

Coach Questions Answered

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I've been training creativity coaches for the past fifteen years and working as a creativity coach for the past thirty years. During the trainings, coaches-in-training respond to the lessons I provide and often begin coaching their first clients, usually via email coaching, which has the great benefit of allowing coaches to carefully think through how they want to respond to what their clients present.

Naturally coaches-in-training have many questions as they begin their journey to work independently as creativity coaches. I invite coaches-in-training to post their questions to the training group via email and I endeavor to answer them. From these many hundreds of questions-and-answers I've selected seventy-five characteristic ones to include here, questions-and-answers that I think you'll find valuable and informative. Please enjoy!

1. Interrupting your client's "usual story"

Coach-in-training question:

I've been feeling like my clients sometimes go on and on with their stories and I just want to interrupt them and say, "Enough already!" But is that sort of interrupting permitted? Is it a good idea or a bad idea?

My response:

Indeed, it is absolutely permitted, though of course you wouldn't say that <smile>. What clients sometimes need is a certain kind of "interruption." Is it supportive to let our client stubbornly "tell her story" over and over again? Probably not so much. We do not want to get seduced, deflected, or bogged down by the story-telling abilities of our clients, who sometimes have honed and perfected their stories and now repeat them without any real investment in what they are saying. For us to invest in a "canned" story is to misplace our energy.

For instance, a client may have a long story about what happened to make her first CD unsuccessful. Rather than "do anything" with that story, our approach might be to ask "What did you learn from that experience?" or "What do you want to do differently this time?" or "Do you feel healed enough to try again?" We are interested in the person telling the story, not in the story per se, and our interest in the person sometimes means that we ask a single simple, eloquent, rhetorically strong question rather than rush around trying to respond to every aspect of a client's story.

Don't imagine that you are "being rude" if you carefully interrupt your client and bring him back to the here-and-now. Yes, you must learn how to do that carefully; but once you've mastered that tactic, you can help

clients make a great deal of progress, since suddenly they will actually be focusing on “now” and not on the past



2. She talks about everything else!

CIT:

How do you navigate a client who will talk about everything going on in their lives—except their creative work? Although I'm not presently seeing clients, this scenario arose during mentoring a new writer a while ago. Whenever I asked a question about the work, her response would quickly gravitate towards the latest drama with her husband/boss/parking warden. I was unsure how to deal with this, and I have a feeling it might arise in future coaching.

EM:

Naturally this happens <smile> as clients have come to us because they are having problems getting their creative work done, are resistant, anxious and so on, and would often rather talk about anything than their creative work and their commitments around their creative work.

The complete secret here is to relax and not try to engage in heavy lifting. A client is too heavy to lift! Additionally, we can try to get very simple agreements in place, like “How many days would you like to write this week?” If a client hems and haws and won't give you a straight answer, you can say, “Yes, wow, that's a lot going on in your life,

but I don't think I heard the number—so, how many days would you like to write this week?"

If you were doing life coaching you might be more mandated to go “all over the place” with your client, but since this is creativity coaching you can fall back on your simpler mandate and keep returning to the central question: “What would you like to get done this week, what might get in the way of getting that work done, and what do you want to do about those things that might get in the way?” Our client may try to distract us so as not to have to create; it is our job to maintain our focus.



3. Such a long list of things!

CIT:

I have a client who sent me a long list of things she has to fit into her life: exercise, domestic chores, one day a week of work, yoga, meditating, time with her husband, social time, volunteering, etc. At the end of the list she wrote, “creating (sometimes).” Question: What she says she wants is to create “better work habits.” I am looking for a gentle way to ask her if she is willing to put her art first. Is that the right approach?

EM:

There are many approaches to take here but let me describe one important one. That is to ask her the simple question, “Since that’s probably too much to squeeze into a week, what do you want to reduce or give up in order to get to your creative work?”

That will shock and disturb a client, who will never have really thought through what she might have to give up in order to create. And it will get her thinking. Whatever she replies, negative or positive, you can bet that you got her thinking. By being real with a client in this way you are also saying between the lines, “Look, let’s get real, do you want to do your creating or not?”

As I say, there are many ways to chat with a client about “putting creativity first” but one good way is to point out that only so much can get done in life—and in any given week—and that your client will have to make choices and prioritize. She won’t find this easy—but most clients need to hear this “hard” news.



4. I have no time!

CIT:

All my clients are telling me that they have no time to do the things that they say that they want to do. I’m sure this is pretty much true – so, how can I help if they just don’t have the time?

EM:

There is never a perfect time to create, as we are always in the middle of things, including our own formed personality <smile>; and a lack of time is never the complete issue, whether it’s a client saying she has no time to write or us saying we have no time to build our coaching practice.

One of the ways that our clients avoid doing their work is to fall back on the “time” issue: that there just isn’t enough time in the day to do everything they want to do. There is always a measure of truth in such a concern, often a really large measure, but I never let “I don’t have the time” stand as the issue. There is virtually no one who doesn’t watch an hour of television a day; and in a way that’s the end of the discussion.

If you don’t want to trade that hour of television for an hour of creating, not wanting to trade is the issue. Maybe you’re too tired and can only watch television. Then being too tired is the issue. Maybe you’ve spent your brain cells on your day job. Then spending your brain cells is the issue. Maybe your husband makes a face as you head for the studio. Then your relationship with your husband is the issue.

There is simply no one who doesn’t have an hour a day available for creating, so we can’t let time stand as the issue. We have to (gently, carefully, but energetically) get out from behind that convenient excuse and look at what is really going on! This is a face of support: not letting “time” stand as the issue, even if a client presents that as “the” issue.

The time issue is naturally most pressing for someone with a day job (which includes raising kids). When a client has a day job (or more than one day job), I first acknowledge that reality and then say, “That probably means that you will have to create first thing each morning, before you go off to work, as trying to create when you get home is so darned difficult, given that most of our brain cells are gone by that point.”

I try to sell clients on creating first thing each day, as that is the single most important change they can make in the movement from not creating to creating. If a client responds (as most will), “I’m not a

morning person” or “That would mean I would have to get up at four in the morning” my response is, “What is your art worth?”

Even for clients who are willing to make this change, the change usually takes weeks and even months to institute, so I like to keep monitoring a client’s progress in that regard by checking in: “How has trying to get up early to write worked for you this week?” This is one face of support!



5. They won't do my exercises!

CIT:

I have two clients right now and I'm finding with both of them that I respond to what they bring up with exercises they can try (for example, I've suggested mantras, thought-substitution, getting a snow-globe, hushing and holding, writing first thing in the morning, etc.). They both write back, say “Great idea!” and then they don't do it (or at least tell me they couldn't get to it when I check in with them). Then I scramble to try something else. I feel like I'm not getting anywhere with either of them so I guess my question is how do you coach people who won't do the work!?

EM:

I have two suggestions. First, I would simply say to the client, “Sorry you couldn't get to it this week. Want to try again next week?” That is, if a client “agrees” that an exercise sounds worthwhile but doesn't get to it, you can play on the idea that she has claimed that it is worthwhile and just ask her to try again.

A second approach is to ask a question of the following sort, said in your own way: “I wonder if exercises of the sort I’m presenting are really useful to you or would it be better if we focused in some other area or some other way?” That is, you might want to get “client buy in” on whether or not she really thinks that exercises matter to her—and if they really don’t, then you need to know what might matter more.

So, to repeat, two approaches would be to simply invite her to try again or to wonder aloud whether she finds the exercises valuable and, if she doesn’t, to ask what she thinks she might like to try instead.



6. What about negative thinking?

CIT:

What do you think is the most effective/practical way for us to help ourselves and our clients overcome/change the negative thoughts/wrong thinking that plays on the automatic tape in our minds?

EM:

One simple thing to say to a client who has presented a true-but-negative thought (like, “Wow, there are so many writers out there!”) is, “Did thinking that serve you?” Not “Was that true?” but “Did that serve you?” If you can get clients to begin to understand that one of their most important jobs is to “only think thoughts that serve them,” you will have helped a lot!

Second, you can present some simple “tactic for changing thoughts” like the following one: “You know, there’s a pretty simple three-step process for dealing with negative thoughts: 1. Hear what you’re saying. 2. Dispute those utterances that need disputing. 3. Substitute more affirmative talk. Okay? Want to try that?”

These two ideas together can help a lot!



7. My client just fired me

CIT:

I thought that I was using a sound coaching technique explaining to my client that I don't know how to help her unless she opens up and shares with me, answers some of the questions in her achievement journal and sets at least one goal. Next thing I know, she tells me she is going to quit coaching as I can't help her. She offered to continue to pay for the next two months to honor her contract, but I told her no, that if she is not using my service, I don't want her to pay. Should I have done that? Or should I have allowed her to send two checks a month as she suggested? And what could I have done to save this client?

EM:

Some percentage of our clients will be demanding, difficult, resistant, and so on; some will be anxious and defensive; some will only “think they want to create” and not really want to do the hard work of creating; and so on. This means that some percentage of our clients will

simply want to walk away, perhaps after complaining about us first <smile>.

So, the first point is: do not take a client complaining or needing to walk away personally. Yes, maybe we could have done “more” or “something different”—but OUR CLIENT MUST DO THE WORK. Clients really can’t be “saved”—motivated, perhaps, nudged in the right direction, perhaps, and so on, but not “saved” <smile>.

As to payment, I personally think that it is a good idea not to take “more money” in those circumstances. That’s a personal decision and I know many therapists and coaches who “demand” that their clients “honor their commitment” even though a client has left or wants to leave. But I don’t personally like that approach and don’t do it myself.



8. When clients don't respond

CIT:

I've been doing email coaching with my clients and most of them have fallen silent. What's going on??

EM:

One of the ways that the shadows in our clients' lives play themselves out is by not responding to us at all.

Remember that a client who could use help and who wants help may nevertheless be habituated to not asking for help and not being able to

accept help. That is why you should take client silence not to mean that you have done anything wrong or that the client is not motivated but that any number of things may be going on, including the possibility that the client simply can't ask for what he wants.

For this reason, be persistent with clients who don't reply to your email or who reply in a terse and perfunctory way. You might say, for instance: "I'm here to help and I'd love to have you tell me what help you need. Will you do that?" You don't have to try to interpret a client's silence or responses by saying something like "I wonder if you find it hard to ask for help?", as a question of that sort can feel off-putting. The better course is simply to say, "I am here to help. What help could you use?"

Don't let silence stop you. Just gently say hello and invite your client to "come on back." Do remember that this "opportunity" for coaching will strike many of your clients as scary. Finally, they have to confront their own defenses, failures, tricks, disappointments, and so on.

