

GEORGIA O'KEEFFE: THE HIDDEN ART OF THE COACHING CONVERSATION

January 4, 2017 / 0 Comments / in Articles, News, Review / by Coaching at Work

True to her coaching philosophy that learning can be gained in all contexts, including in art galleries, leadership coach Rachel Ellison's visit to the late artist Georgia O'Keeffe's exhibition in London sparked insights for herself and others

By Rachel Ellison MBE

What surrounds you in your office? A framed photograph, a decorative calendar, an ethnic wall hanging, a painting? You probably know why you chose it and what it represents on the journey that is your life, your career, your way of coaching.

What we see or what we sense, affects us, as coaches, as clients, as people going about our business.

Georgia O'Keeffe (1887-1986), an American artist born to Irish and Dutch-Hungarian parents, was raised on a dairy farm in Wisconsin, near the border with Canada. O'Keeffe painted skyscrapers, parched landscapes and extreme close-ups of flowers; she depicted native American dolls, Spanish colonial dwellings and animal bones found in the New Mexico deserts. But there are no people.

For me, O'Keeffe's palate achieves both subtlety and depth. She paints many shades of black, multiple shades of brown. There are pinks, ochres and greys. There are pastels, thin as tissue paper. And there are strong, deep lines of navy, rust and orange, like her arc of sound in *Red and Orange Streak* (1919), which O'Keeffe said represents "the haunting sound of cattle lowing for their calves". It also represents her missing the comfort of her childhood: "a very healthy part of me".

Some of her work looks quite 1970s, until you realise it was painted in the 1920s. How outrageously minimalist, modern and liberated these works must have looked back then.

O’Keeffe communicates a stubborn independence of mind, a confidence and conviction. A capacity to evaluate for herself: “I decided to strip away what I was taught.”

How many coaches are prepared or even able, to strip away what they have been taught, and work with what they have left? Likewise, how many clients? How do we support each other to go back to basics?

O’Keeffe studied reality obsessively: a vase of lilies or the swirl of her husband’s winter coat. She painted it, abstracted from it and then painted again, from memory. What solutions come when we are able to break free of our reality?

Is her repetition about painting a better picture, dissatisfaction, a meditative escape or an unhealthy neurosis? Or does she offer an example of resilience [not giving up] and mastery [keep practising even if you can do it, can’t do it, are becoming frustrated or are bored]?

What place does repetition have in coaching, resilience, mastery?

O’Keeffe’s husband, photographer, Alfred Stieglitz, photographed her in portrait and in nude. Because he photographed her, we may ‘see’ more of O’Keeffe than we might otherwise have done. Like many artists, she and her husband lived amidst a circle of creative friends. But I found myself feeling disturbed by a sense of intrusion of Stieglitz’s career on this exhibition marking a century of feminist O’Keeffe’s work as a pioneering woman in the arts.

O’Keeffe certainly resented her husband’s insistence that her paintings were psychoanalytically informed. Freudian. Sexual.

“You look at my flower and hang all your own associations with flowers on my flower and write about my flower as if I think and see what you think and see of the flower. And I don’t,” accused O’Keeffe.

Was this a rejection of the man, the meaning, or her even own sexuality? (Stieglitz had insisted the couple had no children.) Ready to push away any imposed Freudian references, I found it difficult, however, to ignore the suggestive elements in some of O’Keeffe’s compositions. In *Black Hills with Cedar* (1941) for example, O’Keeffe paints a shrub in bloom depicted, between two heaving hillocks. Just a landscape, or the body of a woman?

When as a coach, do we attach ourselves to an interpretation of what the client is saying – imposing our ideas about their issue and perhaps refusing to accept theirs?

O’Keeffe’s work evidences a clean, technical, almost architectural style of painting.

Coaching tools and techniques also offer overt structure. But even the most organic and elegant of coaching conversations is likely to carry a degree of conscious design beneath the enquiry: a philosophy, a model, a deliberate choice of question.

Like a coach who consciously attends to silence, O’Keeffe consciously paints the spaces around an object. You can feel the heat of New Mexico beating down, even though the artist hasn’t drawn the sun. She’s painting the unseen.

This reminded me of the imperative of coaches to explore the gaps, the spaces and the silences. To go beyond the foreground and look at what’s not being said. The paintings were smaller than the vast canvasses that I had anticipated – I had made assumptions.

O’Keeffe sometimes paints the frame, as an extension of her picture. In other pieces, the works are double-framed with borders of hessian. I like this as a metaphor for staying conscious of boundaries. When have your boundaries become blurred? When might you have put a double frame around a client’s issue – or your own?

Almost 100 years after the Great Depression, America searches again for a coherent sense of its national identity. Arguably, O’Keeffe, who’d never been outside the US, forged her own American identity through her art, her feminism, her self-confidence.

When working with clients, coaches are helping leaders develop and align their personal and professional identities. And a grounded, self-confidence to go with it.

Reflections and themes

- *Explore assumptions*
- *Painting sound*
- *See the spaces*
- *Imposition and intrusion*
- *Fear and dependency*
- *Symbiosis, dependence or mutual encouragement*
- *Dominance, aggression and fear of inferiority and failure*
- *Rejecting the idea or the person*
- *Ownership*
- *Search for identity*
- *Frames and double frames*

- *Veiled or displaced rejection*

Georgia O’Keeffe (1887-1986)

O’Keeffe was described at the exhibition as “one of the foundational figures of American modernism and a pioneering woman in the arts”. The exhibition, which came 100 years after her debut in New York City, explored her work, her feminism, the personal and professional interconnectedness of O’Keeffe with her husband and, more widely, the search for American identity after the 1929 economic crash leading to the Great Depression.

Find out more

R Ellison, ‘The art of coaching’, in *Coaching at Work*, vol 4, issue 3, 2009. Go to: <http://bit.ly/2g0QBoH> [<http://bit.ly/2g0QBoH>]

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