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Thanks for the Kick in the Teeth: What Happens When You Finally Name the Thing

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TRANSCRIPT

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She wasn't saying it. I could see it, just beneath the surface of the smudged mirror I was trying to hold up in front of her. But it was like she was avoiding her own reflection. As she circled around this really heartbreaking topic, my curiosity piqued, and a question entered my mind that I couldn't refuse asking. So I paused her spiraling for just a moment, and I asked, "What I'm hearing you say is that despite knowing you need to be focusing on yourself right now, you continue to absorb the wants and needs of everyone around you."

Her head fell, her eyes filling with tears. "Yeah," she whispered. "That's exactly what I'm feeling." And though the floodgates opened that day, the real work was able to begin.

Fast forward a couple of months. I'm working with a different client. We are several sessions into talking about his hesitance to retire. "I just like being busy," he said. But I could see how jittery he was, and the fact that he refused to make eye contact with me through the screen told me something else was there. So I asked, "Is it that you like being busy, or that you like being needed?"

He sucked in a sharp breath through his mouth and went, "Yep. That's probably more likely it." We spent the rest of that session talking about his fear of not being needed in retirement. At the end of the session, he said to me, "Thanks, Britt. I'll be back again for another beating next week."

Two different stories, two very different experiences, but one thing happened the same in both. Something important had finally been named. In naming it, we gave it a voice. We gave it permission to speak. And because of that, they were able to start making meaningful progress forward.

The thing I'm talking about here is that thought, that idea, that suggestion that lives just beneath the surface. It needs to come out into the limelight, but we haven't given it the words yet. It's the thing that needs to come to the surface, but our clients don't want to give it space. And it's our job as coaches to help that thing make its debut.

But helping our clients name their thing isn't always easy. It definitely wasn't easy for me when I first started coaching. See, I had this thing about being nice. Okay, so it was really about being liked. I really wanted to be liked. I also, like, needed to be liked if I wanted to get clients.

The problem was that somewhere in my life, I had learned that being polite and being direct were antonyms. That you couldn't be kind and compassionate and also be direct and honest. I didn't think you could be both. So I opted for the kind of coaching that never made me feel uncomfortable.

And then I had a difficult client. Honestly, he was infuriating. He showed up to sessions having never completed anything. He would cancel sessions frequently, and when he did show up, he always had an excuse. I tried to follow him. I tried to offer observations, but they were timid. I tried to hold up the mirror, but my hand shook, and I wasn't brave enough to hold it directly in front of him.

Several sessions in, he was making no progress. He showed up yet again with an excuse dancing on his tongue. As I prepared to bite mine and follow him through yet another meaningless conversation, something popped into my mind. It was so obvious, I was angry I hadn't seen it sooner. Before I could stop myself, I found myself saying, "You know what? It sounds like you don't really want this. It sounds like this whole thing is a big excuse to avoid something you don't want to talk about. I just don't know what it is."

And because I realized very quickly that I hadn't asked a question, I added, "How does that land?" My heart was hammering in my chest. My client looked at me like I had three heads, and I thought for sure he was going to say, "I'm done." Instead he said, "Honestly, that lands right in the gut. I don't really want to be doing this. What I really want to be doing, I don't even know where to start."

It was my first experience with being more courageous in my coaching, because my hand was forced. It was messy and uncomfortable, but I learned two really valuable lessons that day.

1. The first is that if I really wanted to offer value to my clients, I needed to start trusting my own curiosity. I needed to get really comfortable holding up that mirror.

2. The second is that being direct isn't impolite. It's advocacy. I needed to advocate for my clients. I needed to get comfortable asking really uncomfortable questions, even if they don't land.

Because the truth is, as coaches we have two options. We can shine a light, knowing that anything the beam lands on is worthy of exploration and holds within it the power to be life-changing. Or we stay silent and watch our clients fumble around in the dark.

I'm not saying we need to name the thing for our clients. That's not what I'm saying here. What I am saying is that we are not giving our clients the answer. Instead, we are listening for the things they are not saying as well as the things they are saying. We are listening for what's in the hesitations, in the moments where they're not following through on their to-do

list and the things they're supposed to be doing. And we are helping them name the thing: the truth they've been circling in their mind all along.

So I want to invite you to take this perspective today. I want to invite you to be your own advocate. And I'm going to do this by asking a potentially sticky question. How many of you here thought about giving a talk today? Or maybe it wasn't a talk. Maybe that isn't your thing. Maybe you thought about doing a workshop, or writing a book. And then that voice entered your mind, and you thought, "Who am I to say this thing? What would I even talk about?"

I use this language specifically because it's the same language I heard in my head when the Spark Talk request came through. I was like, "Yeah, that's not going to be me."

Then I was in an assessment with a new coach, and we were listening to her client talk in circles around the same topic, over and over again. The client kept saying, "I'm not worried about this. I'm not worried about this." But she kept returning to it, over and over again. So I'm waiting for the coach to point this out, and it never happened.

At the end of the session I said, "You know, did you notice what happened there?" And she said, "Oh, no, I noticed. It just felt uncomfortable to point it out. It didn't feel polite saying that to her." So, as I've done dozens of times, I went into my little spiel about how being direct is actually advocacy, and how it's okay to be polite and direct at the same time. There's space for both.

And the light bulb went off, and I was like, "Oh. My thing is helping people come to this conclusion. Finding the thing they're not willing to point to, or talk about, or admit to." So I signed up for this talk that day, for better or for worse.

What is the thing you talk about so much that maybe you've forgotten it's actually valuable to other people? Because just like our clients, our lives are filled with experiences that are completely unique to us, and our expertise is sharpened by that experience. So much so that we often forget to even look at it.

For example, I had a client recently, several weeks ago. She's one of my longest-standing clients. She reached out to me: "Emergency meeting, please. I'm writing a speech, and I don't know what to do with it." So I jumped on the call, and I was really taken aback by her distraught demeanor. She looked like defeat personified.

For the first several minutes of that conversation, she talked again and again about this topic, and I could hear her frustration. But I felt like there was something else there. It felt like disgust. So I asked, "What about this topic do you despise so much?"

She kind of chuckled and said, “You’re right. I actually do hate this. I just don’t have anything else to offer.” So I asked if I could offer her an observation, and when she nodded, I said:

“Over the past several years of working together, you’ve written five of the seven books in your seven-book series, the first of which was just picked up by a publisher who called it brilliant. You have spent decades in the theater, as an actress and a director yourself, and teaching other young, I think the word is thespians, how to be actors and directors themselves. You have years of experience, and you have recently become a master of mindfulness, with years of instruction and teaching. So tell me: how does that woman have nothing else to offer?”

We spent the rest of that session mining for her thing. At the end of the session, she smiled, her demeanor much more relaxed, and she said, “I don’t know what I would have done. Thank you so much for the kick in the teeth.”

Sometimes our thing is hiding in the thing we talk about so much that we forget it’s valuable. Sometimes it’s hiding in our experience. And sometimes it’s in our talent, waiting to be discovered.

> *Either way, it’s there. You just have to be brave enough to name it.*

Thank you.