Especially for this reason, that it may scare your clients to begin, do not take a client's initial silence or ongoing lack of responsiveness to mean that he is not interested or that you are doing something wrong. It is much more likely that he IS interested and that you are doing NOTHING wrong but that he is petrified about encountering his creativity issues.

Keep being gentle and insistent, even if you are getting complete silence, and keep checking in with "I am here and eager to be of any help that I can. Let me know how I can help." Coaches in previous trainings have sometimes not heard from clients for ten or twelve weeks!—and then the client will check in with one chagrined excuse or another, an excuse that can be translated as "I'm sorry, I was just too afraid."

The basic response to not hearing from clients is to re-contact them and keep re-contacting them until they cry, “No more!” You want to give them a chance to work with their own doubts and fears and “come around” to agreeing to coaching, so each follow-up email should be gentle, inviting, and reassuring.

Even if they say no, you want to read between the lines and see what kind of no it is, whether it is one that is very close to yes and might change to a yes with one more carefully-worded email. Remember, this is something they really, really want to do—it’s just that they also have many reasons for not beginning.



9. Anxiety, anxiety

CIT:

This is a self-coaching and a client coaching question. What suggestions, questions, exercises, etc. do you have that can help someone discern between the physical or "gut" reaction that comes a) as a genuine and self-protective response to something they need to stay away from (doing/saying/heeding in some way), or b) from fear that surrounds something challenging, but that really should be done/said/heeded in some way in order to grow personally or professionally? The physical reaction is the same but might have different origins or triggers. So how does one tell which is the authentic source?

EM:

Great question! There is no perfect answer here; what I tend to do is the following. I remind folks that our nervous system is not built to do a great job distinguishing between excitement and anxiety—adrenalin gets poured into our system in both cases—and so it is wise not to always suppose that we are anxious or afraid when we have certain feelings: we might actually be excited! This message helps clients begin to “re-think” their own feelings and reactions and reframe some of them more positively.

Second, I suggest to all clients that creating will make them anxious or afraid some percentage of the time and so it is on their shoulders to acquire at least one anxiety management tool that actually works for them—to not just know about it or have read about it but to actually practice it and own it (I’ve done a whole book on this: *Mastering Creative Anxiety*). So, to repeat, there are no easy answers here but there are nevertheless quite real and important suggestions that we can make.



10. What about taking notes?

CIT:

This is kind of a silly question but I’m going to ask it anyway. I am wondering if you might have some general advice about the practicalities of keeping notes on clients. I am very new to coaching, and I am finding that when I am talking with my clients in person, my attention is completely absorbed by the conversation and trying to keep

it focused and helpful. I am not remembering everything that was said during the session and feel like I should be making notes for myself. This would be easier if I were coaching by phone or email, but I am coaching face-to-face. Do you have any practical advice about making notes in a way that is not intrusive to the process?

EM:

Personally, I am not a note-taker, either during or after client sessions, and I have never been, even when I was a therapy intern 30 years ago. But of course, that is just a personal choice!

Because of the way I work nowadays, which includes email work, I always have a running account of what we've been working on—I think that's one of the great virtues of including email work as part of your "coaching package," because you end up with a lot of information at your fingertips, should you want or need to refer to that information. If I didn't have all of that email correspondence then I might think differently about taking notes—but as it is, I have no particular need for notes.

If a coach did want to take notes, I would probably suggest not taking them during a session, since that both breaks your own concentration and makes a client wonder "Why did she write THAT down?" Rather, I would take maybe a minute or two or three right after the session to make some quick notes. If I felt the need to take notes, I would probably do it that way. But, as I say, I personally don't feel that need; which isn't to say that any given coach might not think differently about this and decide to keep brief or detailed notes.



11. What about coaching relatives?

CIT:

My question is, would you or do you coach people who are related to you?

EM:

Well, there are really two questions here: what do I do and what do I think you should do <smile>.

Personally, I indeed coach people close to me. For example, I have helped our younger daughter through the process of writing a nonfiction book, getting the book published, and effectively promoting it. But I am very practiced and very careful <smile>. So, although I do coach relatives, I would probably advise most new coaches not to coach relatives: family relations are hard enough already! (That's the subject of one of my books, *Overcoming Your Difficult Family*.)

On the other hand, if someone close to you is struggling and you believe you could be of help, it would be something of a shame not to be of help. So, I think I must sit on the fence on this one. I can see a real downside and a real upside to coaching a relative, which probably means that the particular context and situation would determine whether it's a good idea or not. You might help; you might create resentments; you might do both at once! This is a very tricky territory with no easy answers.



12. Just being interested

CIT:

I am very interested in my clients but I also worry that I'm not doing enough. Somehow, I think that just being interested is a value in and of itself; what do you think about that?

EM:

I agree! An important part of our job is just being interested. You don't have to worry how to respond if you are really interested: you will find yourself naturally saying things like, "Gee, that sounds hard, tell me more about that," "Wow, that was brave of you, how did that work out?", "Boy, that was a hard choice you made—what went into your thinking on that?", and so on. This may not sound like coaching but it is exactly coaching.

Just think about how many (or how few) people take a genuine interest in what you do. For many of our clients that number will be very small or even zero. So, your very interest is super-refreshing and important and will generate some new hope in your client: the hope that maybe others will also take an interest in her down the road. It may prove a stretch for a given coach to actually be interested <smile>, especially on days when we are tired, over-busy, upset that we are not getting to our creative work, and so on, but hopefully you can muster interest even on those days—since taking an interest is one of the foundational elements of support.



13. Small steps and bigger steps

CIT:

I know that it's a good idea to suggest to clients that they take small steps, so as not to overwhelm themselves. But what about the bigger steps that they want to tackle? How can those be approached?

EM:

It is not unusual for a client to have so much going on in her life that she is literally mentally, physically, and emotionally unable to proceed with her creative work. If we focus on small steps and small successes, that can help. So can helping a client break down the big steps confronting her into steps that are smaller and more manageable.

A big step might be to get her studio space in order. A small step is to enter the studio and visit there for a few minutes. A second small step might be to make one decision about where something in the studio can be stored or about what one thing in the studio can be thrown out. Both our clients and we might wish that things could proceed more rapidly than this: but small steps successfully accomplished really do build momentum. A good question that it never hurts to ask a client: "What small steps would you like to try to get your painting [or whatever] going again?"



14. Less is more

CIT:

Sometimes I feel that I am not saying very much in my email responses to clients. Should I be worried that a response of mine is pretty brief? Is that necessarily a problem?

EM:

Not at all! It is good for us to remember not to bombard our clients with too many ideas and too many words. Remember: less really is more in coaching.

Let me repeat one of my main messages, that as a rule less is more in email coaching. In general, a short, careful, smart, on-point email from a coach, even if it is only three lines long, will prove of much more value to a client than a two-page email filled with heart-felt compassion and brilliant ideas.

That isn't to say that we must always or even often limit ourselves to responding briefly. Especially for the sake of learning, you may well want to try your hand at writing out your thoughts at length, really as much to clarify them for yourself as to articulate them for your client. But, as practice if nothing else, every so often make it a point to send a really brief response to a client, to test out how that feels and to learn how clients respond to succinctness.

Rather than sending a client a list of issues she might want to work on, which usually has a daunting feel and makes us want to stubbornly shout, "I won't work on any of them!", it's probably a better idea to choose an issue that you think is worth working on and suggest it to your client as the focus of your work.

This can sound like, “You brought up a lot of things that you want to work on. I think that x might be a good starting point. Can we focus on that?” The phrase “can we focus on that?” is different from “what do you think about focusing on that?” The former is a form of leading, the latter forces your client to think through her many issues and decide if she likes your choice. Either is fine: sometimes you may want to lead and sometimes you may want to follow. But in either event, do try your hand at being brief, even if it feels odd to be doing “so little.”



15. How would you like to be coached?

CIT:

I wonder if it's appropriate at the beginning of coaching a client to ask them how they would like to be coached. Drill Sergeant? Cheerleader? Kindly Aunt? Or all three? I've posted this question to my two trial clients -- haven't received an answer yet.

EM:

Well, if they do happen to like one sort of way of being coached and they tell you that, then you just got limited <smile>. So, I would probably not personally ask such a question. What I do say all the time is that I am offering “support and accountability,” which kind of announces that you can expect some cheerleading and also some drill sergeant energy <smile>.

In general, I think it is better to operate the way that you intend to operate rather than asking a client how he or she would like you to be. First, I suspect that clients wouldn't really know how to answer; and second, if they do answer and announce their "preferred you," well, then you just got a bit obligated to fit into that round hole, even if you are a square peg!



16. Wrapping up sessions

CIT:

My question is, how do you wrap up conversations? That's what I have the hardest time with. I want to stay within the time frame we have allowed for, and then conversations seem to keep lingering. I want to know how to finish the conversation professionally without it feeling abrupt.

EM:

That's a great question. I typically use one or another of the following three approaches:

"Jane, let me interrupt us for a second and summarize, since we're getting near the end of our time together. First, you intend to do x. Second, you intend to do y. Third, you intend to do z. Do I have that right?"

“Jane, hold on a second, we’re getting very near the end of our time together. Is there anything we haven’t touched on that we should touch on for a minute?”

“Jane, unfortunately we have to be stopping. But I’m pretty sure that you know what you’re going to be doing for the next two weeks until we talk again, yes? You have a clear picture of that?”

That is, I do two things at the end of a session: remind the client of what she’s committed to during the session and tell her that we must stop. In a way, it is as straightforward as that <smile>!



17. Maintaining Perfect Boundaries

CIT:

How do you handle a situation where either you or the client might develop some kind of affection or interest in the other? I am sure that happens a lot - a client might feel "heard" and "understood" - or maybe the coach finds someone similar to herself/himself. One person I coached started telling me very personal details that made me feel uncomfortable and I believe there was some kind of attempt to test his sex appeal I have since declined to coach that person again and made some lame excuses, but wonder how to handle this more professionally. What are your thoughts on this?

EM:

This is of course a serious and important question. Since I only work via email, skype and phone nowadays, that makes matters simpler; but I do lead workshops and in other ways meet with the occasional individual, so the issue is real for me as well as for all of you.

The answer is to keep perfect boundaries. Not decent boundaries; not good boundaries; perfect boundaries. This is an area where it's important to be diligent and strict. It is my job to keep perfect boundaries, energetically, in the language I use, and in every other way.

If a coach is lonely, if a coach is unattached, if a coach is looking for love, if a coach ... this can be a very dangerous area and it's really important that a coach look elsewhere for human warmth, contact, sex, and love and not to clients. There is no wiggle room here—this is an ironclad principle.



18. Coach as task-master

CIT:

Do you ever find yourself in the role of a 'creativity task-master' and as a result do clients avoid reporting to you because they haven't been writing, painting, practicing their instrument, etc.? And how do you respond to them not responding?

