of every kind of coach: life coach, executive coach, small business coach, presentation coach, Christian coach, divorce coach and parent or family coach. There are dozens of institutes training even larger varieties of coaches, sometime via online lessons. Some of these coaches help people via email or telephone with clients in search of convenience, stressed out by their fast-paced 21st century lives. Each one of us seems to be chipping away at our Culture of Narcissism and promoting growth and cooperation instead. Yes, growth promotion is a growth industry now.

Perhaps the most famous face to face coach, (some would say "in your face"), confronting high conflict couples and families is Dr. Phil. He demonstrates one effective approach as coach to clients who need to change even *while they resist*. Many of us relationship coaches work with such couples and families stunningly stuck in fear, hopelessness, and shame. Relationship rescue dreams sometimes come true on TV with Dr. Phil, who manages to dole out scholarships, cars, expensive exercise equipment, and even introductions between his TV child "clients" and their favorite pro athletes.

Dr. Phil, the show, has revived aspects of Queen for a Day, one of the hot TV series of the 1950s. It is a new version of that template, wherein an incredibly downtrodden contestant is selected for the most heart-rending story -- chosen for financial rescue with all sorts of material goodies. Today's version includes plastic surgery and access to excellent behavioral treatments or residences. They may re-condition unruly children or rehabilitate addicts or even runaway brides. Famous for cajoling, demanding or nudging folks to "get real," does Dr Phil McGraw, the infotainer psychologist *himself* have to **get real**? Could he get the attention of his client without the monetary rewards?

Getting some people's attention is **HARD**. In the **real** coaching trenches, without a studio audience, there are no great material incentives or same day intensive rehab access to offer our clients. Dr. Phil shares wit, wisdom and insight into what makes people tick. He demonstrates how to repair or undo the addictive shaming modes of relating that are so endemic in our society. Having established a well deserved credibility, as a no holds barred rescuer that usually knows what he is talking about, given his reliance on generally sound research, Dr. Phil has become irresistibly attractive to millions of Americans. In fact his show is the 2nd most watched show to Oprah, his most famous client and supporter. He matches her fabulous interview skills. He provides the ability to help get people begin to alter very persistent behavioral patterns. Then he teaches how family systems work well when you put "Family First." As do I, when possible, he leverages the use of videotape feedback to get his clients to see themselves the way other's do - sometimes for the very first time. But how does one overcome barriers to getting going with a coach?

In the **real** helping world you have to pay for and invest time in your **own** healing. You do not get to preview your coach in action. In fact, you rarely get to see your coach assisting others outside of your own family sessions. For the true incentives are not external. What our clients seek is internal: the restoration of hope, love and peace in place of resignation, hate and stress.

Rather than respond at the time of a casting call to Hollywood, clients come in or should come in to develop more confidence when facing life's transitions. They come at those moments of pain, perhaps **when planning a milestone event: a family reunion, a wedding, a graduation, confirmation, anniversary, or 30ieth birthday**. In fact that is why I became the first Psychological Event Planner. I noticed that so many people planning such events suffer tremendous angst in the process. Why are so many happy milestones leading so many people to "lose it" when they should be experiencing the joy of letting go, moving forward and celebrating with their community of significant others. If it takes a village

--- it best not be a village of idiots: jealous parents who never moved on from their own divorce or other grudge holders who make it all about **them** and leave you feeling or acting like the village idiot. I found I can help people at these crucial times to develop life-giving life strategies for dealing with the first ever reuniting of their divorced parents, for example. Perhaps they are facing a Monster In Law as played by Jane Fonda, peeved at losing her special only child to the not good enough daughter in law. In that movie she had never learned how to deal with loss and is forced to face her perfect storm: losing her son, her youthful body, and her job as a famous host of her own television show. But not everyone gets it that these moments of transition and loss are the time to seek help. The American way is to procrastinate. My plea to all thee who delay: Procrastinate Later!

Counseling without celebrity, **your** coach works from the stage wings: gently guiding clients to **know themselves**. I facilitate without a hammer. If I were to be probing publicly with video cameras documenting my every move, I could freely provoke the way Dr. Phil does. Behind private doors, I am sensitive to your feelings and past dramas. As the Keep-it-Together Expert I will want to model keeping it together myself rather than amplify further angst.

