



THE EARTHQUAKE, THE CHASM AND THE PUZZLE

After being shaken awake one day, [Neil Scotton](#) took a look at the steps we can take as coaches, as citizens and as a profession towards enabling a healthy future.

Have you had an earthquake moment? That moment when you saw, heard or felt something, and suddenly the health and future of someone, something or somewhere struck you as so uncertain, so unfair or so bad that you cannot find peace of mind until you do something about it?

I call these earthquake moments because, for me, the shift from leaning in gently to 'I can't rest until I do more' was literally an earthquake. Being shaken awake. In Surrey, England. In February. Just days after mid-winter forest fires in Sussex and people sunbathing on Welsh beaches. I couldn't go back to sleep. So I got up. And began typing. Words flowed from I don't know where. And in one of my (until then) first posts on social media, I put it out on LinkedIn. The response was astonishing.

Key points in the post included:

- Climate change is real. And it's killing.
- Social breakdown is real. And it's hurting.
- Our children want and need us to do something.
- Our profession has to come off the fence. All professions have to come off the fence.
- Our work has ripple-out. We cannot ignore the responsibility that entails.
- We need to fully realise what 'Humans are not the centre of the universe' actually means.
- We need to realise that 'Give nature a home' type thinking is well-meaning but shows how arrogant, self-centred, egotistical and frankly stupid we collectively are.
- We need to recognise that the client's agenda includes everything they need to be healthy – this includes food, water, safe streets, a future for their children, places of beauty, a world not at war.
- All work must be good work. Doing some pro bono work for good causes is great, but will never be enough.
- We need to shift from a mindset of exploitation to one of nurture.
- It's time we called time on celebrating the 'Me-More-Now' lifestyle.
- We must confront the big issues and speak our truths.



Among the thousands of views and many 'likes' of support came extraordinary messages from coaches. They included many from present and past leaders in our profession.

It became clear that:

- Many coaches feel strongly about what's happening in the world around us.
- Many do not feel that they have sufficiently 'come out' to make what they care about clearer to the world. They want to take more agency to make things better at the scale needed.
- It's REALLY important that 'names' in the profession come out in support.
- It's REALLY important that the professional bodies come out in support.
- It's REALLY important that those who are coming out share their experiences, so that others can learn from their challenges and be inspired by their stories and successes.

Following the post, as I spent many hours figuring out what to do next, a series of three metaphors became clear:

1. **The Earthquake:** The moment when you know you have to do something.
2. **The Chasm:** The gap that exists between what you are currently saying and doing at work and more widely in life, and what you need to be saying and doing if you are to be authentic in what you say you care about. This gap may be

practical, but there are many emotional and mindset issues (fear, denial, anger, shame, hopelessness, helplessness, martyrdom, messianic delusions and more) to deal with in crossing that chasm.

3. **Your piece of the Puzzle:** I remember a speaker saying: 'At the heart of every complex problem is a simple solution. And it's wrong.' These issues are complex. No one action, one movement, one idea, one model, one organisation, one collaborative venture, one professional body, is going to solve it. This is a puzzle with many pieces. And people have different ideas of what the picture on the front of the box looks like. We need to each find our piece, the bit we can do, see who it connects with and put our pieces together. Our pieces may look very different. But they are all needed. The essence is to find the thing(s) where you can make difference or role-model a behaviour or way of being. And through your own action and working with others the pieces come together.

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And it's wrong.*

In July, Lise Lewis (EMCC International President 2011-20) and I ran a session using these metaphors at the Coaching at Work Conference in London, UK. Through conversations before, during and after the session, some truths emerged:

- We (as a profession) will need many tools and lots of training and experiences to help ourselves and our clients emotionally and practically deal with the oncoming realities. We will meet much denial, anger, fear, frustration, guilt, shame and more from those (including ourselves) who may feel they have been part of the problem or have ignored it, or feel powerless to do anything about it.
- We need to recognise there are never just two people in a coaching conversation, there is always ripple-out, and we need to be able to hold the space for 'beyond self' and 'beyond the organisation' conversations.
- More of us need to come out and talk about what we care about.
- We will need to be role models – acting with authenticity and integrity – and be prepared to walk paths with or before our clients.
- We need to show up in our contracting, understand what it really means to be 'equal partners', and be open with the values from which our thoughts, questions and responses are based. Honesty is a key theme here. The unavoidable truth through all this is how we've all gone with the 'Me-More-Now' thinking, and not been honest about why we feel the need for it, why we play along with it, and the implications and effects this has on us and others.
- We need to help others connect with others, so that together they can do things.
- We need to support and signpost colleagues and clients to sources of information, inspiration and further support.
- We need to be there for each other – this stuff is big. It will need listening, kindness and understanding. It will need us to explore the most important questions. It may also need direct communication. And holding each other to account. And... do you notice how our coaching competencies prepare us well?
- We need the professional bodies to convene 'Courageous Conversations' for us to talk about this; the needs, opportunities, challenges, paradoxes, contradictions, realities, ethics and more.
- We need to revisit our codes of ethics. They've done a great job in protecting the individual and the reputation of the profession so far. They don't address the 'beyond the coach and client' aspects of our work and ripple out.

