

'You will be moved, challenged and inspired.'

Roger Fielding MCC, ICF



Fierce **Love**

**Essential lessons in coaching with
courage, compassion and connection**

Marie Quigley

With honesty, wisdom, and compassion, Marie Quigley weaves together stories from her coaching work and her wider life in a way that feels both deeply personal and also very relevant for these times. Every lesson invites reflection through her insights and the powerful questions she poses. An extraordinary book that stayed with me long after I finished it.

– **Helena Clayton of *Leading from Love*, leadership and coaching expert**

With the wisdom of a seasoned master, Marie Quigley teaches us to hold the tension between nurture and challenge. Full of profound, real-life stories, this book helps you experience fierce love as the coaching foundation that supports an explorer toward their most bravely loving self. A counter-cultural antidote to an industry often obsessed with goal-setting, action plans and performance.

– **Christi Byerly, MCC, founder, Awaken Coach Institute and author of *Holy Rebellion***

Marie Quigley masterfully illuminates the subtle nuances and ‘ego traps’ – those quiet performances of worth and protective strategies – that can hinder a coach’s impact. With a blend of technical mastery and heart-centered wisdom, she guides the reader to spot these distortions and return to a state of grounded, fierce love.

– **Ahmed El Ibyari, MCC, founder, Intellect Coaching School**

This book is for anyone ready to stop performing and start showing up, whether you are a coach, a teacher, a parent or simply finding your way back to yourself.

– **Dr Winnie Sin Wai Pu, course director, undergraduate Certificate in Coaching, University of Cambridge Professional and Continuing Education**

This book addresses areas that many coaches silently struggle with and which often hold back their coaching. Marie Quigley sets out a series of pragmatic and insightful lessons that provide a powerful, reflective resource for coaches.

– **Ian Day, author, leadership coaching expert, chartered coaching psychologist (BPS)**

Real coaching is not always comfortable. This encouraging and inspiring book is an invitation to step beyond technique and into a more courageous way of being with those we coach. For any coach who wants to bring more truth, humanity and heart to their work.

– Sue Knight, NLP master trainer, coach and author of *NLP at Work*

Marie Quigley invites coaches to look at themselves honestly and courageously, examining whether they are showing up as their whole, authentic selves or hiding behind technique when something far more powerful and deeply human is available to incorporate into their practice. For coaches at every stage.

– Jeanine Bailey, MCC, co-founder, Empower World

Marie Quigley's message is refreshingly simple, clear and grounded in years of experience: true transformation in coaching requires fierce love. Through compelling stories, examples and concepts, she skilfully demonstrates what this looks like in practice. Our profession needed this book to be written.

– Jo Seasby, PCC, professional leadership and executive coach

This book brings us back to what truly creates impact: not technique, not performance, but the depth of our presence, the honesty of our partnership and the courage to stand for what matters. A powerful contribution to the future of coaching and a timely reminder of who we are called to be.

– Mel Leow, MCC, co-founder, Catalyst Coach, and author of *ENGAGE*

Marie Quigley gives us all permission to bring our courageous, compassionate and connecting love into our coaching, even, and perhaps especially, into the corporate world of work. Reading her book feels like a warm hug that offers tenderness and faith in you as a coach in equal measure.

– Clare Norman, MCC, coach supervisor and mentor coach, author of *Reclaiming Love in Coaching*



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Jonathan Passmore

Foreword

Coaching has grown rapidly over the past two decades, evolving from a niche developmental intervention into a widely recognised professional practice used across organisations, institutions and cultures. Alongside this growth has come an increasing interest in models, tools and frameworks designed to support coaches in structuring conversations and demonstrating measurable outcomes. While these contributions have undoubtedly helped professionalise the field, there is a risk that the heart of coaching can become obscured behind technique.

At its core, coaching is fundamentally relational. Creating a robust relationship between coach and client is an important factor for insight, learning and meaningful change. Effective coaches are skilled at building trust, creating psychological safety and expressing empathy. These create the conditions which allow clients to explore questions that matter to them, often in ways they have not previously considered. Yet a coaching relationship that focuses solely on support risks becoming overly comfortable rather than developmental.

Effective coaching requires something more. It requires the coach to add a piece of grit to the client's oyster and through the process of irritating, frustrating, rubbing and challenging, the client can form a pearl.

The pages that follow explore these dynamics in practice. They remind us that while coaching models may guide our work, it is the

relational space we create, the combination of care and courage, which builds and sustains the relationship, but also encourages the client to move towards new insights and the motivation for action.

Prof Jonathan Passmore
Henley Business School,
University of Reading, UK

Introduction

The journey begins

In 1999, I moved from Singapore to Dublin with my husband Michael and our one-year-old daughter, Erin. Despite having Irish heritage, this was a difficult move. I was living in a city where I knew no one and my family members were all a minimum four-hour journey away. Although I was born in England, my family's 'home place', Killowen, is located on the shores of Carlingford Lough, County Down. It's my spiritual home and provides a source of deep connection for my heart and soul. Living in Dublin, however, I felt isolated and lost. It was a lonely time in my life.

