

Coach Reporter interview with Jayson Blair, Disgraced Journalist Turned Life Coach

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Hi everybody I'm Mark Joyella.

Jayson Blair rocked the world of journalism back in 2003.

You will remember he was the reporter at the New York Times that dragged down one of the world's most respected journalistic institutions into a plagiarism scandal that ultimately cost not just him, but two top New York Times executives their jobs.

Blair later wrote a book and then he disappeared. But this week he resurfaced in Northern Virginia where he's working as a certified life coach.

Dr Eric Oberschneider is a psychologist and director of Ashburn psychological services. He hired Blair after some admitted reservations about Blair's toxic past.

Oberschneider calls Blair "the comeback kid" and a success story. He says Blair is a man who has transformed his past and found a way to use it to help people.

Blair's history of deception and disgrace, Oberschneider says, is a strength in Blair's work with clients; many whom have histories similar to that of Jayson Blair; substance abuse, mental illness and breakdown.

Jayson Blair talked to us from Virginia.

Mark Joyella (MJ) - Jayson Blair welcome to the Coaching Commons

Jayson Blair (JB) - Thanks for having me Mark

MJ – I know that a lot of coaches have read the news articles over the past few days and they've seen Jayson Blair, Life Coach and it has certainly spurred conversation.

Can you tell us how did this happen? How did this come about for you?

JB – umm.. Mark are you getting more at why or how this article came about or how I became a coach?

MJ – How did you end up here, personally?

JB – Oh ok, alright. Umm ...I worked at the New York Times as people know and uhh what most people know is that there was scandal that involved me plagiarizing and fabricating stories. What a lot of people don't know happened afterwards. The New York Times graciously helped to get me into a psychiatric hospital afterwards. After several months of psychiatric treatment I was diagnosed with Bipolar disorder. I spent about a year still in New York trying to get the meds right that's during the period that I wrote my book and after the book was done I decided to come back home where I went to high school and where my family is. I knew I needed more

family support and you know that sort of one on one care that you kinda can get from a life coach.

Umm I came home and struggled while I was home, found a psychiatrist umm..and my mom came up with the idea for starting, cause she was struggling too you know with my struggle and she came up with the idea of starting a support group for families and friends of people who have Bipolar disorder and I said you know what?

I really need to find people that I can relate to so I started a support group for myself.

And what happened was those support groups grew into a network of about 5 support groups across Virginia and then moved into areas outside of direct support of people in the group into community outreach and other things like that and crisis intervention going with people to the hospital and with their doctors umm and I got involved with mental health professionals, one of the mental health professionals I got to know through a community outreach event for depression screening was Dr. Oberschneider at Ashburn Psychological Services.

He suggested to me that I should become a life coach and I should simply take what I was doing at the support groups and bring it to a more professional setting where I could work with closer with the psychologist and psychiatrist that I was sort of already informally working with when I work with the members of the support group.

At first, when he first said it, (MJ – interjects with “umm hmm”) I kinda laughed in the back of my mind, I I you know I couldn't take it seriously.

And it wasn't the concept of life coaching that I didn't take seriously, it was the concept of him taking that risk on me given my background but what I didn't know was long before we did the depression screening, he had already checked me out. He had talked to doctors, he had talked to psychiatrist. I don't know if he talked to my own psychiatrist but he talked to enough people who knew umm the work that I had been doing the last three years to feel confident about it.

So I kind of brushed it off at first and he and his wife came back at me again laid out the plan showed me programs for certification, told me where life coaching was going, put me in touch with a friend of theirs who's a wellness coach. We talked about it for hours and weeks and whether it made sense.

We sort of just came up with a plan of at least trying the certification, see if it fit together and ultimately it did and we took a cautious approach, only one or two clients at first and we went to see how that went and we focused on the area that I knew best which was disorders, Bipolar, depression and slowly with that work we went into other areas where I had experienced umm you know career coaching, umm attention deficit disorder, umm and then more intensely with the seriously mentally ill.

MJ – You're certified?

JB – Yes. Umm I was certified..I got my certification through the Spencer Institute. I don't remember how many months it took but it was something like seven or eight months.

Now one of the things that Mike suggested that was a really good idea was also take some private classes in psychopathology, pharmacology because those are some of the things that I

knew a fair amount about from working with the psychiatrist and psychologist but to sort of sync the model of the life coach, we added some curriculum of psychological classes.

