

# AN INTEGRAL LEADERSHIP COACH'S DREAM

*(excerpted from "Integral Leadership Coaching: A Partner in Sustainability" by Lloyd Raines, published March 2007, Integral Leadership Review.)*

## ABSTRACT

When we're invited to be interviewed as a potential coach for a leader, we may hear some specific developmental focal points like: enhance communication skills, cultivate leadership presence, sustain high performance, delegate more, mentor others, improve work-life balance, or enhance relationships and networks. At some point, the leader will want to know what is the coach's method or philosophy. Each coach responds uniquely, giving his or her approach to serving and partnering with leaders.

## KEY WORDS

Climate Change  
Triple Bottom Line  
Integral Coaching  
Shadow Coaching

## CATEGORIES

Leadership  
Corporate  
Ethics  
Sustainability

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When I daydream about clients I’d love to coach, I imagine being inside the world of CEOs of traditional companies that want to re-design towards a triple bottom line strategy, or coaching government leaders who have identified stewardship and sustainability as key issues in their leadership vision. Yet, there is one client—even more than these—that dominates my imagination: Mother Earth. I wonder what it would be like to coach this most successful of all CEOs in history. This humble servant leader that has organized an incomparably vast network of intelligence, diverse resources, and organic technologies worldwide, into the most efficient, collaborative, “green,” durable, and resilient productive enterprise ever.

What would it be like to coach her? Here’s how I envision it. During the first meeting, I am sitting across from Mother Earth. She is perched in a sturdy winged-back chair, ever so slowly rotating on her axis, yet basically remaining in place. Patiently, she listens as I describe our coaching partnership, our agreements, the way we’ll be focusing on things that matter to her – areas in which she wants to develop and grow. I let her know that I’d like to do a series of interviews with her stakeholders.

She’s a great listener, absorbing everything I say and do. I’m immediately aware of being in the presence of stillness and dynamism. How does she do that, I wonder? I know from readings about her that she spins at almost 1,000 miles per hour (not to mention hurtling at 67,000 miles per hour through space in her revolution of the sun), yet she appears to be still much of the time. I’ve got to watch my assumptions. As I take in her presence, I feel her unconditional acceptance.

I recognize right away that this is an eloquent, no-nonsense client. She doesn’t speak in the conventional way, and will require more subtle capacities in me for a good working relationship to take form. I sense she is poet and artist, creator and destroyer made manifest in her being. She *is* art and science, species and integral systems, flora and fauna, emergence and dissipation. She seems to have it all. I recognize we’ll have to collaborate differently than I have with any other client I’ve ever encountered.

Before long I have that recurrent feeling as a coach: being both the coach and the client. I am learning as much from the client (about myself and the world) as the client could be learning with me. We are mutually exploring, experimenting with what is and what wants to be.

I pose a series of questions to Mother Earth: “What explains how successful you’ve been? What have been some of your most meaningful experiences over time? What has helped shape who you are? What’s going well right now that you appreciate and want to reinforce? What would it be like if it was even better? What could you be doing more of, less of, or differently that would make a difference that mattered? What goals do you want to set so that our conversations can be purposeful and meaningful? How can I best support you in meeting your goals?”

I listen and observe quietly, relaxed and appreciatively. Clearly, she speaks with a different voice than any to which I’m accustomed. She provides detailed pictures of what’s going well and where there are breakdowns—pointing to parts of her being, her somatic self. From what I am observing, I can

see she is “saying” a great deal, yet, honestly, I know I’m missing a lot. It’s as if she is speaking in some ancient tongue that, surprisingly, I grasp. I hear Mother Earth say, “It seems you are a little distant when you sit with me, observing, calling me Mother Earth. I feel as if you are observing but not really seeing; listening but not hearing. Why not occasionally just use my initials ‘ME’ when we are in our coaching conversations?”

Over the first several sessions, I’m gathering information. I go to people who have studied her, taken her measure, so to speak, and spoken for her. Here’s what I’m told. Mother Earth has mastered efficiency, is full life cycle, is constantly seeking value in detritus so that there is no waste – everything is valuable to some other part of her systems. But, there is one species that has had an impact that challenges her capacity to absorb and self-correct: humans.

ME absorbs everything that is – all the creation and destruction of life, beauty and poisons, life and death – from the tectonic plates to micro-organisms. Yet, humans have mined from the earth toxins that took millions of years to naturally sequester. Humans dug out toxic ores and elements, and created oil-based synthetic toxins in amounts that go beyond Earth’s capacity to absorb and cleanse them. Beyond that, her precious topsoil (that takes 1000 years to accumulate one fertile inch) is being washed away at a rate that threatens our capacity to grow enough food to feed ourselves. ME’s topsoil continues to be poisoned through our oil-based fertilizers – making agriculture the most polluting industry in America. “You might ask yourself: What are you doing to ME?” Trying to wake me up—I finally begin to listen more intently, with more awareness to the connections between things, as if what I ask about her is also about me.

Now I’m spinning on *my* axis, and we’ve just really begun to dialogue in earnest. As I observe and feel, she reveals to me that her most advanced species is caught in a negative feedback loop based on continual growth and diminishing resources. Mesmerized as humans

are by an ancient historical belief in dominance and competition, it is killing Mother Earth’s natural capital – astonishingly, the essential capital that humans take for granted—even though we are dependent on nature for everything we need in order to survive.

Between sessions, as her coach, it is *I* who end up being given homework. She asks that I read Jared Diamond’s book, *Collapse* (2002). Then she suggests *Blessed Unrest* (Hawken 2007), and both of Al Gore’s books (1992, 2006) so that I can get a better handle on envisioning how a healthy, sustainable economy coheres with healthy, vibrant ecosystems and the organizations and the societies they support. And there are still other things she suggests for me to read, places to visit, people to talk with. She suggests I visit three different types of her ecosystems.