One day, as I was trying to understand how to live in this place and manage my internal struggles, my little girl and I entered Bewley's coffee shop on Grafton Street to rest and eat lunch. We sat down at a table beside a much older woman who had a beautiful Donegal accent. We got talking and I shared that I had recently moved here and was finding it difficult to settle. She bent down, reached into her bag, pulled out a little book and handed it to me. She shared how *Anam Cara: Spiritual wisdom from the Celtic world* had become her 'friend' as she had managed some difficult times in her life. She suggested that I might find some comfort in the beautiful words in the book, written by the Irish writer and poet John O'Donohue in 1997.

The concept of *anam cara* translates into English as 'soul friend' or 'soul mate', referring to a deep and meaningful connection, often with a person who acts as a teacher, companion or guide. The term

originated in Irish monasticism, where it was used to describe a monk's spiritual guide. In Gaelic culture, *anam cara* reflects deep trust, love and understanding. Conveying a spiritual bond that transcends physical attraction, it highlights the Gaelic perspective on love as a connection that touches the soul.

I bought the book that very day. The sense of affinity, love and peace I experienced from reading the words readied me to touch deep into my own soul and cradle myself as I faced into the turbulent winds that were blowing at this time of my life. It helped me rediscover my personal journey toward meaning, purpose and a sense of something beyond myself.

The *anam cara* of the Celtic tradition spoke loudly to me. This little book is now well loved, its pages worn and its margins filled with handwritten thoughts and moments of reflection. It is and has remained a powerful reminder of how we can connect to ourselves through loving others. O'Donohue writes: 'Love begins with paying attention to others, with an act of gracious self-forgetting. This is the condition in which we grow.'

Anam cara transcends cultural boundaries and encapsulates the human need for connection. It invites you into a space of courage, compassion and vulnerability. It supports the crucial role of deep presence, companionable silence and genuine concern for another person's wellbeing. It facilitates the development of a loving presence that sees the whole person. It empowers you to manage and let go of your ego, needs and perspectives to be able to give full attention to someone else. *Anam cara* emphasises that love is not solely an emotion but also an action, a way of being that requires a shift in focus from oneself to others.

As I spent time in my loneliness and distress, learning the lessons of this cycle of my life, I began reconnecting with myself, holding the intention to grow, heal and nourish my heart. As I chose to love myself, not just in gentle reflection but in courageous waves of radical compassion and acceptance, I challenged my own thinking and the stories I was telling myself. This was a journey back to *me* and to remembering who I was at my core. As my light

re-entered through my own darkness, it provided a space for my rebirth, coming out the other side with greater wisdom.

My life continued to unfold; I stepped into doing work that supported others to search out meaning and purpose and create their own reconnection. And I understood the need to build open and trusting spaces that give people the opportunity to explore what matters most to them. From my own life, I discovered that places offering quietness and serenity partnered with generous challenge and provocation are the spaces that offer the most growth.

My pathway to professional coaching

My path to becoming a coach commenced long before I trained, became accredited and credentialled. I started my career as an art director in a London advertising firm and soon realised that, although I loved listening, asking powerful questions and helping ideas take shape, selling things we don't need didn't fulfil me. I moved on into the world of teaching, mentoring and training, and I thrived in it. It was in this role that I was introduced to my first coaching model – the GROW model (an acronym for goal, reality, options and will/way forward), created in the 1980s by Sir John Whitmore.

I have had the absolute joy of being able to live and work around the world for more than 30 years with my husband Michael and our three children – first, moving to the former East Germany shortly after the Berlin Wall fell; then on to Singapore, where my work took me all around South-East Asia; then to Dublin with our baby daughter, Erin, followed a few years later by the birth of our son, Conan.

As a mum, I wanted to create work that would allow me to build a business around a growing family. After undergoing successful Bowen treatment for immense pain in my body, I decided to train to become a Bowen practitioner. Bowen therapy (see Ambrose 1970) is a non-invasive, holistic practice using gentle, rolling movements

on specific points of the body to stimulate nerve pathways, fascia and muscles, which encourages the body's innate self-healing process.

I set up a small practice and, although I valued working with Bowen therapy, I began to include mindfulness, movement, somatic and embodiment practices that I'd learned in Asia. Soon, my clients shared feedback that the questions, internal explorations and visualisations were having a more profound impact than the treatment itself. I had a reputation of being 'the woman who listened to the body'.

Six months after I gave birth to Teagan, our third and youngest child, it was time to move countries again. I knew that continuing the work of deepening my own and other people's awareness was a calling for me. This awareness led me to the decision to become a professional qualified coach and set up my own coaching practice.

Back in my early twenties, I began delving into my own depths or, as Nick Petie describes it in his book *Developing Leaders for a Complex World* (2013), my 'vertical development'. This widened my lens on the world and deepened my understanding of who I am within it. Having always been entranced by the search for 'self-actualisation' (Goldstein 1934), I'm still striving to deepen my awareness and fulfil my potential, attempting to learn about and understand my internal landscapes. My inner exploration has emerged in many formats, from professional programmes with certificates attached, through to personal practices aimed at restoring harmony and balance within myself and in my relationships with others.

My life experiences and how I have responded to them have shaped who I am. All my joys, losses, happiness and grief have profoundly impacted me. My relationships have shaped me in ways I am still discovering. My marriage has taught me things about myself I could never have learned alone. The birth of my children opened up more love than I can explain with words.