EM:

I would say that I am a bit of a creativity taskmaster; I do it gently but firmly; and clients do indeed often avoid reporting because they haven't gotten the work done. Therefore, I check in with them after a time, which almost always causes them to confess; and I use our monthly chat to find ways to have my client recommit to her dreams and goals, after which she will usually work pretty well.

I expect all this from clients, it doesn't disturb me, and I don't hold it against them. It is hard to, for example, make a feature-length film with a day job and two kids—or whatever the particular circumstances are. So, I am supportive while holding them accountable—and I fully expect that stretches will occur when they don't check in with me because they aren't really working. I can check in, I can be supportive, I can be helpful—but I can't make them do their work. I am easy with that reality.



19. Asking for feedback

CIT:

I'm wondering if, when we are first starting out, it's valuable to ask for feedback from our clients? If so, is there a particular format or way that we should do it? And perhaps the broader question is - how do you suggest that we go about critiquing our work and improving?

EM:

This is an interesting question. On the one hand, asking clients for feedback gives them the opportunity to be more critical than they actually feel and also gives them the opportunity to move responsibility from them to us. A question like “What would you have liked more of?” or “What would you have liked to be different?” gives them the chance to point a finger at us <smile> whereas a question like “What do you wish YOU had done more of?” is, while the real question, one we are not likely to ask, for diplomatic reasons. So, I think we get a skewed answer, skewed in a negative direction, when we ask for feedback.

On the other hand, you may well want to know what your client is thinking and how she experienced your time together. So, one sort of answer to this dilemma may be: craft very careful questions. As a matter of personal style, I would probably not ask for feedback but rather just try to decide for myself what seemed to work and what didn't, remembering that “what worked” is a bit of a funny concept, since our work together may only bear fruit months from now when my client is ready to really work.

As to the broader question, about critiquing our work and improving, I think it's important to have many experiences before “critiquing too much”—your mantra ought to be, “I will naturally improve by working with lots of clients and by being mindful of what goes on as I work with all those clients.” Get lots of experience before you begin to critique yourself too much.



20. Putting your foot down

CIT:

Do you always give a client who is struggling two or three alternatives or is there ever a situation that calls for one clear path and one particular suggestion? Say that a client can't seem to end her novel. Do you ever say in so many words, "Carve out one hour this week between three p.m. and four p.m. and outline your ending, then next week write three paragraphs each day," basically giving them a road map to finishing? Do you ever do that?

EM:

Not exactly that. But, yes, sometimes I absolutely put down my foot <smile> and tell a client that she must do something in particular. Here's an example. A client wrote a novel. She queried agents about it. A BIG London agent was interested in it and wanted my client, who lived a few hours away from London, to meet with her in London on a certain day.

My client (who was probably basically just nervous) emailed me to say that it was a shame that she was so busy on that day and certainly wished that she could meet that agent. I "demanded" that she drop everything and go to London! She did; out of that came a two-book deal worth \$300,000. So, yes, sometimes I say "you must do this" <smile>-- pretty much always with a <smile>!



21. Organization and Classes

CIT:

I have two clients now! One asked me about specific organizational issues with her journal writing. She has tons of journals she has kept through the years and is trying to figure out how to organize the great ideas that come from them. Another client is a young student who is so turned off by a drawing class she is currently taking, and cannot get out of it, that she says it has completely turned her off to her own art making. How would you handle these two issues?

EM:

As to the first client, I would underline what an arduous and frustrating process that can be, how most journal-keepers never do manage to organize those ideas, and how setting up a schedule that she sticks to will prove very important. A related question is: what is she intending to do with the ideas she mines from her journals? Is it for a memoir, a novel, a nonfiction book, or what? If she doesn't know, it is going to be extra difficult to pluck things from those many journals, given that she has no frame for them or container for them. So, helping her decide what she is working on is a significant part of the puzzle.

As to the second client, I would announce that no class, no matter how wretched, ought to turn her off art—many great artists, Van Gogh among them, bolted from art class but didn't then not make art. It is one thing to hate your class and a very, very different matter to stop making art because you hated a given class. I would ask her to tease those two ideas apart: why should a bad class lead to a rejection of art making? She needs to think that through!



22. Fear of success?

CIT:

My client says that she can't generate a list of goals because she "fears success"? Is that a legitimate point, an excuse, or what?

EM:

Yes, an impediment to goal-setting is what is sometimes called "fear of success." We may not want to set goals because then we will have to accept what we have wrought, should we accomplish those goals.

For example, if a client has managed to wrangle four regular columns, then she will have four real deadlines. If she has an active comedy troupe with a schedule of gigs, then she will have a ton of duties that either must get done or else things will fall apart. In situations like these the answer is almost certainly not to "do less," as all of these things are things that she wants in her life. The answer is to surrender to what she has wrought, which means surrendering to the fact that she will be exhausted sometimes, that she will go brain dead and need a few hours of television, that she will get anxious when deadlines loom, and so on.

The most important thing is for a client to affirm that this is the life she wanted. If it isn't, that's another matter. But if it is, then the first order of business is to celebrate the deadlines, as they are proof positive that she has managed the impressive feat of, say, landing four regular columns! We are in the area of demanding, honoring and celebrating personal responsibility: that is, not just demanding and honoring that heroic action but also celebrating it.

As human beings, we would love to skip some portion of this hardness. This might sound like a client saying: “I hate selling my art so I’ll just get an art rep and that will take care of that.” You know that your client is so far off the mark as to make you weep, as there are virtually no art reps of the sort he has in mind, of the few that there are, they have a million artists to choose from, and, in short, that your client will have to learn to sell himself or else not sell. What can you say here?

You can say “Put together a list of art reps, indicate what they like to represent, what they charge, how they operate, and so on. Get that to me by Thursday, if you can.” That is, you can “agree” with your client’s version of reality but make him get much more real. Or, as an alternative, you can say, “I’m convinced that you will have to do your own selling as part of your career and I would like to suggest that we work on that. What do you think?” That is, you can state your opinion and see if you can get some client buy-in. Both approaches are viable and reasonable.

Your client may well “fear success”—that is, she may fear all the hard work and anxious moments that do indeed come with “actually making it.” You can simply say, “But this is meaningful to you, yes?” and lobby for her to make a new meaning investment in her goals. Meaning is not like a lost object (as implied by the phrase “finding meaning”); it is much more like a decision. If a client says to me, “I haven’t found the creative thing I want to do,” my response is, “There’s nothing to find. There’s only a choice to make. Choose something, invest meaning in it, throw your heart and soul into it, and see what happens.”

There is so much rhetoric in our shared mythology about seekers and seeking that most people reflexively believe that seeking is what they should be doing. In fact, what they should be doing is choosing. One way to handle the “fear of success” issue is to invite clients to

“consciously choose and commit to their goals and dreams”—that is, consciously reinvest meaning in their art.



23. Control versus influence

CIT:

My client keeps saying to me that there’s nothing about the marketplace that he can control and I’ve been at a loss as to how to respond. Any suggestions?

EM:

It is good to remind clients that with regard to goal-setting there will be tasks that they are in control of and tasks out of their control but which they can still perhaps influence.

If their goal, for example, is to teach at a well-known workshop center like Esalen, Omega, or Kripalu, it is in their control to contact someone there with a smart inquiry and out of their control to get accepted. If their goal is to write an excellent novel it is in their control to show up every day (or almost every day) and out of their control to be guaranteed an excellent product. If their goal is record an album it is in their control to write the songs, to research studio spaces, and to choose which songs to record and out of their control to make the studio musicians they hire show up on time or to be guaranteed an excellent album.

We must do our part; AND we must learn how to influence the process so that the things that are not in our control nevertheless go more smoothly and have a better chance of a positive outcome. It is not in our control to write a wonderful novel or get ourselves on national television but we can positively influence that process in all sorts of ways. There is a big difference between, quite correctly, not attaching to an outcome that is out of our control versus working very hard to positively influence that same outcome.



24. How many goals?

CIT:

I'm working on having my client set some goals and I wonder, if there some magic number of goals that I should suggest to him? I can't imagine that if he came up with thirty goals we'd be able to work on them all!

EM:

I find that clients can hold about three goals in mind and work on about three goals—but not much more than that. That is, you don't have to restrict yourself to working on one goal, unless your client has one clear goal as her focus; but by the same token it probably won't work very well to put six or eight or some large number of goals on the table.

I tend to summarize those three goals (if it is three) at end of a session by saying something like, "Let me see if I've got this right. You intend to write every day at eight in the morning; you intend to do some research

on self-publishing; and you intend to look into maybe reducing your hours at work. Does that sound pretty accurate?”

You can also ask your client to summarize, which also works well. If she happens to name a ton of goals in her summary, you might let her get to the end and then say something like, “Which of those goals do you think are a top priority?” or “Which of those goals do you want to focus on over the next two weeks?” If she claims to want to do everything, let her try—because she just may be able to <smile>!



25. Planting seeds

CIT:

What if a client finishes up with me and nothing much has happened? Should I consider that a failure?

EM:

Absolutely not. You may have planted some important seeds that will flower later. Coaching is so much about planting seeds that we need to recognize the logical consequences of that truth: that a client’s success may occur a year from now when our work together bears fruit and long after we have lost track of our client.

That is, we may never know that the work we did with a client made an enormous difference in her life, and yet it is entirely likely that it did. How long between seed and flower? I have heard from clients that

something I said to them ten years ago only took hold this year; only this year did they finally write their novel or make their film.

When we are trying to gauge to what extent our clients are being helped by us, and perhaps lamenting the fact that they don't look to be making much progress, we must factor in this truth, that we are planting seeds, and as a consequence feel optimistic!



26. Things that can happen in a moment

CIT:

Do you think that some clients can gain insight quickly and be helped by even really brief interactions?

EM:

Absolutely! I firmly believe that a client can learn everything she needs to know in the space of a few minutes about her current problem and her best path. The problems that creative people face have to do with simple matters like anxiety getting in the way, the marketplace being brutal, the creative process requiring more care and attention than clients are accustomed to paying, negative self-talk playing a crucial negative role, and so on. Clients can come to understand this in a matter of minutes.

Even despair can evaporate in two minutes if a person finally understands that he is in charge of making the meaning in his life and that he must stop waiting for meaning to appear. That understanding

can be gained in minutes or, just as likely, never. So, if we have even a few minutes of a person's time, we may just possibly make an enormous difference in that person's life; and if we happen to have an hour, a tremendous amount can (and sometimes will) transpire.

Sometimes you can completely solve your client's problem by saying something as short and sweet as, "You know, writing a novel may be a little harder than you realized. Maybe if you redouble your efforts that will take care of the problem." The key is willing yourself to go deep right away. If you stay superficial, so will the person you're addressing. If, on the other hand, you connect with your client, use your wisdom and your patience and your empathy, and allow yourself to go deep, your client will come right with you and can have a splendid three- or five- or ten-minute interaction with you.



