

Getting on Track: What a "Life Coach" Can Do For You

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# Pep Talks

*A number of so-called life coaches are helping Mainers get through more than just the winter.*

IT happens to all of us, sooner or later. Another birthday, and there's our unfinished novel languishing in the same dresser drawer, our business plan still adrift in the dream stage, our ideal mate still unfound. Or perhaps it hits us during the midwinter torpor, in the recriminatory heap of unsplit wood we never got to, or the job we intended to quit before spring. These soft regrets aren't critical; we've lived with them for years, after all. We're doing fine, in fact - except for a nagging notion that "the way life should be" is not exactly the way life is.

Maybe it's time for a life coach.

No, not a shrink. If it's psychotherapy you're after, walk your fingers a little farther through the Yellow Pages. "People go to a therapist because they need healing," says Alfred DePew, 52, a certified life coach from Portland. "My life-coaching clients are whole, resourceful, and creative. They're looking for more balance in a life that is already fulfilling to them." What they get, typically, transpires over the phone, lasts thirty minutes, and results in a specific goal, an "action" toward fulfilling the goal, and a clear deadline for completing the action and reporting back to the coach. Skeptics might deride the concept as self-indulgent hand-holding, another baby boomer fad. But life coaching is meticulously focused, non-therapeutic,

*Alfred DePew, of Portland, doesn't wear a whistle around his neck, but he is a coach of sorts. DePew is one of dozens of personal motivators for hire who can help you identify and realize your potential - like your own private Bill Parcells.*

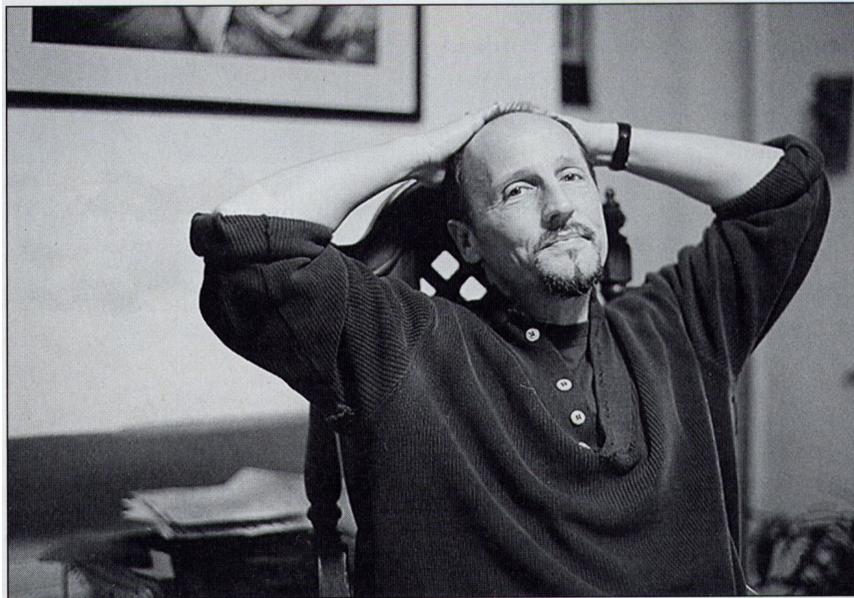
results-oriented - and the first session's free. Talk therapy it ain't.

"Life coaching offers a different kind of support, a way of taking action in the world," DePew adds. "This is not about processing feelings." Despite his rolling-thunder laugh, DePew comes across as a soft-spoken, spritelike fellow with a face that appears lighted from within - the physical opposite of the letter-jacketed hulk on the sidelines that the word *coach* often conjures. "I invite people to start living their values," he says. "I believe this is a radical act. When people start honoring what's really important to them, their lives change. They come to an articulation of their life purpose and their life vision."

If this sounds like too tall an order, consider this: Scarborough periodontist Jill Gaziano's first "action" as DePew's client was to *clean her bedroom*. DePew had asked her to divide the areas of her life into a pie chart - a common coaching technique - and assign each section a number according to her satisfaction with each area. "One of the things I

wanted was an organized environment," she says, "so we started there. It actually changed the way I felt when I woke up in the morning." She eventually embarked on a more metaphorical de-cluttering by breaking up with her boyfriend and rearranging her daily schedule to make room for painting. (Note: Interactions between certified coaches and their clients are confidential; people quoted here have granted permission to use their names.) "This isn't about resolving past issues," Gaziano points out. "Life coaching starts you in the present and directs you toward the future:"

A growing international phenomenon (new Web sites pop up daily, it seems), life coaching appears to be thriving in Maine. The Coaches Alliance of Maine emerged in 1998, co-founded by Nancy Lubin, of Camden, the first life coach in the state to be certified by the International Coaching Federation, the profession's de facto regulatory body. "I think Maine attracts a certain independent-minded kind of person to whom the



idea of becoming a life coach is very appealing," says Lubin. "On the other hand," she laughs, "prospective clients here have that same independence - people who wouldn't readily see themselves as in need of life coaching. But I find that we get more and more clients within Maine as the word gets out. Word of mouth is very powerful here."

According to Lubin - whose credentials from the International Coaching Federation signify that she has received extensive professional training and pledged to adhere to a code of ethics - there are countless avenues for learning the life-coaching craft, many of them exclusively online. A good number of coaches, DePew and Lubin included, prefer the face-to-face route through organizations such as the Coaches Training Institute (CTI), based in San Rafael, California. CTI offers a foundation series of five large, three-day training workshops in several major cities, and then a follow-up six-month certification program that takes the form of small-group training via conference calls. Lubin describes the program as a process for "learning to ask powerful questions."

admits, "I realized he wasn't going to critique my writing. That was my job." His job was to help Sweet zero in on her goal and, more importantly, the obstacles - real or imagined - blocking the way.

