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Put Me in, Coach — I'm Ready to Play

By [Diana Spechler](#)

Coaches are great in baseball and acting, but do they work in life? Diana Spechler takes the plunge and finds out.

I recently learned that Jayson Blair is now a life coach in Virginia. If you're wondering why that name sounds familiar, it's because he was famous once, for about five minutes, when he got caught plagiarizing articles he wrote for the New York Times between 2002 and 2003. In other words, he's a celebrity screw-up.

Yet now he's a life coach?

Granted, life coaches are not therapists. Whereas therapists focus on the past to understand the present, life coaches emphasize the present as a means of moving forward. But when I think about Blair, I can't help wondering: Why should I trust someone to teach me how to move forward if his way of moving forward — of living — is reprehensible?

I've made it thirty years without a life coach, and for the most part, I do okay. I wake up every morning. I get my work done. My penchant for vodka aside, I maintain a healthy diet. But then there's the other side of me. Each month, I find myself counting out nickels to make my rent. I have a garbage bag full of clothes that I've been meaning, for nine months, to take to Goodwill. My last 672 relationships have suffered identical fates. I don't sleep enough. I have a control issue — or twelve.

While my problems aren't insurmountable, I'm often unsure of how to surmount them. So although the Jayson Blair news has stirred up my inner skeptic, it's also gotten me thinking, somewhat obsessively, about life coaches. I'm suspicious of these people, but I also wonder if I'm not missing out on something. Maybe there's someone out there who can teach me how to live. Maybe there's someone who can repair me.

So I hit the phone, and set up some meetings.



Julie Melillo

My first appointment, Julie Melillo, is pretty and well put together. With thick dark hair falling over the collar of her black leather jacket, she seems like a reliable workout buddy, or the tough best friend in a romantic comedy who orders a sundae with two long spoons.

Julie, who got her life coaching certificate in 2007 from the Southwest Institute of Healing Arts, a program in Tempe, Arizona, that requires one hundred training hours, asks me to fill out a "lifestyle overview" that scores my satisfaction with each part of my life (living situation, finances, love life, family life, etc.) on a scale from one to ten.

I lie about everything.

Julie looks at my sheet. "Everything looks really strong. You gave 'friends' a nine."

"I have great friends."

"Okay, but what would bring your satisfaction to a ten?"

I hesitate. I inflated all my scores so I wouldn't seem ungrateful or self-pitying, and also because I like to pretend I'm perfect. This, I think, is why therapy would never work for me. I would sit with a therapist and say, "But really, I'm fine. Now tell me about you!"

"I'm not always comfortable with confrontation," I admit. "For example, I threw a party last week and some of my best friends didn't show. They didn't have good reasons. They just got lazy. It really annoyed me, but I didn't let on."

"Okay." Julie nods encouragingly, and then repeats what I said in a digestible, bite-size chunk.

Twenty minutes later, I have thoroughly spilled my guts. Of course, Julie's active listening — her nodding, encouraging, and echoing of my thoughts — is not an uncommon therapeutic tool. But I can't remember the last time anyone, not counting my mother, showed me such attentiveness. Or at least, I can't remember the last time talking about myself so freely didn't make me feel guilty and self-indulgent.

Julie shows me how my lifestyle choices and patterns are directly connected with my ingrained "beliefs." To break detrimental patterns, I'm supposed to examine which of my beliefs aren't working for me, and replace them with new beliefs. For example, if I believe, "I'll never be financially comfortable; that's just the plight of the artist," I should instead learn to believe, "Other people make their livings as artists, so I can, too."

Next, Julie gives me a personality test that assesses my personality as ENFP (Extroverted, iNtuitive, Feeling, Perceiving), which means I should embrace creativity, reject confinement, and hook up with an ISTP (Introverted, Sensing, Thinking, Perceiving) man.

By the end of our session, I'm intrigued and invigorated, ready to start hunting for the ISTP of my dreams, and ready to confront my friends if they ever piss me off again. Did I learn anything from Julie that I couldn't have learned on the Internet, or through meditation or life experience or self-help books? Maybe, maybe not. But she's a great listener with an inspiring, positive way about her, and she encouraged me to open up, which might be what I needed most.