27. Client in Crisis

CIT:

I've worked with only a few clients so far but one in particular, Sandra, is struggling with many different issues, creativity being only one. She was recently laid off, and has very low self-esteem, and when I asked her where she wanted to start, she said 'I have no idea!' I was able to come up with some very specific questions but I'm having a hard time drawing her out. This is in contrast to the other folks with whom I'm working who are able to answer questions with more ease. Any suggestions?

EM:

Well, if she was just laid off, she is actually probably in crisis (unless she has other financial resources). So, I would calmly inquire as to what is essential for her to get done at this moment in time: is it finding another job, looking at a career change, asking for help from relatives, or what? That is, in such circumstances I would act like a “life coach” and try to figure out what’s going on overall, so that I could figure how the creating fits at this moment, if it even does.

Life is real. Although as creativity coaches we focus on creativity issues, we are also looking at the whole “creative life,” including basic survival issues. So, I suspect I would start there and try to get a picture of what this “moment” looks like to her before pressing her on any creativity issues.



28. Too many ideas!

CIT:

As an artist, I consistently struggle with feeling overwhelmed by having too many ideas at once (while not having strong project management skills). I jump from project to project and end up stalling half-way through. Then more great ideas pop up, perpetuating the cycle. I've tried practical solutions to limit my options and I've tried to create deadlines, but it seems I keep finding myself in the same position with tons of art in my sketchbooks and unfinished projects. Not sure if it's an internal block (i.e. not good enough yet, can't think sequentially) or a gap in skills, or both. How can I coach myself through this one?

EM:

This is a very characteristic problem <smile>. If you were a client, I would ask you to declare what one thing you were working on and then I would see if I could help you stick to it through completion and, if you intended to sell it, through its sales' efforts.

One frame for this in explaining matters to a client is to say something along the lines of “mere interest is not the same as real interest” and “loving a lot of things can mean that we aren't really loving anything.” If a client were “genuinely interested” in a project, why wouldn't she naturally see it to completion? Usually clients are only half-interested in their projects and so find it easy to abandon them. So, I would try to get “what really, seriously, genuinely interests you” on to the table and see where a conversation of that sorts leads and what sort of information it elicits.

Naturally there are other approaches, around “better organizational habits,” more regularity and routine, and so on. But I would probably want to help a client “get” the difference between discipline and devotion: that if the devotion is there, the discipline will follow.



29. I have to drag the information out of them!

CIT:

I have four practice clients I'm working with. This is week five of our work together. What I'm finding is their responses are somewhat short. I pose questions to them, sometimes give a bit of reflection or

information and they respond with very short answers. So, what this is feeling like is that I'm having to "drag" the information out of them. Or sometimes it feels like I've helped a couple of them achieve their original goal so maybe we're done? I'm wondering if this is normal or perhaps I need to be doing something differently to engage them more? I feel like I've done a lot of the talking (typing) so far, so this week I kept it short and simply asked them what they will be committing to this week towards their goals. Any words of wisdom? What will I talk to them about for the next eleven weeks of the training!

EM:

Well, it depends <smile>. Let's say a client has agreed that his tasks are such and such and that he'll keep to such and such a schedule and he manages to do that and all he has to say to us in his emails is, "Still working!" I do not need anything else from that client—that is a success story! I am earning my money despite the fact that he is providing only short, crisp responses.

That is a very different situation from a client whose emails are "Still not working and all is miserable." There I need to work. There I might say, "So sorry to hear that! What do you think we ought to focus on to help things get better?" or something along those lines.

So, it matters what the short emails are about. If they reflect the fact that our client is working, then they are no problem and we have to quiet our own anxiety about feeling like we need to do more or get more from our client. If, on the other hand, they communicate a lack of progress, then we have to get in there and ask questions, make suggestions, and so on. The length of the reply isn't what's significant. What matters is what the message signifies!



30. It will take me months!

CIT:

My client is saying that it's going to take her months to clean up her space before she can even think about beginning to create. Should I buy that or call her on that?

EM:

When a client lets you know that it will take her months to clean up her space (which means that, unless we are talking about a remodel, she won't be cleaning it up much at all) we can expect our client to be defended with respect to much of what she presents.

A good response from a coach is, "I can't quite get a picture of that. Do you mean that you will only work on organizing the space occasionally, or do you mean that you will look at the things in the space and not quite figure out what to do with them, or what? Help me understand what's going on here." Part of the purpose of a question of this sort is to see where your client "will come from" in her response: will she come back with an open response or a defended one?

Since creating is hard, clients get defensive because they are not inclined to acknowledge that it is hardness that is stopping them. We want to "normalize" that hardness by repeatedly letting it slip that we understand that writing a novel, say, may be blissfully easy on some days—but hard on many, many other days. Once clients acknowledge that truth and stop fearing hard work, they grow enormously ... and often quickly.



31. Not completing things

CIT:

Many of my clients have trouble completing things. Is that usual?

EM:

Once a client manages to work regularly, another challenge that begins to loom on the horizon is ... completing things. "Completing" is its own large, important issue. We are resistant to completing work not for one reason but for several: that then we will have to "really" appraise the work and see if it is any good; that then we will have to take off our creator's hat and put on our salesperson's hat and try to market the work; that by completing the work we will face a kind of down time and a meaning crisis as we stand between meaningful acts; that by finishing we are forced to begin anew and provoke the anxiety that comes with starting; and so on.

These are a LOT of reasons and each of them is a powerful blocker. The solution is the straightforward, heroic one, to decide to complete things despite all the emotional reasons for not completing them. Maybe you won't like the finished product, maybe you won't be able to sell it, maybe you'll feel down and bereft: so be it. These are the things that we creators are obliged to deal with. So, when a client has "completing" as a central goal, be alert to the many issues that may arise, including the whole volatile area of "selling." Starting may prove hard; persisting may prove hard; and, yes, completing may prove hard.



32. Not attaching to outcomes

CIT:

I have a client who tries different creative practices but does not seem to stick to any one of them. She admitted to me that she holds the belief that if she is to put any effort into something, the end result should be excellent. It seems to me that her attachment to the end result is keeping her from truly diving into and sticking with a given creative medium and falling in love with the process of creating. Besides letting go of her expectations, what would you recommend that she do?

EM:

Yes, this happens all the time. A client will claim to “love so many things” that she can’t actually work on any one thing. I would “demand” that my client make a choice and pick a single medium, and a single project within that medium, and “stick with it for a while.”

By the end of the session I would want my client to agree that, for example, she is working on a certain book and that she is working on it five days a week from seven a.m. to eight a.m.; and that if the project begins to bore her or trouble her or if the grass seems greener with some other project she will nevertheless stay with this project for the amount of time she committed to—say “the next two weeks.”

This is all straightforward enough but we have to be compassionately firm to get this sort of agreement by the end of a session. To echo your thoughts, I would ask her to “just show up” and “not attach to outcomes” and to “follow the excellent plan we just agreed to.”



33. How do you instill confidence?

CIT:

My client has an extreme lack of confidence. How do you handle that?
How do you instill confidence in your clients?

EM:

The central strategy is to give them things they can actually do which, if they manage to do them, begins to instill that confidence. So, this might sound like, “Do you think you could get to your novel for maybe just 20 minutes each day? Does that seem possible?” For most clients, that will sound “easy” and “doable” and they will agree to that

Then, a week later, you will hear that even so small a commitment proved too hard. So, then you can say, “Okay, shall we try that again? Or cut it back to ten minutes a day? What do you think?” That is, we help them accept that not meeting their own goals is best met by setting new small or even smaller goals. At the same time, we cheerlead by saying things like, “I’m sure you can do this” and “I bet you can do this” and “I’m guessing you’ll really enjoy getting to your book every day once you have this habit in place” and similar upbeat messages.

Small goals and cheerleading! Of course, that is not a complete answer <smile>, but it is one good approach.



34. A lifetime of small steps

CIT:

We want to create and put our creative work out there, but to embrace it when that piece of work is done and to promote it, THAT is the part so many people fail at. They don't try. They may do a couple of promotions and then let it drop. What are some gentle techniques to encourage our clients not to give up and help them understand it's a lifetime of small steps and just continuing to move forward? I find the challenge is not doing the piece of work as much as pushing it ahead when it's done!

EM:

Here are a handful of gentle techniques <smile>:

1. Your life matters and your efforts matter. If you can remember that, you'll have more motivational juice to create and more motivational juice to promote (an existential approach)
2. Sometimes we're very noisy inside and that's what's stopping us from creating or promoting. Here's a technique to get quieter. (a cognitive approach)
3. Sometimes what gets in the way is a bit of anxiety and fear. Here are few anxiety management techniques. Think you might like to learn one? (an anxiety management approach)
4. Maybe you're holding a scarcity model, that if you do this project and then spend time promoting it you can't do all these other projects at the same time. Want to change your point of view to an abundance model and picture getting lots of your creative work done, one piece at

a time and one piece after another, and promoting each one? (a reframing approach)

5. Small efforts count. They really do. (a baby steps approach)

Etc.

There are really a limitless number of things that we can offer and that we can try. There's no need to think that there is "one" right approach or one magic bullet technique: it's better to presume that there is a robust menu of things that can work (and maybe even create such a menu for yourself!).



35. Taking risks ourselves

CIT:

Starting a coaching practice feels exactly as risky as starting on a novel. Any way to make it all feel less risky?

EM:

We must risk in our creative life and in our coaching life. This means that each of us should try projects that scare us, market in ways that scare us, and every day do something that scares us. This is anti-biological, as we are not built to want to scare ourselves, and also completely species-sensible, as we are creatures who understand that to get what we want may mean that we have to do things that scare us.

If you are a major league batter facing a pitcher throwing a hundred miles an hour, the first fraction of a second after the pitcher throws the ball is spent making sure that the ball is not aimed at your head. That is our natural instinct, making sure that we are safe. After that split second, however, you turn to trying to hit the ball. You deal with the fear and then you act powerfully.

Creating is just like that. You deal with the fear that you are wasting your time spending a year or two on your inchoate novel in whatever ways you have learned to deal with that fear and then you write powerfully. If you can deal with fears of that sort in a split second, you will do an awful lot of creating! The same with building your coaching practice. Really learn an anxiety management strategy or two and embrace the idea that the things that are important to us may well feel risky!



36. The coaching session

CIT:

Should I be holding the idea of a coaching session as a time when maybe just a little gets done or when a great deal gets done? Which is the better way to hold it?

EM:

Both! Just getting a little done is a lot. At the same time, the “coaching hour” is a vast amount of time and you can completely change your client’s life in that hour. You may help her solve her problems and, even

more dramatically, you may help her see her creative life in a new way, as something she has to pay more attention to, as something she has to become more aware about, as something she has to become smarter about.