### ME’S MATURING ECOSYSTEMS: TYPE I, TYPE II, AND TYPE III

Over time, virtually any ecosystem naturally evolves from a random collection of self-interested organisms to a gradual cooperative and finally synergistic self-sustainable system.

A *Type I* ecosystem is a random mix of organisms, plant, and animal species—an area of intense activity around abundant resources. There is only a drive to reproduce, consume, and move on. Picture the farmer’s newly turned field and the wide-open opportunities for weeds to take root. She asks that I take notice of what is working and not working in the *Type I* ecosystem.

*Type II* reflects the beginnings of cooperation and balance between some organisms, throwing down deeper roots that endure the seasonal changes, resulting in more stability over time, some cooperation, and more efficient usage of available resources. Picture the farmer’s field with perennial berry bushes and tree seedlings. Again, ME asks that I notice what’s working well and not working so well? She wants to know

what differences I notice in the balance and integration between the various organisms in *Type I* vs. *Type II* ecosystems.

*Type III* is a fully integrated, self-organized flow of energy exchange between organisms, in a state of relative equilibrium, living in synergy and characterized by zero waste—everything providing service and value to other systems, with totally efficient usage of available resources. For *Type III* examples, ME asks that I picture prairies, coral reefs, old-growth redwood forests. (For more on these three types of ecosystems, see Benyus, 1990). Finally, ME asks me to see what wisdom I can cull from an overview of the three ecosystems. “Learn from them,” she says. “Use this wisdom everywhere – it will guide you and with it you’ll know what to do and how to do it.” I’m not sure what she means, but feel that she is presenting me with a way through many conundrums.

As I ponder the three *Types*, I sense they are roughly equivalent to Gilligan’s three levels of moral development.

- Nature’s *Type I* ecology is akin to moral level one: selfish;
- *Type II* is like moral level two: care for one’s own tribes (or readily compatible species); and
- *Type III* is roughly equivalent to harmony among the global species and tribes.

Nature, then, has its own dynamics of selfishness, cooperation, and enlightened self-interest. If we study nature’s lessons, we may learn from her organic intelligence embedded in her technology and systems. Imagine creating natural processes that efficiently filter water, transform sunlight to energy, grow protein-rich marine life, and scrub the air clean of pollutants—in ways far beyond the best technological capacity of humans. And she contributes this absolutely astounding value to humans for free. Free. For the poor, agrarian, indigenous, and wage-workers in the world, this is a huge gift and stabilizing force.

Everything I learn about ME helps me in some direct or indirect way. Whether literally or metaphorically, each conversation, observation, reflection, and exploration with nature animates new ways of thinking, feeling, and behaving – that are unifying. Fragments of myself are coming together into a coherent story.

What I am learning from this holistic conversation with ME is intimate and sensual. I feel as if I’m connecting with parts of myself that previously have been disconnected, yet in ways I couldn’t put a finger on. I didn’t know what I didn’t know, and the gaps in me had no names. Yet, the stories she is sharing with me are simple and illuminating, revealing how many of her systems work effortlessly to support me and humanity and wildlife if we simply respect her genius and protect instead of destroy her network of systems. In disrespecting her I disrespect myself and others.

Coaches are observing, inquiring assemblers of our clients’ storyboards. And, more often than not, those storyboards happen to resemble big parts of our selves, as well. When our storyboard expands outward to include connections with Nature, we are able to reflect on how to live sustainably and flourish. If coaches and leaders are attentive to the natural order the dynamic matrix of life, then we will understand how to properly steward our environment, design our businesses, empower our government and citizenry, and live in harmony with life.

## Mother Earth’s Integral Story – Does It Matter?

Can an integral approach offer value that is qualitatively different from non-integral? In various ways, I’ve tried to share how I’ve experienced the value of that difference. An integral perspective has deepened and broadened my scope of awareness and curiosity and helped me to develop a larger, more meaningful coaching conversation. That bigger conversation opens my clients (and me) to active participation in the intentional shaping of the

kind of world we want to live and work in.

Unlike earlier decades and centuries, it seems that the tipping points of the late 20th century and early 21st century, especially regarding climate change and pollution, call for leaders to be more aware of the impact of visible and hidden connections that bind humans to humans and humans to nature—not just at the organizational and local levels, but fundamentally at a systems global level. Individual and business actions cascade well beyond their locale.

Leadership coaching, like any other enterprise, is a medium for growth, perhaps even a measure of enlightenment, enhancing one's capacity to enjoy and contribute to a meaningful life. Whether people 'chop wood and carry water' or lead large organizations in the delivery of goods or services, we can choose to cultivate an attitude of openness, observation, and learning about the deeper and broader connections in life. And then people can make choices that align with that awareness. In so many ways, what coaches and leaders do together is explore the visible and hidden structures that make life work.

Purposeful conversations, self-observation exercises, and behavioral practices serve to enhance a leader's capacity for wise stewardship of vital resources. The fruits of the collaborative inquiry between leaders and coaches help leaders engage the best intelligence available for implementing responsible strategies to benefit local and global customers and citizens—and to do so in ways that preserve and restore the health of the global commons. Global communications and a global economy have dissolved boundaries of space and time, making us virtual neighbors and intellectual partners no matter our coordinates on the map. This self-organizing global network is re-designing the very architecture of human living to attune with nature. That attunement may well be human history's greatest breakthrough in healing the human spirit.