

# COACHING ON THE COUCH

**Erik de Haan** finds solutions to the mid-life crisis in the novel, *When Nietzsche Wept*

Dr Erik de Haan is director of Ashridge's Centre for Coaching and a senior organisation development consultant at Ashridge Consulting. He can be contacted at erik.dehaan@ashridge.org.uk

## part five

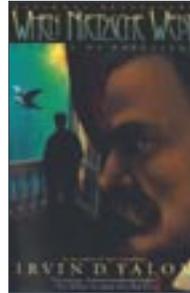
**C**oaches are often called in in times of crisis. Sometimes they are asked to suggest ways forward in a leadership development crisis when previous routines no longer work, or when a promotion has opened up a different and challenging new leadership context. Sometimes they are asked to help a leader who has come under criticism and may have been offered coaching as a last chance to improve.

It is for this reason that it is good for coaches to be familiar with the so-called mid-life crisis, through personal experience or through reading. The novel *When Nietzsche Wept* (1992), by the well-known psychiatrist Irvin Yalom, describes an intensive mid-life crisis and its resolution through coaching. It is a historical novel depicting what could have happened but did not.

Lou Salomé, Friedrich Nietzsche and Sigmund Freud could have spent the last months of 1882 meeting the famous Viennese doctor Joseph Breuer, as in the novel, but it is unlikely that they did. What *did* take place in 1882, however, was the first 'talking cure', as it was described by Dr Breuer's patient, Bertha Pappenheim (who is committed to history under her pseudonym, Anna O.)

*When Nietzsche Wept* evokes the fascinating Viennese *fin-de-siècle* world into which psychoanalysis and psychotherapy were born. The novel relates the unfortunate outcome of that very first 'chimney sweeping cure' – an apt epithet by Pappenheim – that eventually gave birth to psychoanalysis.

As well as being an engaging read, this book serves as a comprehensive and profound introduction to the thinking of three great men: Joseph Breuer, Friedrich Nietzsche and Sigmund Freud.



### A personal reading

The story is written from Breuer's perspective, but I feel more drawn to Nietzsche. To paraphrase Nietzsche's book title, he is depicted as very human but not *all-too* human, and he practises his coaching with detachment, sensitivity, fearlessness and selflessness.

The main tenets of Nietzsche's philosophy are clearly introduced. Yalom shows us how groundbreaking ideas such as the will to power, eternal recurrence and choosing and loving your fate (*amor fati*), can be used by coaches, especially when dealing with a mid-life crisis. Yalom reflects a great deal on coaching in the novel, especially the initial stages of the journey.

### Why I think it's inspirational

The novel form allows us to learn what happens around the consulting room, and to appreciate how a coach can be affected before and after coaching conversations (Breuer's and Nietzsche's fictional case notes support this). It presents psychotherapy as experimental and existential, which befits the setting in a time when neither coaching nor therapy had been invented.

When the coaching takes off there is a lot of experimentation around the question, 'Who is the client?'. Also, the two protagonists experiment continuously with their coaching style: Breuer begins with a directive style and then tries to lure and tempt Nietzsche into the coaching in an almost manipulative way.

When Nietzsche takes over, he too begins as directive and even authoritative, but later he settles into a style that is almost psychoanalytical. The final pages show how a deep friendship, uniquely mutual and open in both men's lives, has evolved out of the sessions, helping at least one of these men to overcome his mid-life crisis. ■