Of course, not everything can get covered in an hour (or a lifetime). But an hour is a very long, generous period of time in which much can happen. I also want to reiterate that there is nothing sacred or magical about an hour. My phone (or Skype) sessions are currently a half hour in length (after an initial hour-long session). Even at the length of half an hour, I will sometimes end a bit early <smile> if we have come to completion on an issue. I might say at the twenty-five-minute mark, “It feels like we’ve gotten a lot done and the next step is for you go out and do the things we’ve discussed. Shall we stop now?”

Of course, I only say this when it feels true—but it sometimes does feel true. Over time, you will learn for yourselves whether to work on the “hour model” or whether some other model turns out to be more congenial for you and how to negotiate each session to its best advantage.



37. What is the magic solution?

CIT:

I have a client who has a few creative blocks she wants to get over in order to get to her writing. I've advised her to commit to a writing routine that's manageable for her, to just get to her desk, and we can work through the issues (with my help) as they arise in the process. She

seems to be asking me for a "magic solution," though, that will solve everything in order for her to then easily write. And she is very resistant to the idea of establishing a regular routine. After my suggesting that for the second time, that the only way to work through things is by doing the writing and managing issues as they arise, she's gone silent. I'm really not sure how to move forward with her.

EM:

Yes, this is typical. It is very hard for some clients—most, really—to face the hardness of the work and the realities of process. So, I might play along with this client (for a while) and say, “I know that you don’t love the idea of routine so maybe we should set some weekly goals and you can feel free to get to the writing whenever you like, without a routine or schedule, and see if that works.”

Of course, that won’t work; but at some point, your client may realize that her way isn’t working. That is, I would “let her do it her way” if she is adamant about that. Now that she has fallen silent, the issue may be how to reconnect and get her speaking again, and so I might say, “I haven’t heard from you in a bit. I think that my suggestions weren’t perhaps squarely on the mark? Maybe can we try some other approach? I do have a few ideas.” If she keeps silent, that’s her business: many, many clients are not ready to really work and that is their business, not our problem.



38. How do finish up with clients?

CIT:

I'm coming to the end of a twelve-week coaching stint with two free clients and I've no idea how to close things. I've asked one client if there's anything else she wants to talk about before we end next week but other than that (and having her fill out a feedback form) I'm not sure at all!

EM:

Ah, this one is easy <smile>. Just say thanks. “Thanks so much for the opportunity to work with you over these past 12 weeks!”

Then, of course, you might say any of the following:

- + Would you like to continue as a paying client?
- + Feel free to come back in the future (as a paying client <smile>).
- + If you feel like it, please let your peeps know about my new creativity coaching practice.

That is, there isn't any last “work” to do or loose ends to tie up or evaluations or feedback to get (unless you want that): you are simply thanking your client, wishing her well, and keeping the door open for her return (which happens all the time). Just keep it easy and light ... nothing more is required <smile>!



39. What about phone sessions?

CIT:

I have a general question regarding phone sessions. What do you do differently, if anything at all?

EM:

I'm guessing you mean different from in-person? The short answer is, absolutely nothing. If I am working with a client, then there are things we are working on, like getting her to write regularly, getting her to send out things into the marketplace, dealing with her ongoing challenges with her health, her parents, her mate, or whatever else is up that gets in the way of her living the creative life she would like to live, so we are chatting about those things, intimately and intensely, whether we are visiting in-person, chatting on the phone, or doing a session via audio or video Skype. In short, we are working—and, to me at least, that looks and feels the same whether we are in-person or on the phone!



40. Unfinished business

CIT:

Often when I get to the end of a session I feel like there is still unfinished business and that we are ending very awkwardly. Any thoughts on what to do about that?

EM:

Coming to a sense of completion in a session is both a good thing and a useful goal. You want to avoid as much as possible ending a session with unfinished business remaining. If, for instance, I am aware that something is not complete and the hour is nearly up (or, in my case, the half-hour), I may go over a few minutes so as to get the unfinished business finished.

If, however, I have sessions back-to-back or for some other reason can't stay on past the hour, I will make the conscious decision to interrupt before the session ends and say, for example, "We left the matter of whether or not you were getting back to your novel hanging and I want us to get clarity on that before our time runs out. Are you intending to resume your novel, are you intending to begin on that short story, or both?"

There is a definite sense in which a session can be a "complete thing," if the coach is aware of that possibility and holding it that way. This takes practice, experience, and the mindful intention to end a session without leaving any unfinished business hanging there.



41. Necessary choosing

CIT:

What about clients who present the issue that they work in many disciplines and/or many genres and aren't currently creating in any of them? What should we make of that?

EM:

With a client in this position I would adamantly focus on the task of choosing. I would want to know what her next project was and have her commit to it even though she might have her doubts about it. I might say something like, “It doesn’t matter whether or not you pick the perfect project, the right project, the project you are most passionate about, or anything along those lines. The thing that matters is that you pick SOME project and then throw yourself into it. So, is it going to be a painting or a song, and WHICH painting or WHICH song?”

If your client responds, “I can’t know until I’m inspired,” I might reply, “That doesn’t seem to be working all that well, does it? Can we try something new? As soon as we’re through with the call, sit down and choose some subject matter for a painting—radishes, sunsets, an abstraction based on your dad’s alcoholism, whatever. Choose it and then begin. All right?” By the way, I have carefully thrown in the dad’s alcoholism because I am pretty sure that a client in this position probably needs some permission to go deep and tackle some real work, which is why that insertion is in there.

Like our clients, we too must choose. We must have the energy and the courage to stop a client and say, “That was important! Let’s focus on that for a few minutes.” For example, it is often the case that a client will say something “in passing” and I will choose to say, “Why don’t you try that?” I will say that when it strikes my ear as exactly the right task for that client, because it sounds like an excellent synthesis of disparate things that the client has been hoping to accomplish. For instance, an actress who also wants to write mentions “in passing” a performance piece she’s been thinking about putting together—and I may “stop

everything” and focus on that. Our client must make choices—and we too must make choices!



42. The best day jobs for clients?

CIT:

Do you feel it's beneficial to suggest to clients that if they must get a day job that they consider a day job that is related to their field of interest, even if it doesn't exactly get them permission to create or perform? For example, what about a musician working in musical instrument sales or service?

EM:

Interesting question. I think it's complicated. For example, a writer whose day job is writing almost always has a lot of trouble getting her own writing done—she's used up her writing neurons at work. So, no, I don't think it's necessarily beneficial to have your day job be connected in any way to the art you love. In fact, I think there is more of a downside than an upside.

I think that some of the most important considerations with respect to a day job are: can some or a lot of it be done from home; can it be three or four days rather than five; does it actually pay the bills or will you need yet another day job to supplement the first one; is it more pleasant/tolerable or more toxic; and does it require that you take it home with you. Yes, there are indeed a lot of questions to ask and

answer with respect to day jobs! And, unfortunately, almost all of our clients will have to deal with this issue.



43. All those materials!

CIT:

My client has a pattern of getting ideas for creative projects and enthusiastically buying materials for them and then feeling resistant and never using the materials. What would you recommend as the best way to support her in taking the steps toward starting a piece and carrying it to conclusion?

EM:

Interesting question. It is VERY usual for a client to find herself in this position. Zillions of folks are buying supplies, taking classes and workshops, readings books and doing everything possible except actually starting, working on, and completing things.

If this is her pattern, I would encourage her to start something and devote herself to completing the thing she's started, even if that means that a lot is riding on it. But I would also try to reduce the power of that "attachment to outcomes" by saying, "Your job is to show up, not to care too much about how it turns out, and then to do your best to complete it, because starting things and then abandoning them is a pattern we'd love to break"—or something along those lines. I would probably push her to "stay with the project," even if that brings up all

sorts of shadows, fears, anxieties and the other things that our clients must learn to handle!



44. What about clients who have failed a lot?

CIT:

I'm wondering what your thoughts are on dealing with clients who have failed at many of their creative endeavors and are really struggling to let go of their negativity towards their own work and potential?

EM:

There is of course no single "right" thing to try with a client in this situation. Rather, there are ALL sorts of things to try. Here are a few:

1. To call the new work "experimental" and to have the goal be that your client will "show up to this new experiment" rather than attach to the outcome of making a successful piece.
2. To work on creating a thought substitute to deal with any negative thoughts that arise—for example, "I intend to feel positive" or "It doesn't serve me to be negative" or "I'm ready for this new work!", etc.
3. To create a ceremony to heal regrets, disappointments, guilt, and negative thoughts and feelings of all sorts—a cleansing ceremony, a burning ceremony (where you write down your regrets on bits of paper and burn them), etc. Ceremonies can be powerful!

4. To have your client create a guided visualization in which she visualizes success.

5. To frame the matter around meaning and say, “Your meaning needs are not going to go away; and since painting is a place of meaning for you, it doesn’t matter what’s happened in the past. You have meaning needs right now and painting will help you meet them.”

And many more! There isn’t any single “right” thing to try—just plenty of reasonable tactics and strategies to offer up!



45. Cancellations and no-shows

CIT:

My question is, how do you deal with cancellations and no-shows to your calls?

EM:

The question was, how do I handle cancellations and no-shows, not how do I think you all should handle them <smile>. I think this is a very personal, tricky area, because it has to do with money and lost money and all sorts of shadow issues around power, authority, and so on. So, the way I do it may or may not be the way any of you might want to do it.

Personally, I do the following. If a client hasn’t called (phone or Skype), then about five minutes after our appointed time I drop the person an

email or Skype message (or both) wondering if something is up and offering to reschedule. That is, I completely make no big deal out of no-shows and cancellations and simply reschedule. If the person doesn't "show up" the second time, I again simply reschedule; and so on. That's my way.

Since folks prepay, if a client never shows up for his session, well, the session is paid for anyway. If he asks for a refund, I will give him a refund, no questions asked. I find it best for me to be easy about all this. For instance, we changed times in California this past weekend and a client in Italy didn't notice that she was now eight hours ahead of me instead of nine. I dropped an email to her at five minutes after the appointed time and she quickly Skyped me, even though she was not expecting to speak for another hour.

These things happen all the time—innocent misunderstandings, forgotten appointments, resistance—and it serves me best not to make a big deal about them. (And, by the way, I have no problem just sitting there, because I'm not waiting, I'm working on something or other, as I'm always working on something or other <smile>.) But, as I say, each of you will need to figure out how you want to be with this "issue."