MJ – so I would imagine that hearing that, your answer to the folks that see this as sort of “oh he’s not life coach in the use of the term as a cliché, is “no I have really been thoughtful, I’ve trained, I am doing hard work.

JB – right and I am doing hard work, I’ve trained. I’ve used my experience but its not just my past experience. If you look at the types of clients that I get, most of them don’t walk in the door knowing who I am or my background.

They find out about my experience, my training. I disclose my background to them, umm I sort of think that I should be held to a high standard even among life coaches so life coaches don’t get criticized because of this, you know so it does not harm the profession and a lot of it I get you know very interesting.

There is a lot of skepticism among the psychologist at first. Skepticism about hiring Jayson Blair. Many of them have heard about the New York Times stories but there is probably greater skepticism about hiring a life coach and bringing down the brand.

Now months later these trained psychologists came to me and said “hey when you first got here we were really skeptical of you; we were really skeptical of life coaching but now we see how life coaching sort of kicks the ball where therapy leaves things off.

Now if therapy is looking back to try and figure out your patterns and where you need to make change and then the process starts there and the client is supposed to go and make changes.

Life coaching comes in at that point with action oriented solutions where you can work with the client so it fills in the gap and for the psychologist instead of not sending their people out to do it on their own, they get to now see the results happen, they get to keep track and monitor them and then for the psychiatrist on their end, you know the way insurance works and the way other issues work they don’t get to follow their cases, they don’t get to do case management.

They don’t get to sit and walk and talk to patients about medications and other triggers that have nothing to do with medication and their seasonal triggers or anxiety triggers or things that happen to them in the relationships that we see and hear causing these problems and how you avoid them, so if I can come in and help them on that end and another thing that I think all of them know is that I’ll take the 3am phone call and not complain
(Laughter)

MJ – Well there is something to be said for that. I will tell you that there has been a lot of discussion on the Coaching Commons site among coaches and some therapists who have found their way into the conversation as well about the synthesis between therapy and coaching especially among some career coaches who are dealing with clients who have never known fear when it comes to their career, who’ve never known the sense of having lost an identity because they’ve lost a career or a job

JB – Oh yeah,

MJ - and there are dangers, to some coaches they see it as a dangerous area to know where the boundaries are and know when you are venturing close to therapy

JB - Right

MJ - And then to say this is something that you would best work with a therapist. But

JB – And I think another thing to add to that discussion is my impression is that a number of people who do have mental health issues that should be dealt with by a therapist first, come to a life coaching because they don't want the stigma of being in therapy or talking to a psychologist. So when you look at all of that, one of the great things of having a life coach in a practice with psychologist and psychiatrist is that I can see client, I can walk down the hall to a psychiatrist, I can run down what's going on with my client, umm let them know, tell them I'm making a referral, I'm going to send them to see him first and then we will talk about how to move forward next.

If we need to move forward with just psychiatry or psychiatry and psychology or life coaching and psychology or what mix of it we need for the client.

So being, I can tell you that thinking about the idea of life coaching on my own outside of a group practice and working with people who have mental health issues which is a lot of the people who end up seeking out life coaches even if it isn't a diagnosed psychiatric are going through a period of time where mental health professionals can be of assistance to them, if I was not in a group practice I would not have as much confidence that I could actually get my clients to go to and do it. To go and see the people, to get the feedback.

MJ – Alright

JB – Does that make sense?

MJ – I..it does. I want to talk to you about the mental health aspect of it all..uhh in the day or so since the news came out that you have kind of been under the radar doing all of this work and working as a coach, umm coaches have expressed a lot of concern about that and what it means to their work and their identity as a life coach

JB – Umm hmm

MJ – And some of the questions that I've heard go something like this uh you know how dare you Jayson Blair, how dare you bring your reputation to our line of work and the threat that I think is perceived is just by attaching your name to coaching in general the impact would be to reduce it for everyone and that there is no way that you could meet muster with any kind of code of ethics among coaches that you have already essentially transgressed them.

JB – Right

MJ – How do you respond to that?

JB – With the...I mean there are so many things to say and the (pause) acknowledging that I am slightly avoiding the question here, the answer in general to statements like that with that broad theme is that I don't see any problem with quietly helping people, which is what I have been doing.