Living across different continents has been humbling and enlightening. Discovering different spiritualities, faiths and belief

systems has expanded me. All these experiences have influenced how I show up in this beautiful practice called coaching. Every person I have come across has left an indelible mark on me. Each one has helped me understand more about the heart and soul residing in this body that walks the Earth.

Over the course of the past 28 years, I have sat with people through thousands of hours of conversations, breakthroughs, tears, laughter and moments of raw truth. These years have influenced my work and the very core of who I am. With each meeting, I learned that bringing my whole self into the room is not only necessary, it is also transformative.

I recall my inspiring coach trainer, Jim Patterson, who sadly passed away in 2015, saying, 'We don't coach for a problem to be solved; we coach for a life to be lived.' I keep Jim's words in my spirit as I choose to be in partnerships, supporting people to create well-lived and well-loved lives.

Discovering fierce love

My first coaching business was called Golden Leap, my version of *anam cara*. It represented my journey of moving into a fulfilling way of living and working that was courageous (Leap) and loving (Golden). Golden Leap meant that I lived on purpose, honoured my values and challenged my perceptions about how things 'should be'. Golden Leap represented moving away from fear and towards love. Despite this, when I completed my coach training, I initially stayed in the safety of coaching models and processes that moved my clients from here to there. I focused on the 'Leap' part and omitted the 'Golden' part. This was an old pattern of mine. The stories I still carried with me were about how I 'had to' follow the 'rules' and do what I thought I 'should' do to be a 'good coach'.

My clients were getting results from this goal-focused, challenging approach but, when I paid attention to my own sense of who I was, I knew something was missing in my work. This was the part of me crafted by *anam cara* – a part that desired the

development of deep, spiritual bonds where people feel safe to share their innermost selves, to be in environments of unconditional understanding and acceptance. This part of me can simply be described as love. I had convinced myself that this part wouldn't be welcomed in the corporate world, that it was too soft, too personal, and that it was my edge that executives were paying for.

Interestingly, though, at the same time that I was being direct and challenging in my executive coaching, I was doing the opposite in my personal life. I had invited a friend into our family life who took advantage of my generosity. The type of 'kindness' I was showing meant I was putting my own needs aside, being overly accommodating towards them and swallowing my voice to keep the peace. I felt anxious when they were around and what was worse, I was misdirecting the fear and frustration I felt in the friendship towards the people I loved the most.

The turning point came when my daughter told me she didn't like this person and didn't like how I was always upset after seeing them. Her honesty, like a slap in the face, woke me up. I found the courage to stand my ground, speak my mind and say, 'No more.' I discovered that this was a different kind of kindness. It was brave and courageous. It was a love that gave me permission to challenge myself and others; a love that had strong convictions and boundaries; a love that gave a voice to the part of me that said, 'Stop! Enough. I will not accept this.' This type of love is strong, clear and has backbone.

It was a defining moment in my life. I realised that the combination of deep courage and radical love is a powerful force. I also knew that both these forces lived within me. I recognised that when I embraced all of me, both my dark and my light, I could stand fully in my own power. This is what I call 'fierce love' – and when I embody this, I know that I am a much more effective partner, both in my personal and in my professional relationships. It was because of this turning point that I gave myself permission to bring all of myself into my coaching partnerships.

Once I chose to bring this combination of challenge and love,

calling my clients forth in brave and loving ways, my coaching conversations moved from being transactional to ones that were profound and meaningful. We were no longer talking about time management; instead we moved into conversations that connected to values, purpose and meaning. As Viktor Frankl reminds us in *Man's Search for Meaning* (1946), quoting Nietzsche, 'Those who have a "why" to live can bear with almost any "how".'

As I continued to work on myself (the pursuit of mastery is a never-ending journey), face my own fears, dismantle my old stories and patterns and stand in my truth, I was able to invite my clients to do the same. When I brought the mantle of love (Golden) into my work along with my courage (Leap), I developed the ability to be present in ways that I had not been before. This love did not replace my edge; it enhanced it. The results were different. My clients were not just achieving their goals – they were clearer, braver and more alive in how they showed up in their world.

The language of love in coaching

While writing this book, some wonderful colleagues have challenged me on the language I've used about love and coaching. 'It's a shocking idea and may alienate you in the coaching field,' said one valued coach and friend. I know so many brilliant academic coaching researchers who have also flinched at the idea of using the language of love when writing about coaching. I appreciate all these challenges. They have held me to account and supported me to stay anchored in the practical application of my work, in partnerships with my clients. If you too are challenged by the word love in coaching, that's wonderful. This challenge is an opportunity for you to explore and experiment with what I share, and perhaps question your beliefs, biases and ways of looking at the world and the work you do.

By now, I hope you understand that fierce love is not about loving your clients in the romantic sense – that would be unethical. To coach with fierce love does not mean abandoning

professionalism; rather, it means integrating a challenging, heart-centred presence with technical mastery.

Professional coaching competencies align with a fiercely loving approach to coaching, in the following ways:

- ♥ ethical considerations and developing a deeper understanding of yourself and your commitment to continual development
- ♥ managing the different contracting processes and cultivating and developing trusting relationships
- ♥ developing your presence and your active listening
- ♥ evoking awareness by opening insights and deepening learning
- ♥ supporting the client's growth in both who they are being and what they are doing.