"I'd been talking about writing my own book for years," Sweet says with the cheerfulness afforded only by one who has finally acted after years of wishing. "I decided at the beginning, if I'm hiring him, I'm going to make this work. It's an investment." She proceeded incrementally, taking her time with isolating a story idea and embarking on a book proposal. "I wanted this process to be angst-free," she laughs.

"I didn't need another burden; what I needed was to turn a corner in my life." Which she did. After "many months" of coaching, Sweet had a book proposal in hand, and Houghton-Mifflin went for it. *Carmine: A Little More Red* is due out next year. "It's about Little Red Riding Hood," Sweet declares, sounding like a woman who has stared down the wolf and emerged triumphant.

THE coach-client collaboration unfolds in three or four thirty- to forty-minute phone sessions per month; follow-ups and report-backs get

The training itself can be eye-opening, according to DePew, who recalls his first training session with a sense of wonder: "Here I was in this hotel in D.C. with its canned air and bad coffee, in January. I was in galoshes and jeans, and everybody else was in business suits, carrying briefcases. They were all motivational speakers or marketing directors, and I thought, Oh my God, what am I doing here? But at the end of the weekend, I looked around at these same people, and I thought, I don't know *whatthey're* doing here, but *I'm* here because I'm a coach." He pauses. "Coaching evolved from corporate consulting. There is no more foreign world to me than corporate consulting, but I found I could take the same techniques and bring them to artists, designers, and writers." Not to mention physicians, retirees, and apple growers, whom he also counts among his Maine clients.

conveyed via e-mail. This contemporary phenomenon relies heavily on contemporary technology; coaches and clients can live hundreds or even thousands of miles apart and nonetheless carry on a successful collaboration. In a state as large as Maine this is no small bonus. A three-month commitment will cost the client \$1,000, give or take, or about a hundred bucks a session.

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Money well spent, according to Chris Bartlett, a family physician who credits life coaching with transforming his professional life. Installed in a "pushing patients through the system" health-services model at a Portland clinic, the beleaguered doctor had 5,000 patients and counting. Something had to change. "At first, I fig-

"It's no accident that it's called coaching," observes Melissa Sweet, an artist in Rockport. "A coach helps you with your confidence, with your persistence. He holds you accountable for what you say you want, and urges you to keep going even when your energy or motivation flags." After illustrating close to fifty children's books written by other people, Sweet felt it was high time to illustrate her own. The problem: too many ideas and not enough focus. DePew, a writer himself, seemed like an ideal coach. "But after five minutes on the phone," Sweet

ured, hey, I'm smart, I can solve this myself," he recalls. But he found the structure of life coaching far more fruitful than going it alone. One of the "four or five" business plans he explored with DePew focused on the possibility of becoming a salaried employee in a less lockstep environment. He is now contentedly employed by Mercy Hospital in Portland.

DESPITE the circumscribed scope of the coach-client relationship, DePew believes it can change lives (even if it's not for everyone). He should know, for he got started in coaching as a client himself after hearing a presentation by a life coach at a men's retreat. "I'm hiring you," he remembers saying. "I don't even know what this is, but I want to make some changes in my life." A veteran teacher of writing, DePew felt he'd gone stale. Teaching was the thing he had loved most, yet, horrifyingly, he no longer loved it and had begun to blame his students. After three months with his coach he started to reconnect with the teacher he'd once been. It came down to a simple skill he'd lost his knack for: listening. "The next semester, the change was astonishing," he says. "It was the same material, but a different

teacher showed up. Instead of obsessing about what they couldn't do, I started with what they *could* do. There was no more bitterness about bad grammar, no more 'kids these days' mentality, just a happy teacher in a classroom with receptive students."

Only a few years later he found himself helping another educator, sixth-grade language-arts teacher Catherine Anderson. Like many new teachers, Anderson felt consumed by her job, but she was also an aspiring playwright who had little time for her creative life. "I was reluctant about coaching at first," Anderson admits. "It seemed so self-helpy." But she switched sides soon enough, when, at her coach's urging, she came up with some strategies for merging her creative life with her work life. "I went to school with a poem I wrote, and I saw that I could show up as Catherine the playwright or Catherine the poet and still be Catherine the teacher." Her coaching sessions also yielded a ten-minute play selected by the Maine Playwright's Festival to be presented at the Portland Stage Company Studio Theatre - good news that she shared first with her students. "I had let them in on my process and wanted to share the results. I had been working on my play just as they were working on their own creative writing."

According to Nancy Lubin, life-coaching goes on all over Maine, in many different forms. "When we founded the Coaches Alliance of Maine, we thought there were maybe ten to twenty coaches here. I think there are at least 200 now. There are a lot of 'executive coaches' [white-collar consultants who work with business executives on setting career goals] who don't think of themselves as life coaches - but that's exactly what they're doing."

DePew believes he's been unofficially coaching, in one way or another, for far longer than the four years of his practice. "When I teach writing, I'm coaching. I ask students to set goals, I offer structure and support, I help them focus. And I'm a cheerleader. I'm a gadfly, too, in the original sense: it means someone who insists on questioning. Years ago, a woman at a dinner party leaned across the table and asked me, 'Do you ever stop asking questions?' " He delivers that unbridled laugh. "Before I became a life coach, I was just a nuisance."

A nuisance for which a growing number of Mainers are willing to pay. As Melissa Sweet puts it, "Of course I *could* have written my book without a life coach. The point is" I *wouldn't* have."

-Monica Wood