

Guru-ism And The Decline Of Coaching

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“The medium is the message.” (Marshall McLuhan)

Marshall McLuhan got it right, commenting on our collective gullibility. We are often prepared to swallow almost anything *if* we trust the messenger. The Madison Avenue folks have understood this for years, of course. (That is why they dress actors up in lab-coats when they set out to sell us medications.) Coaches seem to be particularly vulnerable to huckster-ism. The pursuit of ever-higher levels of human performance is fertile ground for those who choose to take advantage of the phenomenon Mr. McLuhan spoke to when he noted that if you can sell the messenger . . . selling the message is a cinch.

It is a sad truth that *talking* about coaching is often more lucrative and ego-sustaining than *actually* coaching. So it is no surprise, in the age of computer-generated slide-shows and laser-beam pointers, that lots of folks have decided that standing in front of the room beats sitting in the crowd. After all: Once you're up there, it's an easy sell. People *want* to trust their teachers. And they want to believe in what they buy.

In fact, our devotion to the message is usually proportional to the amount we have to shell out for it. An expensive three-day seminar, for example, can convince an entire room-full of supplicants to accept *en masse* ideas that

might not be fully vetted. It isn't important to verify that what our teachers say is true; just important that we *all paid* for the information. (There is safety in numbers.) And then: Bad ideas gain prominence, like snowballs rolling downhill, growing larger and more formidable all the way.

And it is an ironic effect of learning from gurus that those parts of presentations that are *most* confusing to us tend to be the parts we question least. We more readily assume our own fallibility than that of the teacher we paid to hear. As a result, we have come to value “weirdness” for its own sake. Who has not been seduced by at least one exercise, piece of training equipment, or grand theoretical pronouncement simply because it seemed so . . . *out there* . . . that it was bound to impress our athletes, clients, or colleagues when we might have occasion to regurgitate it, later?

The problem, here, is that when the gurus re-create themselves in the form of “ideas and information for sale”—whether a text, or a course of study—they also tend to create lots of rigidity in the minds of consumers. Heaven forefend, for example, that our athletes' knees should ever wander beyond their toes when lunging or squatting; or that the *multifidus* muscle should choose to pull *its* oar before the *transverse-abdominus* (even though both things happen in sport—and in life—all the time).

What I find so unfortunate is *not* information with which I disagree getting into the coaching dialogue. It's that the promulgators of so much of this information have committed their ideas to the texts they use to bolster their “cult-of-personality” status as “cutting edge” coaching gurus, making it that much harder to dispense with when it proves to be drivel. People are, after

all, generally trusting of their teachers and assume that most of what they read in books is true.

“If you meet the Buddha on the road . . . kill him.”
(Zen Parable)

I am hardly a Buddhist scholar; but the idea, here, is that the *real* Buddha probably doesn't advertise. That is: the pilgrim you meet on the road will not set out to sell you *up* on the enlightenment scale if he or she is, in fact, enlightened. The proselytizing Buddha, therefore, is the false Buddha, and may be dispensed with (though I suggest regarding the word “kill” in the parable, above, as being purely symbolic and remaining *within* the law.)

It *is* a nice feeling, being regarded as the expert. And though we *should* state the limits of our knowledge and understanding, the temptation to “take on airs” (as they used to say) is great, sometimes leading us to wrap ourselves in experiences we don't actually have. Example: A friend (and otherwise honest fitness instructor) boasts on radio commercials for his gym that he has been training top-level athletes for thirty years. He is forty-one, now. (You do the math.)

Consider the coaching patois. It is replete with terms and phrases that we hear or read and then simply cannot leave alone—any more than most of us can effectively define or use them with anything approaching exactitude. “Functional training” and “proprioceptively enriched” are examples of this kind of “coach-speak” where meaning is relative to the speaker. We get much of this from our gurus, but we should remember that it is an easy thing

to spice a presentation with high-sounding, multi-syllabic junk, reminding us of another of McLuhan's maxims: "Mud sometimes gives the illusion of depth."

I once heard a coach use the phrase: "...*re-tonification of the central-nervous system* ..." in an informal discussion on sprint training. While I wrote furiously to preserve that (august!) line for later use, I asked the speaker to explain what he meant. My notebook (I can show it to you!) dutifully records the comedy-of-the-absurd experience. I wrote:

"Re-tonification of the central-nervous system" (Balance)

Terms and phrases barge into our consciousness and are then used and re-used, often imprecisely, until whatever meaning they may have originally held erodes and they are left as shriveled and bankrupt as the word "LITE" on ice-cream containers and beer bottles. As McLuhan observed: "When a thing is current, it creates *currency*." That is: an idea becomes accepted *simply because it is stated frequently*. And given that we live in a time of instant credibility; of web-sites and book publishing made easy-as-you-please, *lots* of misinformation gains a foothold as a result. Soon, we are all too cowed to point out that the emperor has no clothes. (*Nobody* likes to admit they may have bought a pig-in-a-poke.)