All these competencies become more impactful when done with deep care and intention. Fierce love does not replace structure; it enhances it.

From client to explorer

There is much debate over what to call the person who embarks on the coaching journey. I have used the term 'client' thus far because it is commonly used in the coaching world. However, the word feels transactional to me, while 'coachee' feels diminutive and other terminology such as 'thinker' or 'player' doesn't speak to the full terrain of the work the person being coached embarks upon.

For me, 'explorer' gives a more rounded definition of what happens when someone engages in a coaching partnership with a focus on fierce love. It honours the full experience of the coaching journey – one that is inward as well as outward, upward as well as downward. The explorer isn't passively receiving help or being 'fixed' by an expert. They are actively navigating unknown territory within themselves, making discoveries, taking risks and charting new paths through their inner landscape and their external world.

The metaphor of exploration captures something essential about

courage. Throughout history, explorers have ventured into unmapped territories not because the journey was easy or comfortable, but because something called them forward – curiosity, purpose, the need to discover what lay beyond the known. This is what happens in a fiercely loving coaching approach. The explorer engages with this work because something is calling them – a sense that there's more to discover about themselves, their potential, their purpose. They're willing to leave the familiar territory of their habitual patterns and venture into the unknown, even when it's uncomfortable. The term explorer positions them as the protagonist of their own journey. They are the ones doing the discovering, the climbing, the navigating.

We, as coaches, are more like Sherpas who have travelled these slopes on our personal journey and traversed lands with others before. We carry tools and knowledge to support each explorer in their personal quest, but understand that the explorer must take each step themselves, make their own discoveries and find their own path through the terrain.

When you, as the coach, partner with an explorer with a fiercely loving approach, you are witnessing someone stepping into their own vastness. You're creating the conditions for them to discover and inhabit more of who they already are. You're holding faith in their capacity when they doubt it. You're shining light on paths they cannot yet see. You're offering your presence and your fierce love as they venture into a land that might feel overwhelming if they were to do this alone.

And here's what makes the explorer metaphor even more powerful. When explorers create a shift inside themselves, their systems shift with them. Just like an actual explorer who maps uncharted territory changes what's possible for everyone who comes after them, the explorer who discovers new ways of being, thinking or relating changes not only themselves but also all the systems they're part of. Their families experience them differently, their teams are led with renewed leadership, their organisations are influenced by their evolved consciousness and their communities benefit from their expanded capacity.

So, from this point forward, I will refer to the person being coached as the explorer. I'm inviting you to try out the term. Let the word roll around in your mouth, speak it out loud, write it down, experiment with it and see if it is a good fit for you too.

What called me here?

'How is it that you are able to be provocative and challenging while at the same time still hold space with love and care?' asked coach C as they observed me in a coaching demonstration.

This question was the catalyst for me to begin going back through my old reflective diaries, examining my current experiences and capturing the lessons I've learned over the years. I wrote them down in the hope that my experience may be useful to professional coaches around the world.

For the past 15 years, I've been designing and leading coach education programmes through live and online training: first as co-founder of Empower World, created in partnership with Jeanine Bailey, then as a tutor on the Cambridge University coaching certificate programme, and through my ongoing independent work as a coach mentor and supervisor. I believe deeply in the stewardship of our profession and in the responsibility of those a step ahead to share what we have learned so others can continue to grow.

This book does not promote one way of coaching. Instead, I share how choosing fierce love as a guiding principle has shaped my own practice and supported me to tailor my work to the explorers' needs. My appeal is for you to find your own authentic, courageous way of leading and supporting growth. As Erik de Haan, director of Ashridge's Centre for Coaching, wrote in 2024, 'Decades of research confirm there is no universally superior coaching model. Instead, effectiveness emerges from rapport, authenticity and aligning interventions to specific anxieties and needs.'

I wrote this book for you because, like me, you want more depth and breadth in your coaching. You completed your training full of

enthusiasm, equipped with models, tools and powerful questions. Your explorers are getting results. And yet, you are sensing that something essential is missing, something that will take the work to a deeper level.

This is a beckoning to reconnect with your own self-love; to rediscover your heart, your gut and your spine; to challenge the beliefs and fears that limit how fully you show up in your coaching; and to trust your inner wisdom so you can step into a state of loving courage and do the deeper work you and your explorers are seeking.

My purpose is to support you in the greater calling that has brought you here, moving from 'doing coaching' to 'being coaching' and bringing both courage and love into how you show up in all partnerships, whether with individuals, teams or groups.

I share lessons as I moved from transactional coaching, focused on goals and outcomes, to transformational work that supports profound shifts in how people see themselves and show up in the world. These lessons are offered as discoveries rather than a linear framework. They helped me create deeper, braver coaching experiences and develop the courage to be a 'soul friend', to move beyond the comfortable and safe into the territory where deep awareness becomes possible.

Throughout, I share my failures and successes through personal stories, explorer cases (with permission) and amalgamated scenarios to protect anonymity. Each lesson invites reflection on your own defining moments and closes with questions to deepen self-awareness. These questions can also be adapted for your coaching practice.

