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Foibles... Life coaching

by Dolly Dhingra

Lifecoaches are a new breed of counsellor, motivator and consultant all rolled into one. Developed in America in the last decade, the idea emerged because everything in life got complicated - from work to relationships, from health to money. Lifecoaches claim they can help you live the life that you want. Now I'm not averse to a bit of self development, and appreciate that life is a journey and that Buddha himself said: "Life is difficult." But that was over two millennia ago. What would he say of it now? "Don't bother."

So I admit to feeling the strain of 21st century living. Fraying at the edges, and if I'm not drowning, then at best I'm only treading water - and that's just in the shallow end.

Given this, I turn to the classified ads of a magazine. This is the desperate people's corner but it is also where the "proactive" folk look for what the world has to offer. Under the section on lifecoaches one quote reads: "Deep within man dwell those slumbering powers, powers that would astonish him, that he never dreamed of possessing, forces that would revolutionise his life if aroused and put into action." I assume it also applies to women and make a call.

Lifecoach Joanne Mallon agrees to meet me for a free half-hour session at a hip wine bar in trendy Islington, London. She needs me to fill in four pages of life probing questions beforehand. What is going on in your life that you would prefer to be different? I mean, where do I start? I write: "I'd like to fulfil my potential doing a job that stretched me, and a bit of romance would be great." Aim high, right? Do I have any personal goals? Whether you believe them to be possible or not? Replacing George Bush, poisoning the boss, burning the office. But I write: "I would like to work in a creative environment that nurtures and develops talent. To be tidier and more organised." What are you tolerating? I resist writing "capitalism and myself," and instead make an honest list involving work, weight, a bad wardrobe and not travelling enough.

Mallon wants to know what changes I want to make over the next month, and then over the next three. We meet and talk through my answers before focusing on careers. She asks me to name 10 values that are important to me in a work environment. So I start getting really poetic and saying things like altruism, creativity, balance and success. We do an exercise whereby she makes me rate each answer against another - leaving scores against each. It turns out that the most important values for me in a workplace are that it be creative and engrossing.

We thrash about ideas of where I'd like to work and where I should be looking for such positions. Then there's a chat about my work environment and the clutter that accumulates through work, both in the office and at home. Mallon explains some fundamental rules of feng shui. Apparently, everything has energy and if I'm surrounded by dead energy then it's no wonder there's little life force around me. I'm told to heed the words of William Morris and only keep things that are either beautiful or useful. We agree on my targets and she recommends I book a treat before tackling any task so that I have an incentive to look forward to. I promise to clear all unwanted items from my desk and at home, and to look for a job in the arts. Half an hour's up and my love-life hasn't had a look in.

Taking the time out to focus on what I really, really want from a job and life is quite simply invigorating and I'm filled with a huge sense of, "why on earth not?". It's a mindset thing. Like changing from a person who sees a glass half-empty to suddenly seeing it half-full.

Lifecoaches are not miracle makers or therapists. They are individuals trained to hone in on ways that help you express your personal needs, and then aid and encourage you to find solutions for them. My future feels like a blank canvas on which I can paint whatever I choose. I leave with a skip in my step taking in lungfuls of the change that's suddenly blowing in the wind.