There is already great role-modelling; Tracy Sinclair and other coaching leaders with their public support. Zoe Cohen sharing information and posts on social media. Charly Cox with her fresh, positive voice and development of practical

tools. Linda Aspey in asking if she could have a 'Climate Crisis Hub' at the Coaching at Work conference (and Liz Hall and Stephen Palmer for saying 'yes'). Hetty Einzig in her book on the *Future of Coaching* and in convening a series of Courageous Conversations for AC members. Lise Lewis in joining me on stage and co-creating the Coaching at Work event. I could go on. And I'll no doubt be embarrassed by the many I haven't mentioned or don't yet know about. There are true pioneers here.

Underneath the complexity and myriad solutions that are coming forwards, three core themes are becoming clear. I believe they lie at the heart of our environmental, social, race, gender equality, political and economic disparity issues. They touch us at the macro level, and deeply personally. I call them 'The Roots of All Evil'. They are simply:

1. The belief: 'I am not enough'
2. Seeing another person as 'Other'
3. Thinking 'It' (animal, plant, landscape, object) is 'Other'

These lead us, on the one hand, into dominating, damaging, over-competing and over-consuming; on the other, into shrinking, avoiding, giving away our power and giving up. Either way, we ultimately engage in the damaging and diminishing of others, ourselves and the world around us.

We are who we are because of the 'Other'. There is nothing that the Other can think or feel that we cannot think and feel. When we lose the sense of 'us' in everything around us, we knock a hole in our own deep fulfilment of life, and in the future that we leave for others. Our health relies on the health of everything around us.

Big change is coming. The 'When?' is now. The 'What?' requires places for people to reflect, be real, explore without feeling judged, be supported, encouraged, creative and confident, see new perspectives, deal with the practically and emotionally complex, and hold ourselves to account. And also change the narrative, create a compelling vision, take practical steps and positive action, and change behaviours. What profession could be really positive in helping people with such things? The role of coaching is clear.

Julio Olalla asked: 'Why has coaching come into the world? It must be meeting a need that existing solutions do not meet.' We used to think that need was about success and performance. Our eyes are being opened to more; things that are bigger, fundamental, profound. Olalla himself spoke of reuniting science and the spirit. We are realising that 'realising our potential' is not about winning some form of race. It's not even about being more human or leading a more fulfilling life, though these are undoubtedly part of the journey. It is about a leap forwards to a way of thinking and acting that leads to health and harmony for all. This is where fulfilment lies. This is what success means. This is what performance serves. When we prioritise holistic wellbeing in this way, we can't help but feel fulfilled, successful, healthy and well. It's immense.



So far, dealing with the big issues has been seen as heading off disaster (and some predict we can't avoid disaster, only do our best to mitigate it). A different way to look at it is to ask, in everything we do: 'Does this make things healthier?' To address the big issues, we just need to keep choosing health. It's a very different focus point compared to success. I find myself smiling in the face of this challenge – this opportunity. Perhaps that's because I admire those of years ago who began building cathedrals, mosques and palaces that they knew they would never live to see completed. They did it anyway. Many of these still stand, and serve, and inspire. They began. Let's begin.

Sharing this article with Jean-Francois Cousin, Chairman of the ICF Global Board 2019, he commented: 'At its core, our mission as coaches is about awakening human consciousness and potential, and empowering them to contribute to greater systemic outcomes. At this most perilous moment for our civilization, we coaches must steadfastly carry out our cardinal mission in a way that (1) makes the most positive, sustainable difference to what matters most deeply to humanity and our planet, and (2) compels and enables leaders all across society to join our quest.'

With leaders like Jean-Francois speaking openly in this way, we have together, indeed, begun.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Neil Scotton, PCC, spends his working time mainly with The One Leadership Project, supporting organisations, teams, leaders, communities and coaches taking on the challenge of real, positive, systemic change. Then he grows veggies, plays guitar, does tai chi, hugs his family and gets a healthy slice of humble pie working with a charity: A Band of Brothers. He's a past President of UK ICF. *The Little Book of Making Big Change Happen*, co-written with Dr Alister Scott, is currently inspiring catalysts.

Neil is running a *Coaching at Work* masterclass on 19 November on The Earthquake, The Chasm and The Puzzle.