I should note that I didn't write this book to help you deepen the work only with people you like working with. Some of your explorers may have challenging personalities. You may not even like some of them very much. Still, you can choose to be someone in a state of loving presence and connection, inviting them to be their best versions of themselves. In my experience, the presence of fierce love can be even more powerful when you don't particularly like the person!

By sharing the insights and experiences that have shaped me as both coach and human being, I hope you'll find encouragement, confidence and courage to be on your own path with fierce love. I believe the world that we live in needs more love. As John O'Donohue reminds us, 'Love is the only antidote to fear.'

Lesson 1

It begins with you

I left my professional coach training programme buoyed up with excitement about how I was going to do this work and the huge impact it was going to make on other people's lives. I announced to one of my peers: 'I intend to do great work, helping people to reach their goals and achieve more than they ever thought they could. My approach is going to be stretching, challenging and constantly moving people outside of their comfort zone!'

Although I had been working with people in many different capacities over the years, as a newly trained professional I believed that an executive coach had to look, sound and act in a certain way to be taken seriously. To play the role of an executive coach well, I felt I had to leave out many parts of myself to do good coaching and be well respected in the field.

My natural way of moving through life is what psycho-analytic theorist Karen Horney would describe as 'moving toward' tendencies. I grew up the eldest of four children with two hard-working parents who were determined to make a great life for us all. The story that I took on my shoulders was that to support my parents and be a valuable member of the family, I had to be the good one, make no waves, do as I was told and make sure everyone else was OK before I was OK. Choosing the role of 'good girl' has had positive and negative impacts. I can be easily loving and connected but, on the other hand, I can give my power away to others, wanting to please them so that they will like me.

When I entered the world of executive coaching, I was determined to shake off some old patterns. I stepped away from being the 'good girl' and moved into being more direct, action focused and challenging, or 'moving against', as Horney would describe it. Maybe choosing a more direct way of being also came from a place of 'pleasing'. Perhaps I believed then that the executives might like me more if I was behaving in a more direct way. Always 'being on' and 'direct' took up a lot of energy. And because I was leaving out the more loving parts of me, it knocked my natural way of being out of balance.

The stories you make up

The stories you make up about yourself can be the backdrop to your life patterns and areas that hold you back or propel you forward. Unless you wake up and notice them, you keep playing them out. This is useful, not just to be aware of for yourself as the coach, but also for the work you do with explorers. The most dangerous myths you tell yourself are the ones that convince you that you are not enough. As I look back over the years, I now understand how important it is to know your worth and use your unique creative gifts.

Even though I was leaving the more compassionate parts of me out of the work, my clients (I called them that in the beginning – and notice that I called them 'my' clients as if they belonged to me!) were getting results. I built up my practice and the explorers seemed to like the experience and be happy with where they were going in our work. But there were many things niggling me and it felt unfulfilling.

I was not only wearing a business suit to organisations, I was also wearing my shield of 'kick-ass' coaching and living up to what I told my peers I would be. As I worked in this fast, forward-moving way, I noticed how tired I was, how much time I kept thinking about the explorers between sessions and how much planning and preparation I did. Yes, the explorers were moving forward, but they didn't seem to be learning about themselves. It

appeared that if they didn't have me as their accountability partner their results didn't last. They soon reverted back to their old habits and maybe even gave up on what they said they wanted because it was 'too hard' or they 'weren't motivated enough', or what they said 'wasn't what they wanted at all'. It became clear that the explorers were not being nourished and fulfilled by this action-oriented, focused coaching work and neither was I. I was beginning to wonder if this coaching thing was going to be for me after all.

At the start of my coaching career, I paid close attention to the so-called 'world-famous' success coaches, often men in their fifties or sixties, working with other men of the same age. Their work felt more like consulting or teaching than coaching. As I listened, I noticed how strongly they believed they knew best. There was little empathy, deep listening or space for exploration in their conversations.

While I appreciated the fierceness of the challenge, when I attempted to model this approach, something felt off. It didn't align with all of who I was or the practice I wanted to build. When I looked ahead at my future self, I realised that focusing only on action and goals felt like stepping onto yet another treadmill. The image that came to mind was of me as a white hamster, running endlessly on a silver wheel, stepping off only briefly to refuel. The thought filled me with horror. While goal-focused coaching had (and still has) its place, for me it became as exhausting as any other unfulfilling job I had done.

This wasn't what I wanted for myself or for the explorers I worked with. I had dreamed of a business rooted in freedom, fulfilment and connection. By bringing only a part of myself, I wasn't making the difference I had imagined – supporting people to know themselves more deeply, breaking long-held patterns and creating lives and work aligned with their values and purpose. I knew the power of this deeper work because I had experienced it myself.

During the early months of setting up Golden Leap, I attended a party and had a conversation with someone I'd just met. As

we parted, they thanked me and said how safe they had felt and listened to without judgement. They told me that I had gently challenged their perspective and it felt as if they were ‘being loved and challenged at the same time’. That final comment stayed with me. It was another sign that something vital was missing from my coaching work.

As I reflected, the missing pieces became clearer. I was leaving out important parts of me – my compassion, intuition, creativity, heart and soul – replacing them with models and processes. Useful, yes, but not fulfilling for the explorers or for me. I had been brave and loving in my work as a Bowen practitioner, so why was I holding back here? The answer, of course, was my old stories.

