

The Unfolding of Aletheia Coaching

By Steve March

A Brief History of Aletheia

In 2012, I launched *Aletheia*, a school of Integral Unfoldment, as an experiment in developmental curriculum and community. It was a chance to offer what I had learned about self-development beyond what I could teach as an Integral Coach trainer at New Ventures West. In the midst of this experiment, a new coaching methodology unfolded.

A Brief History of Coaching Methods

Many of you are already certified as *Integral Coaches* by New Ventures West. You might be wondering how *Aletheia Coaching* is different or what it might add to your existing practice.

There are several generations of coaching methodology. In the book *A Guide to Third Generation Coaching*, Reinhard Stelter articulates three generations of coaching method. The first generation, borrowing from sports coaching, is about problem-solving, achieving goals, and winning. The second generation is about opening new and positive future possibilities and leveraging existing resources to realize them. Both first and second generations are structural approaches.

Integral Coaching is a structure-centric approach of the second-generation sort. As you know, the Integral Coach's job is to uncover the background structures, like structures of interpretation and narratives, which determine the client's way of being. And then, to design structural interventions, like new possibilities, new narratives, new distinctions, and new practices to help the client embody a new way of being.

The efficacy of such an approach depends largely on the coach's knowledge about structures. New Integral Coaches frequently feel like they need to know more to be effective. And, that is often true. To be effective, Integral Coaches have to amass a deep understanding of various cognitive, emotional, somatic, and relational structures, how they function, and how to intervene skillfully with each. No doubt, this is why studying the Enneagram is so popular among Integral Coaches because it is a storehouse of wisdom about ego structures. And, for Integral Coaches, there is a seemingly endless need to read more books, discover more resources, and learn more body practices to amass such expertise.

Structural approaches can be very powerful. There is no doubt about this. However, if not used with sensitivity, structural approaches also have the potential to be wounding. The evidence for this is unfortunately too plentiful, even among skillful and masterful coaches. From my earliest days as an Integral Coach, this bothered me, and I made it a

personal mission to find a way to address this. After several years of exploring other methods, including various forms of psychotherapy and spiritual direction, I realized that structural approaches have a big blind spot.

Structural approaches are blind to experiential process. An experiential process is always a relational process, including relationships with others and the surrounding environment. It always includes bodily felt senses, emotions, thoughts, and imagery. An experiential process is multi-faceted, complex, and emergent. An experiential process is, therefore, always integral.

Once I noticed this blind spot, I realized that most of the breakdowns new Integral Coaches were experiencing were coming from not knowing how to navigate experiential process within the coaching relationship. Coaches get stuck when clients feel strong emotions, when their defenses get triggered, and when they get stuck in a dilemma. Also, coaches get stuck when their structural interventions don't work. Students in my coaching classes frequently asked questions like:

- What do I do when the client isn't in a breakdown?
- What do I do when the client doesn't believe my naming of their essential positive quality?
- What do I do when a narrative doesn't land, but instead the client feels unseen and hurt?
- What do I do when the narratives/distinctions are confusing to the client?
- What do I do when clients don't do their self-observations, practices, and readings?
- What do I do when the client keeps changing the topic of conversation?
- What do I do when the client keeps telling more stories?
- What do I do when the client insists on being stuck?
- What do I do when the client distrusts me as their coach?
- What do I do when the client gets triggered by me?
- What do I do when the client triggers me?
- What do I do when I'm in a breakdown with a client?
- What do I do when I don't know what to say?

All of these questions are about what is emerging within the complex, relational, experiential process.

Of course, to become skillful, second generation coaches eventually learn that they must work with the client's experiential process. But without a methodological foundation, it can be a struggle to do so effectively. Seeking a foundation for this, second generation coaches often learn process-oriented methods like Eugene Gendlin's *Focusing*. I did this too. Yet, it isn't easy to integrate a process-oriented method into a structurally centered method. Coaches who try often wind up with an eclectic approach where they switch back and forth between, for example, Integral

Coaching and Focusing without being able to integrate the two. This can confuse both the coach and client.

It is hard to add process work to a platform of structure work because this violates the natural relationship in which process creates structure, not the other way around. Here is a great article by Gendlin on this very point (https://www.focusing.org/folio/Vol23No12012/01_Gendlin_FocusingResearch.pdf). However, it is possible to do structure work on a platform of process work. Let's look at approaches that do that.