Jared Matthew Weiss

My next appointment is with Jared Matthew Weiss, a twenty-seven-year-old musician and self-proclaimed "life-stylist" and "professional friend." Despite his age, Jared has already made a name for himself. He has a "Mantra of the Month" one-liner column (i.e., "I can laugh at myself" and "I have to work for what I deserve") in Shape magazine, and has appeared on "The Tyra Banks Show." If you met him, you'd get it: He oozes charisma, from his quirky humor to his unshaven baby face to his beaded "What's Shakin" bracelet (crafted by a young cancer patient at the Ronald McDonald House, where he volunteers) to his custom-made Nikes with green laces and a personal message on the tongues: JMW HITS.

"Welcome to my world," he says (which, at the moment, means Starbucks).

Since I told him on the phone about my meeting with Julie Melillo, he says to me, "I know you spilled your guts with that other life coach, so I don't want you to do that with me." He then proceeds to talk about himself. A lot. I don't get much of a sense of Jared's life-coaching skills, but I do learn all about his path to self-discovery — like how he used to attract women with too many problems until he realized it was his own fault, and how he used to be arrogant but now he's not.

“You’re so young,” I say. “Did you go to school for life coaching?”

Jared laughs. “I always tell people, ‘There’s no reason why you should trust me!’ What do I know? I didn’t go to school. I have no credentials.” But then he shrugs. “People just love my energy. I have great energy.”

Jared’s life-coaching method is to empower his clients by convincing them that they are the authors, producers, and stars of their own life movies. He instructs them to write about what they want to become, until one day they find themselves living the lives they previously only imagined.

“My mission is to teach you self-love,” he tells me. “Your mission is to learn it and do it.”

I believe wholeheartedly that Jared loves himself, and that many people could perhaps learn by his example. I’m also starting to realize that shopping for a life coach is like shopping for clothes: While that skin-tight purple unitard from American Apparel isn’t necessarily right for me, it might be the perfect addition to *someone’s* wardrobe. I feel pretty confident that both Julie and Jared could improve me; that with their coaching, I could wind up paying two months’ rent at a time, taking deep breaths, and cleaning my apartment.

But it’s not until my third life-coaching session that I find my life coach soul mate.

Eric Horwitz, whom I meet in his vast Chelsea loft, is dressed like a finance guy, as if in homage to his old life.

“I was like a spy,” he tells me. “I was married with kids, working in finance, working in this men’s world, but I was gay and no one knew it.”

Now that he’s out, his former life as a spy comes in handy because he’s carved out a niche for himself as both a personal and a corporate life coach.

Eric hands me a sheet of paper titled “True Values,” and tells me to circle the words on it that I react to in a visceral way. (My circled words include “originality,” “exhilaration,” and “family.”) He then has me tell him the three most important things that have ever happened to me. Once he has all of my information, he wants to help me set my goals.

We talk for two and a half hours. Not once does he check his watch, glance at the door, or fidget. Occasionally he rises to pace, but it’s clear that he’s pacing because he’s concentrating, trying to better understand me. I have never in my life met anyone so able, and willing, to focus completely on another person.

By this time, he’s uncovered things about me that I didn’t know about myself — i.e., that my yoga practice is, ironically, more a rigid obsession than a healthy habit. The afternoon of self-discovery is making me light-headed — almost giddy.

I leave Eric’s apartment feeling not just empowered, but elated. He has given me a list of things to do, including writing letters to people with whom I have unresolved conflicts. (He promises me I don’t have to send them.) He also says, “How about you don’t do any yoga all week unless you absolutely feel like it?” And about a particular man who’s been causing me grief, he tells me, “Call him!”

“What?!”

“Why not?”

“I’ll get hurt.”

“You’re already hurt.”

“I’ll get...more hurt?”

“And? So?” He laughs. “Wow,” he says. “That control stuff runs deep.”

I feel like selling all of my belongings and becoming Eric's disciple. I want to walk with Eric Horwitz. Really: He's that good.

After life-coach sampling my way through New York City, I've changed my mind about Jayson Blair. Why would I want a life coach who's never struggled? All three of the life coaches I interviewed charge between one hundred and two hundred dollars an hour. If I'm going to shell out that much money (especially if I seek life coaching in part to fix my financial woes), I want a coach who has overcome a little adversity. Life coaches *should* have rotting corpses in their closets. After all, we all have rotting corpses in our closets. Or at least that bag of clothes that's been sitting there for nine months, waiting for us to take it to Goodwill.

Julie Melillo: yourdreamslifecoach.com

Jared Matthew Weiss: jaredmatthewweiss.com

Eric Horwitz: gem-llc.com

Diana Spechler's debut novel, “Who By Fire,” is available now through Harper Perennial. For information, go to dianaspechler.com.

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