Let us remember: The essential preface to all presentations, pronouncements, texts, treatises, discourses and debates on the subject of human performance should be a bold-faced reminder that *this is a work-in-*

progress. It is a *journey*, as one can easily deduce by examining the progression of Olympic records over the years. There *is* no end-point. And this truth suggests that *coaching* is also a journey—a heuristic process where the more we do, the more we learn. Each of us is the Buddha. So: when somebody on the training road says: “I’m *it!* The be-all-end-all! Listen-to-me-and-look-no-further-because-*I-have-the-answers!*” Well . . . Go for your gun.

Here are some thoughts and questions useful in sorting the informational wheat from the chaff:

- 1) **There are two kinds of teachers: The ones that really want you *know* what they know; and the ones that really want you to be *impressed* by what they know.** The biggest imposters tend to stand in the brightest spotlights, so be skeptical of résumé’s and introductions. You know:

“_____ has worked for _____, and _____ He has written _____ articles for such publications as _____, _____, _____, and _____. He has presented—often—at the _____ National Conference, and is the author of **Why Everybody Should Do It My Way** and **Pay No Attention To Anyone Else**. Over _____ people have been certified by his organization in his training methods, and he is personally responsible for the athletic accomplishments of _____, _____, _____, and many others too

numerous to name. And now: Please welcome *my good friend* . . .

”

Just skip all that. It is written and recited to make you feel better about spending all that money to attend.

- 2) **What is this person selling?** I sell stuff. Do I present because I want people to buy what I have to sell? (No.) Should people *assume* I present because I want people to buy what I have to sell? *Absolutely*. It is up to me to persuade them otherwise. Whenever you begin to suspect that you are present at a commercial *masquerading* as a presentation . . . *run*—don’t walk—for the exit.

- 3) **If someone is making a subject more difficult to comprehend than less so, it is a lead-pipe cinch that they either do not understand it, themselves, or they have a reason for their obfuscation.** (How many coaches struggled to understand and employ the old Eastern European periodization models without ever considering that the word “periodization” was a euphemism for “drug-cycle?” How many athletes suffered as a result of well intentioned coaches working *without* that bit of information?)

- 4) **Whenever you hear somebody taking credit for the athletic achievements and / or prowess of somebody else . . . leave. Let the athlete offer credit to the coach if he or she feels it is justified.** Some coaching gurus never see “star” athletes until they *are* stars. (It is often a symbiotic relationship: The gurus only want to work with

the stars; and the stars are often suckers for the gurus.) And when it comes to stars . . . you need to know who it was who brung-em to the dance more than who wants to dance with them, now.

Be A Good Student: Find A Good Teacher

Learning and teaching are synergistic and a student who does not test the teacher is about as useful as a teacher who does not test the student. It is too easy to accept without question most assertions when they come to us printed in books or amplified from the front of the banquet hall. Guru-ism may be an unfortunate and unavoidable part of popular culture; but we must not simply accept what the gurus offer us as though it comes down from the top of the mountain etched on stone tablets.

I am drawn to coaches and teachers of considerable (and verifiable) experience who have learned from their mistakes; *and who are happy to admit that they made some*. I have found it beneficial to learn from the folks who were too busy coaching in their formative years to have written many books or devised whole business empires (*with certificates suitable for framing!*) from their personal (newly minted) coaching philosophies. I also like it when my teachers tell me about *their* teachers. And happily, it has been my experience that, when you find one good teacher, you will find many more simply by hanging around and meeting the folks your *teacher* hangs around.

I am also persuaded that the best coaching mentors are those who foster *independence* rather than dependence. I simply do not *want* to believe that I can't progress unless I have *this* piece of equipment; *that* textbook, or pay for (yet) another certification and the CEU's required to sustain it. I just want to get good information and have confidence, enough, to use it.

To that end, I suggest you do two things: 1) When *receiving* information, determine where it comes from; find and verify its source(s). (So much of what is called "new" and "cutting-edge" has been around for a *long* while. [Medicine-balls and yoga, anyone?]) And 2) When *presenting* information, inform your audience whence *you* came by it. "I learned this from "So-And-So," (for example). "*He* may have made it up, or learned it from somebody else. But *I* learned it from him." I do not feel diminished by acknowledging my teachers. Rather, I feel fortunate to have learned from good people, and proud to identify them when sharing what they taught me. Those coaches too insecure to give credit or attribution to their sources do a disservice to the coaching profession and will, ultimately, invite questions concerning their professional integrity, the veracity of their information, and the provenance of the wisdom they claim (or imply) is their own.

Finally, while we may not be able to escape the coaching gurus, we *can* eschew dogma in favor of knowledge. Keep your critical-thought mechanism charged and calibrated. And keep your powder dry: You never know whom you might meet on the road. *Namaste*.

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