After waiting too long, many seek the instant *hero to the rescue*. We all deep down may be looking to be rescued, not just from pain or poverty but from the finitude of life itself. Perhaps we all crave to **be** heroes as well. Yes, we are all limited in time and would love to be able to leap tall buildings with a single bound and **dodge** speeding bullets, not to mention the Grim Reaper. So when we fall in love in order to be rescued from our own families, as we escape from them into the excitement of adult hood, or the next stage closer to the end, we often anoint our **partner** with impossibly heroic expectations. We expect them to compensate for our weaknesses, be every thing we, ourselves and our extended family can not be, or simply be there to fill the voids of life that we would rather not acknowledge. We join them in offering to be **their** heroes, offering to take care of one another, though what we really need to accomplish is *to keep our commitment to take emotional care of ourselves*. The next time you think "Rescue Me," you'd best be talking to yourself.

If you figure out how to rescue yourself, then you become **present**, with extra energy to solve problems. To prepare ourselves to keep that commitment we must know ourselves, our unfinished business and our Achilles heels. Then we might have a shot at working out a respectful and dignified interdependence when tempted to blame and shame the proximate other.

What I teach in the present, simply put, involves offering to Honor, Appreciate, Respect and Dignify: forming the acronym H.A.R.D. Why is it so **HARD** to sustain such attitudes towards our partners, our children and our authorities over the long haul? Because we are waiting to receive it before we give it, especially after having been betrayed. However, maturity and spiritual healing dictates that we stay in non-dramatic dignity and offer love and unconditional regard and kindness and that we offer it **first** rather than only after having received it. That requires patience since, you may not get back the love you give, perhaps to your embittered ex partner and current co-parent for quite some time into the future.

Here is the harder part. To be able to give it to the other, we must first be giving H.A.R.D. to **ourselves**. Some of the self-proclaimed victims that show up at the Phil portal would not be caught dead paying for help in a private situation. They are not into taking responsibility for themselves and able to choose dignity over severe conflict. Many a naïve soul manages to con him/herself into believing they are right and others are wrong. They might follow the lure of the bright lights and obtain one's own 15 minutes of fame. In our private coaching sessions you are not promised such a rose garden though you will encounter both beauty and thorns. What you get is an opportunity for lasting change in a very confidential arrangement where one discovers the power of dialogue around very sensitive, personal issues. With a counselor attuned to you and your family you may experience enough emotional triggers to lead you to finally commit to the hard work of practicing new habits.

Many arrive to the first few coaching sessions with a report of a breakdown in ability to communicate, and a loss of a sense of humor. I know that it will be important to not only stimulate new awareness and accountability but to inject a few laughs as well. What I also know is that it may take a **long time** for people to let go of their early learned and deeply ingrained loyalty to the images and voices of one's extended family. So no matter how much time one may spend practicing new styles or modes of communicating, and laughing about one's flaws, the bottom line is to give oneself permission to face fear -- to move on into an uncertain future. Growing up means listening to one's **own** voice and creating one's **own** image of relating while the competing voices and images of our models pop up and derail our best intentions. We "can't communicate" usually translates to I am having trouble communicating with my own self and "I don't want to know it."

How do you honor, appreciate, respect or dignify those who are deceased or, if alive, are emotionally cut off? How do you honor them if you never forgive? How do you begin to untangle the complexity of family dynamics, extremity and the kind of secrets that have made Desperate Housewives a runaway hit? You need supports from those you trust. Rather than endorse your sense of victim hood, a good friend will remind you to look inward. You may need to create your own Fairie Godmother, the voice of the ideal parent, clipping your own wings or patting you on the back for following your values, so that you move forward with grace.

It is not enough to simply stay in the TV land audience looking for reassurance that other's painful situations are worse than our own! Maybe your TV watching buddy could help you take new action steps based on dignity and love rather than on anger and lust. Be a good neighbor, maybe your neighbor's every day hero, during crunch time. Even the normally self-centered neighbors on Desperate Housewives occasionally take on the role of empathic friends. Your coach would appreciate such support, as well. After all, in REAL life, there is no adoring, applauding, sobbing, and laughing Greek Chorus in the room.

As your mortal collaborator, I might simply facilitate your decoding the secret motivations of your families as you rediscover **love's** treasures and limitatons. You will learn how to carry to the other important people in your life the feelings that you had convinced yourself you could never face, never mind **deliver** directly. I offer some tools. You experiment and if the tools work you reclaim some hope. Rather than rescue you, I eventually guide you to self-rescue -- to that HARD path of ***commitment to take emotional care of oneself***.

Hopefully in that process I will have provided perspective, laughter and pride.

Dr **Shel** is an Executive, Family and Divorce coach. As the Keep-It-Together Expert, his mission is to lift spirits by restoring hope and peace in families that are struggling. One way he does so is through Psychological Event Planning (P.E.P). He may be reached at 617 731-9174 or ShelMiller@rcn.com

Family Life: Keeping it All Together