Could I really bring all of myself into executive coaching? Would I be seen as too soft, too caring, too much? And how did that sit alongside my early declaration that I would be a ‘kick-ass coach’? As Helena Clayton observes in her ‘Leading from Love’ white paper (2023), ‘It’s not OK to believe that we need to leave part of ourselves at the door when we come to work... How come I can’t show you all of who I am? Including my love. What harm must we be doing to ourselves to keep parts of us so walled up from the people we spend most of our working hours with?’

Through my reflective writing practice I realised that love could be courageous and grounded; challenging and provocative; fierce, honest and compassionate – all combined. I knew that if I wanted to work authentically, this type of love had to be part of my coaching. This knowledge also came with fear. Voices – internal and external – told me there was no place for love in boardrooms or the culture I was working in. For a while, I listened. I closed my journal and slipped back into old patterns.

But I couldn’t forget the feedback from the earlier conversation at the party, or the words of my Bowen clients, who spoke of how their pain eased when they were supported to look inward with courage and care. I asked myself a question: ‘What would be the cost of not showing up in a fiercely loving way?’ The image of the white hamster returned and I knew the cost was simply too high.

As I looked back over my life – the good and the dark times, the ease and the struggles – I remembered my commitment to create spaces of quietness and serenity, paired with generous challenge and provocation. What became clear was this: if I was going to bring all of myself into coaching – my presence, my voice, my fiercest love – it required courage: courage to challenge when I was tempted to stay silent; courage to be with discomfort; and courage to be fully myself rather than perform a role. This journey, from fear to fierce love, became the foundation of my work. As I reawakened these parts of myself, my desire for experimentation was revived.

I did not step lightly into this way of working. The explorers always remained my priority. I met them where they were, introducing experiments only where it was welcomed. At times I coached bravely; at other times I retreated into safety, slipping into consulting or advising. Each time I did, I felt the misalignment. Yet through continued experimentation, I grew braver and gathered evidence of an evolving, more authentic practice.

Self-development

I realised that my development could not stop with training, models or competence alone. I needed to continue my own vertical development, turning toward what remained unconscious. I explored psychodynamic influences, beliefs shaped by systems and culture, and the protective strategies I had developed over time. I immersed myself in psychology, human development, leadership, healing, mindfulness, grief work, breath work, somatic approaches, parts work, neuro-linguistic programming (NLP) and meditation. I re-read *Anam Cara* (many times) and reconnected with the Celtic soul language that had once helped to heal me when I felt lost and disconnected.

I also reawakened my creativity from my years as an art director, inviting imagery, metaphor and intuition into my sessions. Even when it didn't make sense to me, I offered this intuition to the

explorers as a source of wisdom. As I modelled courage, explorers began to do the same, thinking more freely, listening to their bodies and trusting their inner wisdom. I came to understand the systemic nature of coaching: we are never coaching just one person; the impact ripples outward.

As I integrated more of myself, I relied less on rigid structures. Knowing myself more deeply became an incentive for explorers to do the same. Carl Jung captures this beautifully in his book *Contributions to Analytical Psychology* (1928): 'Learn your theories as well as you can, but put them aside when you touch the miracle of the living soul. Not theories but your own creative individuality alone must decide.'

Alongside my inner work, I committed to mentoring and supervision. I partnered with mentors aligned with mind-body-soul work, receiving brave feedback to ensure my practice remained ethical and competency based. I brought my work into supervision, engaging with it normatively, formatively and restoratively (Proctor 1986) and exploring it systemically (Hawkins & Shohet 1985).

My professional practices changed. Instead of arriving with a tight agenda, I used my preparation time to hold the explorer in my mind's eye with care and tenderness. Before each session, I set an intention and trusted the unfolding of each conversation. I moved from focusing on outcomes to seeing through the eyes of love. I also brought in my own self-care practices, which equipped me to be kinder and ensured I was healthy and well.

I wanted to be more courageous in understanding how others saw me, so I engaged (and still do) in gathering 360° feedback, using four simple questions to help me become aware of areas that I need to focus on (Johari window model, Luft & Ingham 1955). I ask people I know from a variety of roles in my life and whose opinion I respect to provide me with stretching feedback to support my growth. It is a daunting experience waiting to read the responses but I always appreciate the stretches that people provide, as I know they only want the best for me.

- ♥ What is it that you most appreciate about me?
- ♥ What do you perceive are my key strengths/characteristics?
- ♥ What do you think I could do even better?
- ♥ What would you like to see me do more of going forward?

I offer these questions to explorers who want to gather feedback but don't have access to formal 360° feedback. It always elicits some surprising information.

Because I experienced the courage it takes to go into my self-exploration, I contracted for working with the explorers differently – inviting more courage, vulnerability, creativity, support and challenge into our partnerships. As trust and rapport grew, which are associated with a willingness to be vulnerable and take risks (Schiemann et al 2019), so did the capacity to question assumptions and uncover areas for deep growth. Coaching became less about doing and more about being.

The deepest shifts often occur when you loosen your grip on technique. That letting go is only possible when you have first done your own inner work. When you know yourself deeply, you can believe in the wisdom already within the explorer, honour the relationship and allow the work to unfold.