The Emergence of Third Generation Methods

The blind spot in second generation methods was noticed, especially by coaches with more psychotherapy background and a third generation of coaching method has arisen from this that is process-oriented.

Stelter himself created *Narrative-Collaborative Coaching*, and David Drake created *Narrative Coaching*. Both are third-generation process-oriented methods that work with what arises in real-time within the coaching relationship. No assessing and designing take place away from the coaching conversation, as is done with second generation approaches. Instead, everything the coach does happens within the coaching conversation itself. This illustrates the shift in method from structural design to emergent process.

Leveraging the know-how of complexity science, a third-generation coach sits with the client in the middle of the complexity and messiness of life. In collaboration, they inquire into and work with what arises in the moment, including narrative structures, in such a way that a new and more empowering path forward emerges. In the process, narrative structures are updated and transformed, new perspectives are opened, and new responses are generated.

Efficacy in third generational methods is less about what you know and more about your ability to be present with the client and help them inquire into their experience. Such coaching helps clients learn to do this for themselves rather than relying on the structural knowledge of the coach, as is the case with first and second-generation methods.

The fundamental insight of third generation approach is that development of our structures always emerges from our experiential processes. That is, process creates structure, but structures (alone) don't create process. For more read the Gendlin article linked above.

Aletheia Coaching - The Unfolding of a Fourth Generation Method

Like third generation approaches, *Aletheia Coaching* is relationally-centered, process-oriented, collaborative, and emergent. To this, *Aletheia Coaching* adds “unfolding depth.” This addition is significant enough, in my opinion, to constitute a fourth-generation approach. Therefore, the Aletheia Coach Training is “Coach Training 4.0.”

In his book *Relational Freedom: Emergent Properties of the Interpersonal Field*, psychoanalyst Donnel Stern describes emergence as follows:

“I have observed for many years that all experience is unbidden. It comes to us, we never plan it, and in that sense, it is always a surprise. Most of the time we are unaware of this unbiddenness. It simply escapes notice. But the moments in which I have a felt sense of emergence are different in this respect. At those times I feel the unbiddenness of experience.”

Going further, he says,

“Any sense of emergence, though, mild or gripping, is vital, alive. It is often emotionally powerful, but even when it is not, it is arresting. It carries a sense of mystery, ranging from a feeling of surprise that merely raises the eyebrows, to sudden, intense curiosity, to awe and wonder, and once in a great while, to the numinous or magical.”

The difference between emergence that merely raises an eyebrow and the profound emergence of the numinous is “depth.” Depth arises from the relationship between what is foreground and what remains in the background of awareness. As the saying goes, “The whole is more than the sum of the parts.” The felt sense of “unfolding depth” is the emergence of this “more” from the darkened background into the illuminated foreground. This unfoldment is always a deeper and fuller expression of our innate wholeness, completeness, and Beingness. We experience and know this as Presence.

Presence is the ultimate resource for flourishing in the midst of our complex world. As human beings, we are all more deeply and profoundly resourced than we know. We are more loving than we know. We are more courageous, stronger, more compassionate, kinder, more powerful, and more steadfast. And so much more. The realization of such wholeness and completeness - the depth of our Being - can unfold palpably in our direct experience. When we unfold our depth in this way, we experience a profound shift in our perspective on everything. New and unimagined possibilities unfold.

In *Aletheia Coaching*, the coach’s job is to offer an attuned and psychologically safe relationship that deepens the client’s unfoldment in real-time. Note the contrast to second generation approaches in which the coach offers their structural knowledge. In fourth generation coaching, the coach often sits in the midst of not knowing, probing and

inquiring with the client into what's arising right now. The coach and client experiment together to discover new insights. In this way, depth unfolds through an endless and beautiful dance of work and Grace. It is not the coach's job to plot a developmental trajectory. Instead, both coach and client are apprentices to the way that life is unfolding within their bodies, relationships, and lives. In essence, *Aletheia Coaching* is about harmonizing with the natural deepening unfolding of life.

