The Awe-struck Coach

(Guest blog by Jasen Booton)

After I responded to a post that Jasen Booton placed on LinkedIn, we connected for a zoom conversation around "curiosity and wonder" in coaching. I am delighted that he agreed to share his insights in this guest blog. Jasen currently serves as a consultant in the Kingdom of Tonga, using a coaching approach to co-construct the primary phase curriculum and support the growth and development of teachers and Ministry of Education personnel. He has a master's in learning and teaching from University of Oxford and is a member of the Oxford Education Deanery and an accredited EMCC coach.

The Awe-struck Coach!

"Curiosity and wonder! As a coach, I've been using these two words interchangeably."

This was my honest admission during a discussion with Jazz Rasool, a fellow EMCC accredited coach. Jazz prompted me to reflect further and put my thoughts on paper. The following extract is from my first attempt to make a distinction:

Curiosity has direction. It moves outward. It reaches, uncovers, explores. There's agency in it – a kind of intentional reaching toward what is not yet known. And we hear this in the language. "I'm curious to know…" "I'm curious to hear…" "I'm curious to learn…" Notice the grammar. Curiosity is always followed by a 'to' – there is a direction of travel; curiosity announces its own intention. It has a destination, even if it doesn't yet know the route. Curiosity is effortful – in essence it is an act of reaching. Wonder is different.

Wonder is received. And again, the grammar tells us something. "I'm wondering if…" "I'm wondering about…" There is no 'to'. No destination declared. 'If' holds open possibility without pursuing it. 'About' circles something rather than moving toward it. Where curiosity reaches towards a solution, wonder holds a question – not to resolve it, but to stay with it. Wondering is present tense and open-ended. It doesn't arrive anywhere.

Posting my ideas on LinkedIn certainly provoked thinking, but a fellow coach asked: "*what is it that makes wonder possible in the first place?*" What creates the conditions for that quality of receptive, open, unhurried presence? Where does it come from?

I think the answer is *awe*. And I think awe deserves attention in coaching practice.

As a linguist, here is what I notice about the grammar of awe: Curiosity moves forward – *I am curious to know*. Wonder opens us – *I am wondering if*, *I am wondering about*. But notice what happens when we use an expression natural to us in common

speech: *'I am in awe of you.'* The grammar points entirely toward the other person. The self steps aside: awe focuses on the coachee.

For a coach, I believe this focus of attention is significant. Awe is the threshold state. It is the moment you register that you are in the presence of someone whose complexity exceeds your existing frameworks. The weight of the story they are carrying. The particular courage it took for them to be here. The significance of this moment in their life. When that registers genuinely, you are *stopped* in your tracks.

The Old Norse root of *to awe* is *agi*: fright, terror. Rudolf Otto, in *The Idea of the Holy*, called it the *mysterium tremendum* – a trembling before something uncanny and overpowering. That is strong language for a coaching context. But I find myself making sense of it in my own practice. If I'm truthful, I would acknowledge a sense of fear in the initial coaching encounter. Not fear of the coachee, but the inner fear of my own uncertainty. What will the coachee bring today? Will I have the right questions? Will I be enough for what this moment needs? To sit with a coachee in genuine openness is to face the discomfort of not-knowing. The poet Keats named this capacity *negative capability* – the ability to remain in uncertainty and doubt without reaching after fact and reason. In coaching, I think negative capability begins with awe. It is awe that stops the reaching before it becomes a reflex.

In coaching to be stopped by awe, *awe-struck*, may be viewed as the honest acknowledgement that you do not know how the coaching encounter will go, but importantly, the not-knowing is not a deficit, it is an expression of honesty, respect and humility. For me, I see an alignment with a coach's beginner's mindset. A beginner's mind is not simply openness as a technique. It is the genuine experience of being stopped, uncertain – facing the person in front of you without the pretence that your frameworks will offer the way forward. I am

increasingly convinced that a sense of awe connects closely with a coaching way of being.

Looping back to the initial provocation: *"what is it that makes wonder possible in the first place?"* I believe that when a coach allows awe to stop them, then wonder becomes possible. The coach who has been genuinely stopped is now genuinely open – not yet reaching, not yet receiving, but present enough for receiving to begin. Wonder arrives in the wake of awe. It holds the space that awe has stilled.

And from wonder, when it is ready, curiosity emerges. Not deployed. Not selected from a mental inventory. But alive – a genuine reaching toward what the coachee has just made available.

So I offer the sequence, as I now perceive it: *Awe stops you. Wonder opens you. Curiosity moves you forward.*

Awe, wonder and curiosity. Which of the three are you least practised in?

For most of us trained as coaches, I suspect it is awe. Curiosity we have been taught to cultivate. Wonder, once named, feels recognisable. But awe, the willingness to be stopped, to allow the self to step aside and point entirely toward the person in front of you – that asks something of us that no framework quite prepares us for.

And yet I am increasingly convinced it is where everything else begins.

You can contact Jasen at: jasen@gel-network.com

Find Jasen on LinkedIn.