Fear versus love

There is a subtle pressure in the coaching profession to always be growing, always evolving, always working on the next edge. Development becomes not just something you do, but something you feel you must constantly prove. You may notice an internal voice that says you should be more self-aware, more regulated, more insightful, more healed. Over time, self-improvement can shift from a practice of curiosity into a quiet performance of worth.

It is important to manage that pressure consciously. The desire to grow is healthy; the demand to perfect yourself is not. When development becomes conditional – 'I will be enough when I am

more evolved, more accomplished, more whole' – you place your worth on a moving target. There will always be another workshop, another qualification, another layer to unpack. Without care, the pursuit becomes endless.

This is where the danger lies. The more intensely you strive to be your 'best self', the more you risk abandoning your 'real self' – the imperfect, human, still-becoming person you already are. Growth that is driven by fear often feels urgent and restless. It can become another way of managing anxiety, avoiding vulnerability or proving legitimacy. In this form, self-development is no longer spacious; it is driven.

Self-work is sacred work. It asks for honesty, humility and courage. Sacred does not mean relentless. It does not require you to scrutinise every flaw or fix every shadow. Growth can also be found in integration and rest.

There is a difference between tending your inner life and trying to optimise it. One is rooted in self-respect; the other can be rooted in self-doubt. When you notice urgency, comparison or the sense that you must constantly improve to be enough – pause. Ask yourself: 'Is this desire for growth coming from a place of love, or is it coming from a place of fear?'

Sustainable development comes from acceptance. Be gentle with yourself. You grow not because you are deficient, but because you are alive. And aliveness includes seasons of movement and seasons of stillness.

Case 1: The inner work

A few weeks after deciding to implement my experimentation to bring all of myself to the work, an opportunity came up for a chemistry session with B, a highly respected academic. The moment I met them, something in me tightened. I didn't feel I could be myself. My saboteurs had a field day: 'Who do you think you are? How could you possibly coach someone like this?' I managed to grab those little gremlins and pop them into a meta-

phorical sealed box for a short time, which allowed me to get through the chemistry session.

The next day, HR told me that B had chosen me as their coach. I didn't even pause to consider if I wanted to work with them. I was newly trained, building a practice, and any sense of 'fit' was drowned out by relief. I'd won the contract and my saboteurs were silenced, for a moment. What I didn't know then was that there was no way I could partner with B for a full year while staying with my armoured-up version of executive coaching.

As I prepared for our first session, I was so nervous that all my experimenting with bringing more love into my work evaporated. My mentors were right, I told myself. Love has no place in executive coaching. I walked in loaded with tools, models, whiteboards and back-up plans – anything to appear competent. I wasn't present. I wasn't holding B as naturally creative, resourceful or whole. I was metal plated with strategy, determined to impress rather than connect.

Our conversation around our working agreements took about 15 minutes, not because I didn't understand the process of great contracting, but because I didn't feel confident enough to lead it. B had been given total freedom in the coaching, which I'd love now, but back then it terrified me. I didn't feel I had the right to shape the work. This was not just due to my lack of experience. Even back then I knew contracting was important. The problem was my self-confidence. I thought B was better than me. And what I mean by better is 'an older, more intelligent, more accomplished, more successful human being'.

We didn't set a focus and B launched into sharing all the brilliant things about themselves. I didn't challenge anything, even though they had received feedback from their team about being domineering and dismissive of others. Instead of stepping into my wiser self, I slipped into a younger, smaller version of me. The imposter was in full control, and without love or respect for myself, I couldn't be fully present.

The beliefs running how I turned up as the coach were loud and unkind:

- ♥ B will find out I'm not good enough.
- ♥ If I challenge B, I'll lose the job.
- ♥ B is too clever to care about love or reflection.

These beliefs shut down my bravery. I left the session feeling sick. When B cancelled our next meeting, I felt nothing but relief. I was grateful that I didn't have to walk back into that room and do the old goal-to-action work that I wanted to leave behind.

My fear of not being enough kept us from doing powerful work together. B was not moving, shifting or seeing anything new. And deep down I knew why: I was in the way. My questions may have sounded clever at times, but they only generated thinking that B already knew. Nothing progressive was happening, for them or for me.

After yet another cancelled session, I decided to do some reflective writing. It was high time for me to have a conversation with my fear-filled part and my wisest part. In this powerful inner dialogue, I discovered that my fear of not being good enough was holding me back from working authentically with B. My fear wanted to play it safe, worried about my reputation and potential failures if I challenged B too directly. However, my wisest part helped me see that true courage in coaching isn't about protecting my image, it's about serving the explorer's growth, even when that feels risky.

By inviting my fear into the conversation rather than letting it control me, I realised that my authentic, courageous coaching style could be useful to B. Hiding it to stay safe would be doing both of us a disservice. I became aware that the bravest path forward was to have an honest conversation with B about how I work, experiment with bringing my full presence and challenge, and trust that if we were not the right fit, this was valuable information rather than evidence that I wasn't good enough.

The next time I met B, I stepped into my courage, my love of self, love of the work and love of the process of coaching. I invited them to explore how we could work together more effectively. I asked them questions such as: 'What would great coaching look,

sound and feel like?’ I invited them to consider whether they were open to more challenges and what our conversations would sound like if we were braver together. We determined ways of working that honoured both B’s needs and mine, exploring how to be genuine partners in challenging their thinking and perspectives. I shared my concept of fierce love and noticed B’s discomfort. As we leaned into this discomfort, B realised that fierce love in leadership meant being courageous and vulnerable in how they led their team. This brought a profound shift in how they understood what they wanted to do in our coaching partnership.