46. Unengaged but not quitting

CIT:

I have a question regarding a client who seems to be unengaged but doesn't want to quit the coaching. I've offered a LOT of suggestions geared to her particular issues and have suggested plans-of-action

which she doesn't follow (although she is agreeable to the ideas). When I write to check in, she tells me things aren't going great; once more, I offer suggestions; and she writes back short responses along the lines of "That sounds great; I'll try that." A few days later, I check in again, and we repeat. We seem to be stuck in this loop, and I'm not sure what to do.

EM:

Well, it might be good not to provide any more suggestions <smile>. Instead, you might wonder aloud, "What's going on?" This might sound like, "Hi, Jane, sorry to hear you didn't get any writing done. What seems to be going on?" She must do the work figuring this out and if she replies, "I don't know," I might try, "What would you like to try to begin to know?" That is, I would keep returning the work to her, in a gentle way and without attaching to any outcomes (for instance, that she actually gets some writing done).

If she drifts completely away, that's what is, and if she at some point does some work, congrats to both of you! I'm guessing, from the way things sound, that at some point she will say "I just don't think this was the right time for coaching" or "I expected coaching to be different from this" or something along those lines—but until she makes that break, I would provide fewer suggestions and make more inquiries as to what she believes is going on. That's the approach I'd take.



47. How do you stay motivated?

CIT:

How do you remain motivated after all of these years coaching clients, especially clients who are slow to do the work?

EM:

Well, I have lots of successes with clients, which is very pleasant <smile>.

The main answer is that working with clients is only a very small portion of my life. Initial sessions are an hour but subsequent sessions are half an hour and typically take place only monthly, so even if I have quite a few clients that amounts to only a handful of half-hour sessions in a given week. I find that easy.

As to clients who are slow to do the work, that doesn't bother me at all. I am not invested in them in that sense. Some clients who haven't been working much or at all start doing lots of work because of the coaching, and that is gratifying; and some continue to resist tackling their own work, and that doesn't upset or offend me at all. So, I find the coaching work easy; if I were ever to stop coaching, it wouldn't be because coaching had become too difficult or because I was unmotivated—it would just mean that something else seemed more interesting, enticing, or important <smile>.



48. A hundred things in the morning

CIT:

My question concerns my self-coaching, but I imagine it could be something that would be relevant for my creativity coaching clients at some point. I completely agree that it is important, even essential, for us to attend to our creative work first thing in the morning. The problem I'm having is that I have a number of things that I want to do, or feel I need to do, first thing in the morning. Some of these things are: walking my dog (which is non-negotiable!), playing guitar, songwriting, yoga, meditation, exercise, working on creative responses for my coaching clients, working on my blog for my web site, and now I have added writing lesson responses and working through the course book for this course.

How would you recommend that I prioritize all of these activities/interests/passions so that they all get my attention? At this point, I feel that I am sometimes just spinning around, wondering what I should be doing and worrying about what I'm not doing and feeling like I'm not accomplishing nearly as much as I could be. Having said that, I would also like to add that I am incredibly grateful to have so many things in my life that I want to do!!

EM:

That's a very long list of things that are supposed to happen in the morning <smile>.

As long as you are holding all of those as things that you must do first thing each day, it's going to be hard to prioritize them or know which ones are most important. What's "most important"? If nothing is "most

important”—if everything is important but nothing is “most important”—that is its own problem that probably has to be addressed.

If you forthrightly examine this issue and conclude that everything you do is of “equal weight,” then you need a super careful schedule that helps you pencil everything in, where yoga becomes ten minutes and not an hour, where exercise becomes ten minutes and not an hour, etc. (I am just making up those amounts, of course.) If everything is important, then your goal is to figure out how to get everything in by shrinking the amount of time you spend on each one and carefully organizing your day.

If, however, some things are more important than other things, then they must actually be given priority. A “more important” thing might get two hours and a “less important thing” five minutes. Whichever is the answer—that all things are equal or that some things are more important—some nice, serious work needs to be done here in order to “get everything” in its place <smile>.



49. Exercises and activities

CIT:

What if a client asks for specific exercises/activities to unblock his or her creativity? Would you provide those exercises or activities?

EM:

This is an interesting question. My response would depend a lot on my assessment of what's going on. If this is just another way for my client not to work on his novel, I wouldn't buy into it <smile>. I would say something like, "Maybe instead of an unblocking exercise, what about writing for twenty minutes a day on your novel?" People will do almost anything not to get their creative work done <smile> and begging for exercises and activities is one of them!

However, if I assess the situation differently—say it's a novelist who has actually written 20 novels but feels stuck in a certain way on this one—then I might well dream up an exercise (it takes me no time to do that <smile>) and present it to her and see if she would like to try it out. My first impulse is to NOT provide exercises and activities—I want clients to do their real work, not some exercise. But In some cases, I will provide them; it depends on my assessment of the situation.



50. What about potential nasty clients?

CIT:

I'm wondering what you do about potential nasty clients? I had someone email me inquiring about coaching and we wrote back and forth exploring what might be going on with her. I poked at some deeper issues and she retorted with, basically, an insult. I wasn't sure how to respond, but I didn't engage. Instead, I tactfully suggested that if she wanted to go further, she could check out my offerings on my website. Afterwards, I thought maybe I should have tried something

else... but then, would I have wanted to work with her? Curious as to what your thoughts are.

EM:

Yes, this does happen ... but, fortunately, really pretty rarely. But, yes, people can be difficult, to put it politely and mildly. I NEVER engage with them or call them out on anything. It's simply not worth it and nothing productive would come from engaging or retorting.

Instead, I will say something like, "Yes, I certainly see your point. Sorry this coaching isn't for you! All my best, Eric" or something along those lines. I am not out to win, make a point, make my case, or anything of that sort. I absolutely do not need to work with insulting folks AND I also absolutely don't need to tell them what I think about them <smile>.



51. What about creativity in business?

CIT:

I have the opportunity to do some work with a company and I wonder if what they mean by creativity is the same as what our clients mean by creativity?

EM:

Probably not <smile>. "Creativity" as used in the business world tends not to mean what a creative or performing artist means by the word.

Creativity has three textbook definitions—innovation, problem-solving, and manifesting potential—and business tends to look at creativity in the first two senses—how do we innovate and how to we solve problems?—and a creative individual is more asking herself, “How do I manifest my potential?”

I find that when I work with businesses I have to remember their needs and look at issues like “resistance” and “blockage” from a different point of view, more from the point of view of what a manager needs, how teams in the real world of business function, etc. Creativity as it relates to an individual means one sort of thing and translating that phrase to the world of business requires finesse and a good understanding of how businesses work and what businesses need.



52. Should our clients keep coming back to us?

CIT:

Are we aiming for clients that keep coming back for help? Or is it better to focus on supporting clients so that they can self-coach themselves through their difficulties and have them only return when they really need help or when there is something totally new up for them?

EM:

Interesting! There’s no simple or single answer to this. Ultimately, a client must help herself. But by the same token a given client may benefit from a coach’s help for years as she manages one challenge, as new challenges arise, as old challenges return, etc. It is not sign of

“weakness” or “lack of independence” that a client uses a coach for a long time. On the other hand, another client may get what she needs from a single session (or a single class, workshop or retreat) and not need coaching for a while, a long time, or ever.

At the same time, there’s the coach’s need to earn money, which naturally pushes coaches to hope that clients will “stay” with them for at least a little while and perhaps a very long while, a need that translates into creating packages that “hold” clients for a number of months and less savory tactics meant to hold on to clients. The simple answer is that we are there to be of help, whatever that happens to mean in a given case; and the fuller answer is that this is a complicated and contextual matter and different client by client and coach by coach.



53. Generating Ideas?

CIT:

I find myself wondering how often clients request help with generating Ideas, say, for example, generating ideas for a novel?

EM:

It comes up a lot but not exactly in the way you put it. I don’t get “I need help generating ideas.” What I get is, “I really want to write a novel but I have no idea what to write about.” That I get regularly.

That isn’t really a question about generating ideas—it is a much “bigger” issue than that, about self-trust, past failures, self-talk that

doesn't serve, too noisy a mind, and much else—but we can treat such a plea as if it were a request for help around “the generation of ideas.” My response is usually the simple, “Any ideas at all about what novel you'd like to write?”

Your client is likely to say, “Well, yes, I've been thinking about X and about Y but I don't know which to choose and they both seem pretty weak.” And in this way, just like that, we've begun to actually talk about things—about choosing, the necessity and reality of process, and so on. So, to repeat, I rarely get that question in an abstract or straightforward way but it is often lurking there in the shadows and usually stands for something else—not the generation of ideas per se but more about self-doubt and a lack of self-confidence.



54. What if I've already looked at the work?

CIT:

If I'm already aware of my client's background or have seen her artwork, I'm wondering how would you approach that? Should I just try to ignore that fact? I'm already aware of what my first client does, and I imagine this same problem occurring again down the road as well.

EM:

I think it's your choice. I believe it's better to “ignore” the fact that you're aware of your client's work, especially since your client is unlikely to be asking you, “Do you think my abstract paintings should be larger?” or “Do you think the third song on my new album works?” Clients

intuitively know not to ask such questions. But it's really completely up to you to what extent you acknowledge what you know about your client's work; and to what extent you actually discuss your client's work with him or her.

I find that I rarely completely ignore my client's work—I straddle some line between working strictly with process but also sometimes helping a client think through subject matter, content and choice issues. For example, one client was struggling trying to decide whether her current output of sculptures should be thought of as one body of work or two bodies of work. I could have handed her back the question but in her case I did look at the work and did offer my assessment, that there was a legitimate way to conceive of the works as one body of work but that it could also sensibly be thought of as two bodies of work. This gave her no “answer” but it did help her better understand why she was struggling with this issue.

There is no clear, perfect, or hard-and-fast line here to walk—you will simply need to feel your way along <smile>.



55. Do you need history?

CIT:

Do you require a lot of clients' history in order to work with them? Or do you find that unnecessary?

EM:

I do not need to have a client's history or have her reveal anything historical to me in order for us to work together. But I AM curious if she is comfortable revealing her story and her truth. The reason I'm curious is that if she is not comfortable revealing her truth, she may have great trouble creating.

When a person is trying to write memoir, for instance, a central question for her becomes, "Do I actually want to reveal this to the world?" Freud, who claimed not to have much insight into creators or creative blockage, nevertheless argued that creative blockage was the equivalent of "self-censorship." Not all of it is, of course; but some of it surely is; and it is especially in the territory of memoir that issues of self-censorship and a lack of willingness to reveal much to the world and to the self comes up.

So, I might ask a client who is trying to write a memoir but who feels blocked, "Do you really want the world to know what you went through, what your mother was like, what your sister was like, and all of that? Because if you aren't willing to reveal yourself publicly, you can't write this for public consumption. That isn't to say that you can't write it for yourself. But if you are harboring the thought that this will ultimately become a memoir, we need to wrestle with the question of what you are comfortable revealing to the world. So—do you mean this to be a memoir ultimately? And, if so, how comfortable are you being revealing?"