Whether it's with support groups or whether it's as a coach or whether it's in my life with my family and my friends. Umm., in terms of how it broadly affects the coaching profession, that is something certainly that I am concerned by. I would hope that my work as a coach would be what is measured and not my past umm because I suspect that as we have talked about before, many of the people who whether it's mental health professionals or as coaches, many of the people come into these profession come in thru the back door. People like Marsha Bradfield with Borderline or Kay Redfield Jamison with Bipolar.

Are we going to judge her on what she did when she was at the University of California and she was manic the whole time and didn't know or even when she knew she had it she stopped taking her medication? We are going to judge her on what she did once she got better, once things were working and once she was able to contribute.

I think it's a little harder for people to deal with me because unlike someone like Kay Redfield Jamison, my fall happened on a public stage and I can't change that umm

MJ – Is you feeling now after you have described that getting help, going to the psychiatrist to get the meds right that what happened at the New York Times was a manifestation of untreated Bipolar disorder and that's your story

JB – Well I.. no I think it's a combination of things. I think you look at it this way, what Bipolar did was, all it did was add gasoline to a fire that was already there. And what was the fire that was already there? My character flaws. So the fire got bigger while they were more out of control...umm the mental illness affected my judgment but I think the reason it affected my judgment was that I did not seek help.

But clearly once the medications were stabilized and once my treatment for Bipolar was at a good point it gave me an opportunity to work on those character flaws and that was the key to it. With those same character flaws, maybe it would not have landed me on the cover of the New York Times but I would have been just as flawed and just as bad a person.

So what I see it as is a benefit. I see it as treating Bipolar knocked down the walls that allowed me to get to the real problems of my personality and who I am. And it's a gift that I was able to get that treatment.

One because a lot of people don't even get past the point where you know that they're ever stable on medication but getting to that point gave me the opportunity to work on me and...

MJ – And yeah, so you are saying that there were issues of integrity that.

JB – Of course

MJ – That needed to be addressed be..with or without a mental illness?

JB - Yes. Yes. Yes. I mean it is.. in my, I mean I don't want to speak broadly about people with Bipolar but my view is that there is nothing that I did that directly caused the scandal that you can directly contribute to the illness. The judgment, the poor judgment affected it. Umm the manic episodes affected it. Fears affected it, that were. Anxiety affected it. All of these things were going in and contributing it..to it but the actual choice to lie or the choice to hide umm..you know not at the famous point of my life, that was a problem I had before then. That was a problem with my character, my personality, insecurity, arrogance all sorts of things twisted into it but I had to start working on one, I had the Bipolar treatment.

MJ – So you..

JB - Getting stable was just the beginning.

MJ – So you say to coaches you know judge the entirety of who you are and the work that you have done since and what? That coaching can't keep the tarnish out?

JB – Umm...you know (short pause) that's not so much as.. well how can I put it this way? Regulation of coaching is not something that I have spent..you know I have spent time researching it and I have spent time looking into it ..umm but it's not really something that I spend a lot of time worrying about and I don't think it's because I have celebrity that helps in any way, I think it's in part because I am in a practice that adds credibility.

The coaching profession is seeking credibility. You know the coaching profession wants people to know the value of this. They don't want the television jokes about it. They don't want the other things like that.

I haven't had to deal with that as a coach because when someone is walking over and calling me because they want me as a coach its either they decided that they want a life coach or a psychiatrist or a psychologist or a friend or one of my clients or one of my client's mothers, brothers or sisters or whole family actually

MJ – Right.

JB – Someone has referred them, so I don't deal with a lot of what people hate mainly because I am in a practice, related to the stigmas of coaching, so it's not something that I have given a ton of thought to.

MJ – I think a lot of the coaches obviously have..

JB – Right.

MJ - And they...

JB – It's the biggest issue.

MJ – Yeah and you know

JB – You know when I get a coach...before...before...you know...I have had coaches come to me, in the area, in Northern Virginia who are starting their coaching practice, they find about me from the website at Ashburn Psych, most of them don't know my background and then find out when they talk to me but their biggest issue is stigma.

What we've worked to try and do is go to the big psychological practices in the area and pitch them bringing coaches on as independent contractors.