Our brave conversations created new respect and opened us both to deeper explorations. I asked permission to challenge B’s thinking when they blamed others, supporting them to see their role as persecutor and their single-minded approach to being right about everything. B began recognising how their patterns at work mirrored their relationship with their family, particularly following in their father’s footsteps of blaming and a belief that they had to lead like their father in order to be successful.

This awareness revealed how they, as the child seeking approval, were now showing up as a harsh leader, bringing their anger both to work and home, causing upset within their team and their family life. We got curious from a place of fierce love and compassion, exploring and challenging all their stories and ways of being. Together we stepped into courage and vulnerability, deepening their awareness and supporting them to discover more about themselves.

The feedback from B’s team midway through the programme showed that people were seeing a different side to B. Although they didn’t quite believe it was long lasting, there was acknowledgement that the atmosphere in the team felt different. B shared how their relationship with their partner was benefiting from the work they were doing on themselves. Of course they were not perfect; new habits need continual practice. But they were willing to put in the work because they realised the cost of staying the same was too painful.

For B, the biggest change was in their relationship with themselves. They began to appreciate themselves more and practised being kinder when things went wrong. One day, B murmured under their breath, 'I've started to love myself.' They laughed quickly, almost brushing it off, but I caught it. I smiled and said, 'I didn't quite hear that, would you say it a little louder?' B laughed, this time more fully, and we both laughed together, feeling the weight and joy of that small, profound moment.

Fierce love created this honest, funny and brave coaching partnership. And I had to do my own inner work before I could invite B to do theirs. All the learning about me, the tough and painful facing of my fears and the wisdom-filled journeys of exploration, taught me powerful lessons about who I was in the world and how I wanted to show up in the work I did with other human beings. Choosing authenticity and noticing how I was showing up created the foundation for real development. Without the inner work, I could not model courage, hold space for vulnerability or support B through meaningful change.

From this foundation, other lessons naturally emerged. Showing up with courage opened the door for honesty, vulnerability and growth. Recognising patterns in both B's life and my own deepened self-awareness and made our work more effective. By exploring together with curiosity and compassion, we co-created insights B could fully own and integrate. Putting new ways of being in place takes time, trust and patience. When you bring your full self, including discomfort and humour, you build trust and make honest, courageous and playful conversations possible.

You can only take your explorers as far as you are willing to go within yourself. This inner work deepens your emotional maturity and expands your capacity to hold space for someone else's work. Your ability to do your inner work isn't optional; it is the foundation for everything that follows.

Questions for reflection

- ♥ What is the internal depth of work you need to explore in order to be braver in your life and work?
- ♥ What are your natural ways of being in the world?
Compliant (moving toward people)? Aggressive (moving against people)? Detached (moving away from people)? How does this impact your coaching?
- ♥ Which areas in your own life might be limiting the depth you can go to with explorers?
- ♥ Where might your own unexamined fears, needs or patterns be shaping the way you show up in your coaching, and what are you willing to explore about yourself as a result?
- ♥ Which professionals could you partner with to do your own work?

About the author



Photo: Charles Cotugno

Marie Quigley holds an ICF Master Certified Coach (MCC) credential and the accreditation of EMCC ESIA coach supervision. She is known for her highly experiential approach to coaching.

With decades of international experience in executive coaching, leadership development and education, she partners with senior leaders, experienced coaches and those new to the profession who are seeking to move beyond technique and develop greater confidence, authenticity and impact in their work.

Marie is deeply committed to advancing the field of coaching through her work as a researcher, writer, supervisor, mentor and educator. Her approach centres on courageous, compassionate and connected conversations that support meaningful transformation. She is a sought-after speaker, regularly invited to share her insights at conferences and professional gatherings worldwide.

Her work spans multinational organisations across the public, private and academic sectors. She delivers programmes both virtually and in person across the United Kingdom, Europe and the Middle East.

You've learned the theory and models behind coaching and have been putting them into practice – but there's something stopping you from realising your full potential as a coach.

While structure has its place, it can also create distance, keeping you within the boundaries of technique. By fostering real, human connection and inviting a courageous form of love to be your guide, the people you partner with will feel seen, understood and challenged.

Drawing on decades of professional practice and poignant moments from her own life, Marie Quigley weaves together rich case studies and reflective questions to share fifteen powerful lessons that have profoundly shaped her coaching. These are not just ideas, but lived experiences, offering practical, grounded insights that will help you coach bravely and effectively.

Fierce Love is an invitation to rediscover your heart, your gut and your spine. It challenges the beliefs and fears that limit how fully you show up and supports you in developing your inner wisdom so you can choose to be in a state of loving courage as you lean into deeper, transformational coaching.

This book is your essential companion if you want to move beyond technique, deepen your conversations and step into a more courageous, connected and transformative way of working.

'This book is fundamentally important to the future of coaching.'

Trudy Arthurs PCC, MAC, PUCA, ICF

'A wealth of practical lessons, profound insights and hard-won wisdom.'

Steve Mitten CPCC, retired MCC, past president ICF

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