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The Spaciousness Advantage

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Edited for readability. Filler words and false starts removed.

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TRANSCRIPT

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The Spaciousness Advantage

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Hi. Hi. It's a lot of fun to see you all in person. I've taught a lot of you over screens, so thank you.

A few years ago, one of my daughters taught me something about coaching that changed my career, so I'm going to share it with you. A few of you have heard this story, but not the why behind it, so you get to hear that today.

I was sitting on the couch, and my three-year-old came running in with big tears in her eyes. She was wearing a pair of boots, and she was holding a pair of tights, like this, and crying big tears. "What's wrong, honey?" "I can't get my pants on."

I solved the problem. Pretty sure you see it too. And I almost fixed it for her. I'm really glad I didn't, because I use this story all the time.

We weren't in a hurry that day, so instead of solving the problem, I just got curious. I did what we do. I asked her a question. I held space. "I'm sorry, honey." I forget the exact question, but it was something along the lines of "What's wrong?" or "How can I help?" or "What do you need?"

And she paused. Looked at the pants. Looked at the boots. Looked at the pants. Looked at the boots. Looked at the pants. Looked at the boots. Then she dropped them and ran away.

I'm going to pause the story there. Just leave us there for a minute, because there's an important lesson here for all of us. Our clients do this all the time. Our clients bring us their boots. Our clients have things they're attached to, things they don't want to take off, things that were hard to get on. The obvious solution is to take them off and put the pants on. They're not taking their boots off. They have identities, ambitions, values.

They also have pants. They have constraints, challenges, expectations, and requirements that don't fit on over the boots. And they come to us and say, "Help me put my pants on."

And we get really good at coaching around pants and boots. We ask really good questions about the pants. We challenge and brainstorm, at least about the boots. We may even ask the right combination of questions in just the right way to coax the pants on over the boots, really carefully, without tearing them. But I think we're solving the wrong problem.

> *It's really more about space than it is about boots.*

So, space. If you've been in my classes, you've heard me talk about spaciousness a lot. If you've been in my assessments, I've talked about spaciousness a lot. I like spaciousness. Spaciousness is a pattern I see everywhere.

In a good conversation: we had a great talk this morning about space and the container. No container, no space, no connection. In music, it's the space, the rests, that make the music. It's just noise otherwise.

I zoom out and look at space. We call it space because there's lots of space in space. That's why we call it space. I zoom in, and you've got electrons spinning around a nucleus, with lots of space in between. There's space everywhere. I think space matters.

I think what worked that day, and I'll tell you what happened, is that instead of trying to solve the problem, I was able to leave enough room for her to create new possibilities. Think of it as the big bang of coaching. I'm not kidding.

And it's not just space in music and atoms. I see this on EEG. The first time I watched a client's brain while I coached them, there was a moment when the client paused. They had an "aha," and there was this big alpha spike. Alpha feels relaxed, present, focused. Just this, just now. It's a lot slower than beta, which is where we think. Alpha's not thinking. It's being.

And I'm not the only person who's seen this. The researchers Kounios and Beeman study moments of insight, and they talk about this too. There's an alpha burst that suppresses the thinking, and then there's a burst that slingshots into gamma, where you have insight. You have to have space to have insight.

I think insight needs less competition. And if we're honest, in a coaching session you have two competing egos putting pressure on a conversation. The client comes into the session with a problem to solve: "Help me put my pants on." And then we have our own expectations, our own pressure. I want to do a good job. I want to be professional. I want to help. I want to be taken seriously. I want to provide value. So you have two nervous systems competing in a very crowded space, and there's not a lot of space left.

Which brings me back to what actually happened that day. Instead of taking the pants off, or taking the boots off, putting the pants on, and putting the boots back on again, I held space. She ran off, and she came back a few minutes later with a big grin on her face. And she was wearing a tutu.

We could run that scenario a thousand times, and I would never suggest, “Hey, honey, put on a tutu.” It wasn’t my idea. It wasn’t the problem. I misunderstood the problem. The problem was not “I need to put the pants on over the boots.” That was not the problem. The problem was “I need something to wear, and I don’t want to take the boots off.” And I missed it.

And I’m telling you, that happens often, even with a good time model. We think we know what the client’s problem is. We don’t. We don’t. We’ve got to leave some room for their tutu, because in a coaching conversation, they don’t know what their tutu is. And I don’t know what their tutu is. Nobody knows. They have to go find it, and they’re only going to find it in space.

So we’re going to play a game. You’re going to do what she did. Think of a problem in your life right now: a challenge, an obstacle, something you want to solve, something you’d get coaching on.

- What are your boots? What’s the thing you don’t want to take off? The thing you don’t want to let go of? The thing it took a lot of you to get into, that you just don’t want to separate from?
- Okay, you’ve got your boots. What are your pants? The thing that just doesn’t fit?

Now we’re going to ask a coaching question. I’m going to pause here: the question you ask doesn’t matter as much as we think it does. That’s a different Spark Talk. What do you need? What do you actually need?

[Pause.]

Nice. Maybe you had a great breakthrough. Maybe you didn’t. That’s not the point. The point is: notice how fast you went to thinking.

So my challenge to you today is this. In your own lives and in your coaching lives, try to find the boots. Listen for the boots. Try to find the pants. Listen for the pants. And then leave some space for the tutu. Thank you.