56. A show of confidence

CIT:

I have a client who has a big professional life and seems so confident at work, yet my experience of her when it comes to her creative life is that she seems very unconfident. Does that make any sense?

EM:

It does indeed! Many clients, especially those in business and in the professions, will present with a show of confidence. They have cultivated a “confident persona” and present that in the world. There is a way in which we have to take that with a grain of salt, as the confidence required to be a nurse or a psychologist or a police officer, say, isn’t the same as the confidence required to write a manual, a self-help book, a novel or a memoir.

Many people have spent a lifetime working to look competent at what they do and confident about what they do—many a nurse, police officer, doctor, firefighter, military officer, teacher, etc., looks perfectly confident in his or her chosen role. They also feel the need to extend that look of confidence into all areas of their life, even if they don’t actually feel confident in some of those other areas. So, a client who must look confident as a nurse may at first present that she is confident about writing her nursing manual and that the only problem is that she “has a little more research to do.” Sounds simple enough!

But it turns out that research has nothing to do with it and that the client is not AT ALL confident that she can write her book. Just as we do not take a client’s lack of confidence at face value, nor do we take her show of confidence at face value. We empathize, feel compassion, and say, “You know, writing a manual is a different task from performing

your nursing duties. I wonder if anything about writing this manual is making you anxious? I haven't heard you mention anxiety yet." It's important to check in like this!



57. I just heard something

CIT:

My client told me something about her past that was very troubling to hear and I had no idea how to respond. What do you do when a client reveals something painful and personal?

EM:

Let's say that a client does spontaneously provide you with some "difficult" history. What then? I think that it's generally a good idea not to "enter into a dialogue" about that historical material. Rather, there is a way to reply after you hear such information that acknowledges that you heard it without entering into a dialogue about it. You don't even have to say "That must have been hard" or something similar in order to acknowledge the information. You can simply proceed to take it into account in your next response.

For instance, you might say, "In light of what you just told me, I wonder if you might want to try x this week?" As long as "x" feels like it connects to and incorporates what your client just told you, you can move directly forward while also acknowledging the information. Often, we feel that we have to "do something" with information. In fact, all we need to do is to take it in and be of help, which often we do by inviting

the client to move on while acknowledging how difficult it may prove to move on.

A client brings up a bad marriage; we might say, “How do you think that’s affecting your ability to paint today?” Or we might say, “I’d like you to hold and honor the difficulties you wrote me about in your last email and paint this week with renewed energy and confidence.” In these ways, we honor what our client has told us but we retain our focus on the present and the future, not on the past, and stay focused on creativity issues.



58. We spent the whole session

CIT:

I had a client yesterday who spent almost the whole session telling me a very long story about something that happened to her when she was in college. I think that she needed to tell her story but I felt really frustrated that we didn’t get any work done. Should I have done something differently?

EM:

One of the ways that people react to their personal history is to create stories about it that they repeat endlessly and unthinkingly. Sometimes a client will provide us with history in the form of a story: when I was in college I had this painting class, and the instructor did this, and then I did that, which lead to x, which caused me to drop out of school, after which, and so on.

I tend to be a little worried when clients present their issues in this sort of story form. In my experience, it is often too pat a recitation and too habitual a way of not moving forward. If I suspect that this “habit for story” is present, I might invite my client to do something that begins to break this story-telling habit. For instance, let’s say that her stated goal is to do some “real writing” in the form of a screenplay. I might ask her to provide me with four ideas for different screenplays. This request forces her to let go of focusing on just one story and also forces her to entertain the important question, “Which screenplay is more interesting than which other?”

The attempt to present me with four ideas may prove very difficult for her, because she is so used to spinning out her first idea and not entertaining other ideas. So, she may say, “I only have one idea for a screenplay. Can I tell you it?” To which I might reply, “Of course, but let’s see if we can stick with this task, because there’s some method to my madness. I’d like you to present me with four screenplay ideas—and I’d like you to rank order them, first in terms on which is most interesting to you and second in terms of which you think is most viable commercially. Okay?” If she balks another time or two, I may have to let her present her single idea. But my effort may bear fruit and help her break the habit of too pat story-telling.



59. How much to share?

CIT:

To what extent do you share your own vulnerabilities with your clients? This is distinct from making the coaching about me rather than the client. But I do wonder if it's a good idea.

EM:

I think this is a very personal matter for each coach to decide and I think there is no right or wrong approach or right or wrong answer. Personally, I do not share much, either about my vulnerabilities or about anything else. I find that when I'm working with a client I'm pretty intensely into my client's reality and the place to bring up my stuff doesn't come up very naturally. It feels like it would be more of an intrusion than anything organic. But that is just me. I think that sharing is both appropriate and potentially useful; it's a coach's decision.



60. They're happy to pay the money

CIT:

What do you do when you encounter a client who doesn't really want to do the work required to move forward but who is happy to pay the money and keeps signing up for coaching? Do you just keep taking the money?

EM:

Quite a sizable number of our clients will be in the group you describe of not quite able or willing to do the work but still paying us and still staying with us. I am very patient with them, not from the mercenary place of "the money is nice" but because they may eventually be able to do the work because they've been in contact with me "all this time."

I remain patient, encouraging, unflustered, and non-disappointed. Of course, it matters if a client is making a little progress or zero progress -- zero progress is disheartening. But even with zero progress, I continue to try to be of help and to make a difference. For a given coach, continuing with a client who isn't doing much may prove too frustrating, boring, or "pointless." But for me, I simply keep trying to be of help—and very often I am.



61. What if addiction is an issue?

CIT:

What are the things that you hold in mind when working with people who struggle with addiction? For someone who doesn't want to approach the deeper work, do you see creative engagement being much of a help? Can a coach be of any help?

EM:

Yes, coaches can help. And I think they should be aware of recovery models. If they are aware of how recovery works, they will realize that

recovery comes first before everything else, including creating, because if you don't deal with your addiction (whatever it "really" is: psychological, biological, social, etc.) your life tends to both fall apart and not be your own. So, first, I would make recovery a centerpiece of the work--that is, I would say out loud to a client, "If you are naming addiction as an issue, we are going to hold recovery as a top priority."

Second, I would announce that the way a client frames his creating must take his addiction into account. To take one example, if he enters early recovery he will want to be very modest about his creative goals, because the "racing" energy of creating runs counter to the "contained" energy needed for recovery. Therefore, he will want to be very careful not to send himself off racing on too ambitious a creative project. Coaches can help with all of this.



62. Client management

CIT:

How do you handle client management? In other words, what do you use to maintain records? Is there a software you like? Do you make hard copies of anything? Where and how do you make notes? I would imagine you will occasionally see a client return after several months, or even years, and they'd come back with the expectation that they are remembered. How do you handle all of that?

EM:

Personally, I keep things very simple. I don't use any software, including

scheduling software (and therefore have no personal software recommendations). I just maintain a list of current clients, with an indication of when they paid and when we chatted. I don't maintain any other sorts of notes or records.

I use my email thread with a client to keep track of what we're chatting about. I send out a "three questions" email at the beginning of working with a client; I will generally take a look at my client's responses to that email in the minute or two before a session, along with his or her most recent response (if we've been chatting via email). That's all the refreshing and remembering I personally need.

Naturally, other coaches will operate very differently, making and keeping notes, using software, and so on. This is just my personal way of doing things <smile>.



63. Reminding clients of their dreams

CIT:

I'm beginning to see how easy it is for clients to lose track of their dreams and aspirations. Should a coach try to help clients keep track of their dreams?

EM:

Absolutely. A creativity coach can indeed help her client hold her dream by periodically reminding her of her dream. Say that your client has as her goal and her dream putting together and publishing a poetry

chapbook. It is good if you can keep an awareness of this project even when your client goes off and does something else, like start a blog or begin writing short stories.

A person without a creativity coach will almost surely lose a significant amount of time, maybe months or years, before she returns to her chapbook, because once a large creative project falls off our radar screen it doesn't come back all that easily. All the resistance, doubts, and fears that naturally exist with respect to any creative project make gearing back up feel really hard. But a coach, who is personally experiencing none of that resistance or fear, can simply remind her client, "Can we check in on the poetry chapbook? How has that been going?"

This reminding can be as soft as a whisper, but even as a whisper it serves the purpose of keeping the project on the client's radar screen. She is much more likely to get back to the project than if she didn't have that coach whispering. So, every once in a while, just whisper: "By the way, is it time for us to chat about the poetry chapbook again?"



64. The drag of a lack of success

CIT:

None of my clients are particularly successful as artists. Is that its own kind of problem and something I should somehow be addressing?

EM:

Yes, and yes.

Success brings with it certain dangers, for example the danger that an artist will keep trying to match his previous success and never quite measure up. But a lack of success is at least as troubling. How long can an artist proceed with his art if none of his dreams are coming true and if he is experiencing limited or no success? A point really does come where we need some success (however we define it) or else we can't proceed, no matter how good we are at reframing the matter or motivating ourselves.

It is hard, verging on impossible, to write story after story after story without having any published. It is hard to paint painting after painting after painting, fill up all of your walls and all of the walls of your children and your neighbors, and have more paintings piling up in the studio. It is not strictly impossible to continue without success and the occasional artist, especially one who is not only trained in Eastern practices but has those practices deep in her system, does manage to go on despite a lack of external validation. But most of us are likely to stop.

For this reason, we want our clients to experience external validation—not merely because it is good to experience it, not merely because they want it, but because without it the road grows just too bumpy and painful. We reality-test with clients not so as to “make them do the work” but so that they can succeed and, by succeeding, find the wherewithal to continue on their meaning-making path. So, yes, we keep this in mind; and we try to help our clients pick paths likely to bring them at least some success.



65. My group for creatives

CIT:

I'm looking at doing a supportive group for creatives starting in April. What would be the best size to start with? And is eight weeks a good amount of time to have them commit to?

EM:

It would matter a bit if you mean online or in-person. I find that online groups can be rather larger than in-person groups and still be effective. I would think that a minimum for either would be five or six -- there is too little energy with smaller groups than that and more heavy lifting for the leader, plus if some don't show up that makes for a very small group indeed.

I would say that eight – twelve is pretty ideal for an in-person group and eight – twenty for an online group. Eight weeks is a quite standard amount of time and works well, though some folks feel that six weeks is about all that participants are willing to commit to. I think that eight weeks makes good sense and is a very reasonable number.



66. Help with formatting?

CIT:

I was contacted by someone who isn't into creativity but who wants help with resume formatting, with anxiety, and with her self-image as

she goes back to work after being a stay-at-home parent. I said I would try to help in whatever way I could. I'm curious if you think I should help with that formatting and if you would engage with clients not interested in creative goals?

