

*This piece by Toni Clarkson illustrates a coaching application of ROG to herself and the organisations she works with. The key theory maps are Self/Other/Situation (SOS), including phenomenology.*

## **Toni Clarkson: ROG – a homecoming**

Before I came to Relational Gestalt, I was a homeless and angry coach. I've been a coach for years and have completed various qualifications etc. and during my time coaching I've developed my own views and philosophies around how coaching should be: I've resisted the GROW contingent, I've been cross at CBT, argumentative with Solution Focussed and suspicious of psychodynamic. I've never seen the need for specious goals and progress reports, or 'coach as expert' approaches. I've found that I've been wholly emergent during coaching and naturally worked on creating awareness; trusting the Other will change as a result of awareness rather than finding 'solutions'. I've believed in equality between coach and coachee and a non-directive approach. And until ROG this often put me at odds with fellow coaches, client sponsors, organisations, tutors, and prevailing 'wisdom'. I was in effect, a homeless coach – belonging nowhere yet looking through the windows of different modalities hoping to see and feel one that seemed like home. I've felt 'other' for a long time! I've spent time being drawn to philosophy, especially existentialism and have been guided by Irvin Yalom and his teachings. At heart, I'm an existentialist / relational / humanist / person-centred being. And my coaching has reflected this. But I had nowhere to place it.

I was half way through my Doctorate in Coaching and Mentoring when I came to the ROG two day introduction session. I was doing a quantitative study on the effectiveness of executive coaching and found myself very reluctant to start my experiment. I came to realise that my research question was 180 degrees away from my philosophical approach and I postponed study.

I attended ROG as a 'punt' – two days of my life to audition something else. I came with no expectations, just curiosity to look through yet another window. And then I had one of the most profound meetings of my life. I heard everything I'd come to believe coming back to me, and so very much more. I found phenomenology, a philosophy that fitted me more perfectly than anything I could have imagined. I found names for what I believed, found new things I immediately felt in my bones. And I fitted it. For the first time, something to belong to and be with – and still be myself. To say it was moving is an understatement. It didn't just attract my head, it attracted my heart and my soul! It's the Relational bit that captures my heart and head.

### **So how has it changed me and my practice?**

How do I find myself now when coaching? Free, fluid, relaxed is the short answer... much more present. I have gained so much depth and assurance and trust in my Self and in the process – and, when I reflect, in the Other. I'm even more confident to work with the moment, what arrives in the between, with what's emergent; I have challenged my own practice time and time again to de-layer old, hitherto unrealised defences and to make my coaching as co-emergent as I can. I am bolder in my willingness to bring my embodied sensing into the dialogue and make meaning with my client and finally I am less inclined to look for patterns in past behaviour and more able to work with what is happening now. I use this for my own life and way of being too; this is too important to me to just use on others.

The Self, Other, Situation, (S.O.S), model has an amazing flexibility; it can be used for contracting, for self-reflection, for group work and in a way puts the clients at the centre of control by allowing a holistic perspective and an equal participation between client and coach/supervisor. With so many modalities – and in truth, coaching 'orthodoxy', the coach is

inevitably leading the client to some destination...looking back or ahead but not around. Phenomenology - the equal sharing, co-inquiry and co-creation of our experience - places the coach and client as equal. Holding and sharing our awareness of Self, Other and the Situation allows a truthful exploration of what is a true and deep alliance. And I just LOVE it! In some ways I wish I'd come to it earlier in my life, but in truth I think that I needed to experience what I have, to learn and be disappointed by other approaches, to become disenchanted and in particular, find my own values and views and ways of coaching in order to be receptive to Relational Gestalt and to both bring to, and get, the most from it. Has it changed me as a person? No. I am still who I always have been; but what it has brought to me personally is a greater ability to bring the inside out. I have always shielded this cautiously until I knew someone really well. I've become more able to look aspects of myself in the eye, and more resilient and resourceful in situations that are tough for me. I hold things less tightly. I still have several growing edges: I want to find flaws in Relational Gestalt – I have questions about how well it can work with those not inclined to self-awareness; questions about the limits of equality and the movement of those boundaries; the realness of bracketing and such like; but I view these questions with eagerness and interest, not as tests of credibility. I am more alive to my own growing edges: I know I need to work on confluence, which is figural for me right now and conjoined with some death anxiety. I need to find comfort with the continuum of diagnosis and bracketing in the moment and I need to work on my introjection and retroreflection when I'm with a client who is not returning a dialogic stance. But these will come; I am 'in flow' with Relational Gestalt. I think I need to stop now. I'm aware of many other thoughts coming into my head, but this is not a piece of several thousand words. I think it's enough.

### ***Toni Clarkson***



*Toni is an independent coach, coach developer and supervisor as well as a corporate escapee; she works closely with New Gestalt Voices to enable more creativity within the gestalt field and within herself. She loves mountains, gardens, chickens, solitude and quiet – the order changes sometimes but those loves never leave her.  
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In dialogue with chickens

