

Courtney Webster COACHx - Don't Know? Don't Panic!

I. Don't. Know.

Three words strung together that can strike fear and dread into the hearts of so many of us.

It's the "land of not knowing" and it's often painful because we're comparing ourselves to the "land of knowing," where we have the answer. This land of knowing is a place that we exalt, we admire and where most of us want to be.

"Eureka! I've got it all figured out!"

The land of not knowing can be a space of contraction. Often, our clients come to us here. They are in pain, paralysis, fog, overwhelm, or confusion. Often, it's painful because we're comparing it to over there, the promised land of knowing.

They may only have that little last reserve in the tank to get there so they want to be sure they're going in exactly the right direction before getting into action because they've tried it all already but haven't "figured it out."

And they've tried! They've tried the class, the course, the conversations, the books, and they are done, and that's why they're coming to us. The pressure and the stakes are high. "I want to get into action but I just want to be sure it's the right way, the right decision."

As a coach, it can be incredibly seductive and tempting to jump right in and get them there as quickly as possible and bypass the incredibly rich opportunity and power in the land of not knowing. Very often, when in this not knowing clients may have made snap decisions or just kind of drifted, and they're wanting to do something different.

That happened to me. It was my first big life decision. "What's your major? Where do you want go to school?" I decided hotel administration, for practicality (and because I liked staying in hotels). Fast forward 10 years and I'm wildly successful and desperately unhappy. So I decide to take three weeks to answer the question, "What am I gonna do with my life?"

No pressure, three weeks.
No surprise, I did not figure it out.

But I never went back to that job. I drifted and I defaulted into a new career.

It was interesting, and I was successful enough, and I was happy enough, until I wasn't. And there I was again back at square one. But that time, I decided I wanted to do it differently, but I didn't quite know how.

So I could be that client coming to you. This happens all the time. This isn't an idle or relaxed, "What should I do with my life?" The work landscape is a fast moving environment and everyday there are people whose jobs are changing or being eliminated. The stakes are high and real.

(A lot of people are asking and a lot of people are answering the question, "What should I do with my life?" A recent internet search provided 5,870,000,000 results. But whose answers are those? Are they mine? Yours? Your client's? They're coming to us and they want to figure it out and we have a powerful opportunity to make friends with this land of not knowing.)

I invite us, as coaches, to get shoulder to shoulder with our clients and do three things.

1. **ACCEPT.** Client, you are here. X marks the spot. Accept it. Instead of being in the land of not knowing and maybe hiding in a cave until you've somehow figured it out in the dark, what if you're in the "land of the great unknown"? Has a different feel, doesn't it?
2. **EXPLORE PERSPECTIVE.** Help your client change their perspective about where they are. Part of doing that is lifting up to the 10,000-foot view and seeing that **you are not in two different lands.** This is all one beautiful place. Yes, over there in Eureka is where you want to be, but right here is where you are, the land of not knowing. So pitch a tent, get comfortable, and see what's here. Also, understand that you are not going to get there without being here first.
3. **GET CURIOUS.** Client, what is here? What do you want? What is possible? What are your strengths? What are your dreams? What are you excited about? What are your fears? You're here. It's no mistake. So how can we use it?

It's an honor, privilege and responsibility to do this with our clients.

Here's an example I have permission to share. Jack was super successful and was completely miserable and wanted out. He was done. He had written his resignation, was ready to hand it in and was already planning to move cross-country. In our first conversation it became clear to us both that he wasn't running to something. He was running away.

I saw we were in the land of the unknown.

So we took the first three steps...

1. ACCEPTANCE – “Jack, you are here.” Slow it down and take a breath which immediately grounded him into the present.
2. PERSPECTIVE – “Jack, you are in the finding out – THIS is your action to be with right now – and it’s going to be crucial part of the figuring it out.” That gave him permission to BE with this part rather than running away from it.
3. CURIOSITY – He took a hard look at what was really important to him – considered lots of different possibilities and scenarios – and pulled the focus back to explore his whole life.

While we were there being curious we noticed he wasn’t having fun or much of a social life so he started exploring there, too. It turned out he was able to create a position within his company that was much more aligned with his strengths. Today, he’s in a successful and satisfying career he loves that checks the boxes that he consciously decided were important, has a fulfilling relationship and a growing family.

He’s happy and he’s especially happy that he slowed down enough to wade thru the painful parts of the unknown in order to find his truth and get into aligned action.

If you or your clients find yourselves in the land of the unknown – it’s OKAY – in fact it perfect – it’s all part of the cycle. We don’t have to rush to an answer without spending some time in the first three steps. This doesn’t have to be a long and self-indulgent exercise but we don’t want to skip this crucial and illuminating space for discovery.

What happened for me? It was 10 years ago and I had kind of given up on figuring out what I wanted to do for a career. I was tired. I had been busy. Reading the books, doing the exercises, courses, worksheets, all of it, and it was still unclear. So I finally just waved the white flag and said, "I don't know."

It was uncomfortable. This land of not knowing can be especially challenging for people who have been high-achieving, goal-setting individuals. (Doesn’t this describe many of our clients?) To be in a place where they don't even know where to set the goals can be excruciating. It was for me.

Reluctantly, I accepted where I was and found a perspective that perhaps I was never going to figure it out or find my calling - maybe my mission was seeking. This is where I was stepping into the curiosity. I started to investigate and do some design thinking where you don't know the answer, and you're starting from the not knowing, and only from here can you start to explore what is possible. And you iterate, and you prototype, and you experiment, and you have conversations on your way to figuring it out. One of the things that happened for me is having a chance conversation with someone who was a coach.

So now, 10 years later, I have a career that checks all my boxes for happiness and fulfillment. I'm pretty sure it doesn't have an expiration date. But if it does, I know what to do.

Dear coaches, we have a powerful opportunity when our clients come to us and they are in the land of the great unknown. Let's pause. Let's hold their hand and see what's here. Let's explore the potential and possibilities. It's then, when our clients least expect it, they're going to find their Eureka right there where they are.