EM:

First, if you were thinking about actually helping with resume formatting—that is, looking at a resume, going over it, helping with formatting—I would advise that you absolutely do not do that, even if you know how to do that, unless you are paid separately for that.

That is not work to do for free—that is too labor-intensive and time-consuming and not really a service offered by a creativity coach. Be very careful in understanding that you do not read a client's novel, listen to a client's symphony, etc., etc.—all of that TAKES A LOT OF TIME and should not be done for free.

And what if a client's goals aren't "strictly" creativity goals? That's complicated, because a client may, for example, have as a goal getting sober or changing careers and wants those things both in and for themselves but also to put him in a position to get his creating done. In that context, I would indeed work on those "related" goals. But if a client's goals aren't creativity related at all, no, then I wouldn't work on them under the rubric of creativity coaching.

Of course, if you also want to work as a life coach, a resume writer, a copy editor, or in some other manner, in addition to being a creativity coach, that's another matter ... and in all of those instances you ought to be paid separately for that work.

The bottom line: be careful about helping in ways that are really other sorts of jobs; and if you decide to do jobs of that sort, get paid separately.



67. Which sort of silence is it?

CIT:

My clients have set some goals and are working toward them. We have had several email exchanges over the last few weeks, but now they have tapered off, and I am wondering how to keep them engaged with the coaching process. I have thought of providing them with some self-coaching questions. Is that acceptable?

EM:

It's important to determine what the tapering off is about and whether clients are stuck and in need of some help or if they are just chugging along getting their creative work done. Tapering off can mean either thing, and if it's the former then we do indeed need to try something (like offering those self-coaching questions) but if it's the latter, and clients are doing fine, there's nothing we should need from them by way of "more contact."

If it's the latter, we can just check in with a simple, "Curious how things are going. Care to check in a bit?" and see if they are still on track. Tapering off is very usual and can mean either one of two very different things, that our client isn't doing her work and has gone quiet or that she is doing her work and has gone quiet. If it's the latter, that's just

fine! If it's the former, then we do indeed need to make an effort to reengage and "start fresh" and get the conversation going again.



68. Not enjoying the steps of our plan

CIT:

A client just told me that she is happy with her plan for her creative life but she is not enjoying executing the steps of the plan. Is that usual? Or strange?

EM:

Absolutely common. One reason (among many) that planning can make us anxious and can make the very idea of planning a little odious is that, while we may well relish the goal that we have in mind, we may relish almost none of the steps required to achieve that goal! How hard that makes it to plan, when the steps of the plan don't really appeal to us.

For example, a coach may truly want to present a creativity workshop and may also truly not want to make phone calls on the workshop's behalf, send emails out on the workshop's behalf, and so on. It is vital that we remember that a plan may involve things that we do not relish doing. How obvious that is! And yet we have to accept and embrace that reality over and over again.

This is a significant shadow side of planning, that many of the actual steps of our plan may feel boring, meaningless, or odious. So be it. We

must simply “do the work in front of us,” because the ultimate goal is indeed of real value to us!



69. Free clients or paying clients?

CIT:

So far, I’ve only been working with free clients. But I've started putting some pitches out to get paid clients. At this stage of my training, should I stick with free clients or go for paid clients?

EM:

If you want clients primarily for the hours and the experience, recruiting free clients is by far the easier way to go, much easier than finding full-pay clients and quite a bit easier than finding reduced-pay clients, who are pretty much as hard to find as full-pay clients. So, if your need is mainly for experience and for certification hours, I would probably go with free for a bit, maybe trying to get as much experience and as many hours as fast as possible.

If, however, you actually want to make money, then you must engage in real practice-building, promoting, marketing, and the other things that come with running a business, perhaps to the tune of 15 – 20 hours a week and including ideas like finding partners, getting clear on your brand, and so on. To me, it seems like you have a basic decision to

make: free clients for the experience and the hours (which should be relatively simple to do) or making money (which is hard to do).



70. Raising rates and packages

CIT:

I've been working with paying clients but at a reduced rate. Now I'd like to raise my rates. I'd also like to start employing packages that bring in more revenue. Thoughts on that?

EM:

I would raise my rates with new clients first, rather than with existing clients, either by simply raising your hourly rate or by building those higher prices into a package. I personally find it hard to raise the rates of current clients and I virtually never do that, but that's just me. If you want to raise the rates of current clients, you might say either of the following: "By the way, in X month I'll be raising my fees" or "By the way, in X month I'll be changing over to a package price." Personally, I would probably find the latter easier to do than the former.

As to how to offer package options, there's a lot to think about there. How many times a month do you want to see your clients? How much email availability do you want to provide, if any? I would "step back" and try to picture various options and packages and then make a decision. I don't think you need to dream up fancy names for your packages, if you decide to provide more than one; and, personally, I think that providing just one package is the better bet.

You might say something as simple as “I offer a combination of email and phone/Skype coaching, I require an x-month commitment, and the price is X dollars a month.” Something that simple has worked well for me (though I am currently back to a single session model).



71. Inner and outer conflicts

CIT:

I’m beginning to see that many clients are experiencing conflicts of one sort or another, even about really wanting to create anything. Have you noticed this?

EM:

Yes, among the greatest impediments to creating are inner and outer conflicts. By that I mean the following sorts of things: you want to write poetry and your husband says that you should get a job; you want to write a screenplay but are too aware of the odds against you; you want to play jazz but you are a trained classical musician with parents who hate jazz; you want to paint but every time your wife sees what you’re painting she snickers; etc.

There can be conflicts between doing personal work versus doing commercial work, between working in this genre or subject matter versus that genre or subject matter, between your vision of your path and someone else’s vision of your path, between using a chunk of time for creating or for some other worthy, important, or necessary task, and

so on. Mere busyness is one powerful blocker, but when there is a simmering conflict on top of the busyness, our tendency is to “avoid the conflict”—which almost always amounts to avoiding our creative work.

How can you help clients with their conflicts? The first step is to even know that a conflict is there. When you have a stuck client and you’ve tried many things and you are wondering what to try next, you can try asking the following: “You know, we’ve tried a lot of things but we haven’t quite hit the nail on the head yet. I wonder if there is some conflict that is stopping you from creating? Would you mind giving that some thought and see if that rings a bell?” If indeed there turns out to be a simmering conflict implicated in the blockage, sometimes just getting it named and getting it on the table is half the battle!



72. When clients go quiet, continued

CIT:

One of my clients has been particularly non-responsive lately. I’ve sent a few inquiries but have not received a response that indicates that any work has been done in the last six weeks. I think this person is overwhelmed by her life. I’ve acknowledged that in my e-mails but besides my e-mails of encouragement, I am not sure how to go forward. Do I just continue checking in?

EM:

It makes a difference whether we are talking about a free or practice client and a paying client.

With a free or practice client I would be inclined to let the client go at this point by wondering aloud something like, “I wonder if you’re finding that this a good time to engage in creativity coaching? I don’t want the coaching to be an extra burden in your life, so do let me know if you’d like to stop at this time.” Something along those lines ...

With a client who has pre-paid for a monthly package and who has perhaps committed to and paid for a couple of months, the situation is different. There I might say something similar but with the added proviso that the client still has time (and coaching) on account. So, this might sound like, “I wonder if you’re finding this a good time to engage in creativity coaching? I don’t want the coaching to be an extra burden in your life, so do let me know if you’d like to postpone the coaching at this time (you would have a month remaining on account). Maybe you’d like to take some time off and start up again when that seems appropriate to you? Let me know your thoughts on that.” Something along those lines ...

There are many other approaches to take as well, but I did want to mention the “let’s stop” versus the “let’s postpone” or “let’s take a break” approaches.



73. The value of email coaching

CIT:

What are your thoughts on the benefits of adding the written component to coaching that email coaching provides? Does this help a

coach do something different from what he or she can do when talking to a client? My sense is that a combination of the two will work the best for me. Thoughts?

EM:

I agree that the activity of writing out his or her thoughts helps a client a lot. That's why I think that email coaching is valuable. On the other hand, for the coach it can be easier to "just" do sessions and skip the email component, really more for the sake of ease than because that is ideal.

I do think that the "ideal" is a combination of email coaching and phone, Skype or in-person sessions but because we have real lives that can be very, very busy, a coach might want to skip the email part and just do sessions. I think that either choice is reasonable!



74. Not knowing your client's universe

CIT:

So I am about to start working with a client who is a musician. He is asking for support whilst he starts his crowdfunding campaign for his new album. He has done this before and though it was successful the process was incredibly stressful for him and he would love for it to be a different experience this time around.

This is a huge challenge for me as my 'comfort' if you like is in working with artists and writers as these are the worlds I have more

understanding of however I have been honest and transparent about this and we are both willing to take this on as a learning curve and new challenge for both of us :-).

So my question is, do you have any tips, articles, helpful advice to support someone who is going through a self funding (like crowdfunding/kickstarter etc) process? Anything that would point me (and him) in the right direction would be gratefully received :-).

Just to be clear he is one of my new free coaching clients whilst I journey through the advanced training :-).

Thank you and much appreciation,

EM:

This is a good example of a situation where the coach may have no personal knowledge of how to accomplish the task the client has set himself. This happens all the time. There is no reason why coaches should know all of these many things (which also change all the time) nor can they know all these things. I would say to a client who is doing something about which I know little or nothing, "Okay, talk me through what you are going to need to do." The client then researches the task and reports back. Then the coach might say, "Okay, which task comes first?" or "Which of these tasks looks like it's going to be the hardest for you?" In this "simple" way a coach can keep a client focused and motivated without personally knowing anything about the task or having had any experience with the task. We can't become experts on

everything, but we can help our clients become their own experts about the things they need to know.



75. What is the main issue that clients present with?

CIT:

In your many years of experience, have you noticed if there is maybe one main issue that is most often presented?

EM:

This is an interesting question. There are all sorts of issues that could be named and that could then become coaching niches for a given coach: overcoming creative blocks, finishing projects, dealing with the art marketplace, too much criticism, too little recognition, etc. However, what I think that virtually all clients are coming to us with as the real or main presenting issue is a corollary to what in 12-step language is described in the following way: "My life has become unmanageable."

This is really the #1 issue. That isn't to say that from a marketing and promoting standpoint one might not want to identify niches and pitch to those niches. But if I were to try to name why clients are really coming to me, it's because in their own mind they need help with "everything." Naturally, we are obliged to work on one thing at a time,

as we can't work on everything all at once. But "everything" is probably the real #1 issue!



I hope that you've found these questions and answers interesting and useful. If they've sparked your interest in creativity coaching and becoming a coach yourself, please visit the following spot to learn more about my creativity coaching trainings:

<http://ericmaisel.com/trainings/creativity-coaching-trainings/>