An Aletheia Coach offers a radically accepting, compassionate, and loving presence to the client. All unfoldment happens in relationship of psychological safety. Without such safety, our defenses are triggered halting deeper unfolding. In *Aletheia Coaching*, we leverage the wisdom of Attachment Theory, to consciously create the coaching relationship as a "secure base." And, as depth unfolds, Presence itself is realized as the ultimate secure base. This deepening sense of security helps to unfold a deeper mutuality and deeper dignity, at the same time.

What most facilitates this sense of safety is feeling seen, accepted, and loved exactly as we are. Paradoxically and effortlessly, in the light of such love, we change, we deepen, and we unfold. Feeling seen, accepted, and loved melts our defenses, touches our hearts, relaxes our body, opens our mind, and deepens our relationships. More aliveness becomes immediately available. And we can follow its flow directly toward our innate wholeness and Beingness. We find ourselves more sensitively enmeshed in our relations and the world around us. With deepening unfoldment, it is easier to sense, feel, and understand what is happening and easier to access our innate creativity and resourcefulness as we respond.

Being a client in an *Aletheia Coaching* session is like practicing "mutual mindfulness" with your coach. You are both present and collaboratively inquiring into what is arising. If any difficulty arises, support is immediately available from your coach for being with it, working with it, and integrating it. New cognitive, emotional, somatic, relational, and spiritual skills are practiced and learned in the session. Leveraging the latest findings on neuroplasticity, clients also receive homework that includes exercises and practices that they can use between sessions to strengthen new neural pathways that form during coaching sessions.

Lastly, in *Aletheia Coaching*, just as in third generation coaching, we work with the client's narrative structures as they get triggered in real time. This helps clients build relationships with their narratives. Clients get to know, appreciate and love their narratives in rich and dynamic way as they are active in the present moment. With this, we have a method that skillfully works with narrative structures on the foundation of experiential process. This approach yields a seamless integration of structural work and process work, something that first and second-generation approaches struggle to do.

A Taste of Aletheia Coach Training

There is so much to share and learn about how *Aletheia Coaching* works, but this is not the place to do so. However, to understand how the Aletheia Coach Training (ACT) is structured, it is helpful to understand *The Four Depths*.

The Four Depths is a model of ontological depth. That is, it describes four levels of depth at which one can be present. Perhaps a simple way to understand this is that a beginner meditator that is present in meditation is, most likely, not as deeply present as someone like the Dalai Lama in meditation.

The Four Depths is a model of depth that applies to the Cosmos (outer world), the Psyche (inner world), and the Soma (the body as the medium for being-in-the-world). As such, it is an integral model.

The Four Depths are, in order from shallowest to deepest:

- **The Depth of Parts** - in which everything is objectified and identified as separate
- **The Depth of Process** - in which everything is a flow of energy and experience
- **The Depth of Presence/Absence** - in which everything is inherently whole and complete
- **The Depth of Nonduality** - in which everything is an expression of Primordial Unity

This model gives us language to speak more precisely about “unfolding depth.” Our innate depth is revealed as we unfold Parts into Process, Process into Presence, and Presence into Nondual Awakening.

The Method of Aletheia Coaching

The Four Depths gives us the four aspects of the Aletheia Coaching method.

Namely,

- **Parts Work** - unfolding our defensive and vulnerable parts
(inspired by *Internal Family Systems* and *Voice Dialogue*)
- **Process Work** - unfolding our bodily felt senses and imaginal felt images
(inspired by *Focusing* and *Embodied Imagination*)
- **Presence Work** - unfolding our innate wholeness and its many qualities and resources
(inspired by *The Diamond Approach*, *Daoism*, and *Yoga*)

- **Nondual Work** - unfolding our ultimate freedom
(inspired primarily by *Tibetan Buddhism* and *Daoism*, and secondarily by *Christian*, *Jewish*, and *Muslim* nondual meditation)

Aletheia Coaching is the first coaching method, to my knowledge, to explicitly include all four styles of unfolding in a completely integrated way.

I didn't invent *Parts Work*, *Process Work*, *Presence Work*, or *Nondual Work*. Some of the pioneers and traditions that inspired me are named above. What I did was to integrate these methods so that the coach and client can effortlessly shift up and down in depth as needed. This integration required adapting each method to the others and creating a unified language and elegant practice. The result is a "full spectrum" method that includes the major insights of all of these approaches in a way that is easier to learn and more powerful to practice than learning each independently and applying them in an eclectic style of coaching.