MJ – Umm hmmm... the

JB – Going to let's say, a gym and saying hey you're a wellness coach lets work out some kind of deal with you and them... so the stigma is a huge issue

MJ – I think that the fear that a lot of coaches had when they found out where your career path had taken you is that it would just add to the mockery of it all and you know I saw this morning on the snarky website Gawker that they were having exactly the kind of hey with it that the coaches feared they would and they wrote "Jayson Blair is now a "Certified Life Coach" which one can argue is just as fake a career as his time in journalism was"

JB – Well I don't think that they are getting that from anyone who has worked for me.. I mean worked with me or from anyone that has been one of my clients or one of my colleagues, so to me... you know that...it's a, it's a useless snarky statement and it's not supported by any fact.. umm and you know we can look at things and cause we are smart people, we can look at things with a critical eye and know that no one is saying that except the writer.

I think that part of the problem...you know, this is.. a good lesson from the situation at the New York Times was that many black journalists when the scandal happened rushed out and said that you know I don't want this to you know, make affirmative action or make black journalist look bad and ran to every media outlet on the planet to do it.

And then talking to reporters about it afterwards, it wasn't even an issue until they started talking about it.

Until the people who were trying to defend affirmative action and to defend the idea that black journalists were just as good as everybody else.

Until they started screaming that this is not.. you know, not a racial issue, not a racial, no one was talking about it being a racial issue.

As a ... that is one of the similar things that happens in a situation like this. That...that...you know it's legitimate for coaches to have a conversation about this but if it starts to hyperventilate too much about it, it's going to become a public issue that people are going to begin to believe.

MJ – Do you feel inclined to come into a place like the Coaching Commons and join that conversation? Or do you feel that you are more than likely to just pretty much walk in the halls at your practice and kind of go off the radar

JB – I mean uh yeah, I mean uh, I...starting today I will be off the radar (chuckle).

I mean I don't, I don't plan to be a part of any public discussions about any of these issues. You know I have also taken a position when I get calls from people who want me to testify for mental health laws or legislation; I stay out of that too. I might send a letter.

I can't put myself on the public stage, one, because I don't know how it's gonna be interpreted. Some people are going to love you know, my story of recovery. Some people are going to dismiss the idea just because I endorsed it.

So it's a real dangerous thing for me to get involved and it's not good for my health either.

Personally I need to be focused on my work but most importantly, if I am thinking of my clients, I need to be with them, working with them in their lives and every second I take to do something else is a second that I can't give them.

MJ – Right

JB – Does that make sense?

MJ – It does... I

JB – And I...I want a quiet life. (laughs)

MJ – Yeah, I think at some point coaches would probably appreciate you, maybe engaging in some form uh..in a coaching environment, into that conversation because I think that, I am sure that they will be expressing themselves, after they've heard you and it would be interesting to actually have a dialogue.

But that is up to you.

You are certainly welcome at any time to come into the Coaching Commons and discuss.

I have a question though.

Maybe it's the journalist in me, I don't know.

But when I hear you talk about doing career coaching, you know, I wonder, with the time that has passed, with the perspective and the training that you have gotten, uhh how you would have coached yourself in those days at the New York Times and..

JB – I would have

MJ – You know..

JB – (laughing) I would have coached myself.. I would have coached myself right up into the EAP office

MJ – You vented in a book umm..that it seemed to stir up all of those issues that you discussed. About race, about journalism, about... about everything.

Other people's careers were...were...were so severely damaged.

JB – I think if I were Jayson Blair’s coach during the time before any of this happened, even without the mental illness..we..let’s say the mental illness played no role in all of this.

I would have been in a very difficult position.

Because I would have been in a position where my client’s view of their best interest would be strikingly different than mine..the..the person that I am right now.

Umm..you know I..for my entire life, I wanted to be nothing but be a journalist.

I could not imagine a world that existed without it.

Umm and looking back and listening to my family and friends and I am sure Jayson the life coach would have said seen it, I gravitated to some of the most unhealthy things about the job.

I loved being available all the time.

I loved pouring my heart and soul into things.

I loved just the fact that it had absolutely no boundaries.

And even though I had a talent for the profession, it was the wrong profession for me.

Not that it wasn’t the right profession and I say this loving journalism, absolutely loving it.. never having wanted to do anything else, but I shouldn’t have been there.

And I’m not..I am not sure that even I as a coach would have been able to convince me as the journalist back then umm..to look in other directions.

But what I would have hoped I would have done is pointed out, which I have done to journalists who have since called me and said “I can’t imagine doing anything else but that I have to get out of this profession”..is that there are other outlets for you.

There are other ways to go.

The skills and the talent that you have built up here are valuable in corporate America.

They’re valuable in government.

They’re valuable in investigations.

A lot of the work is very similar.

You think that it’s not as meaningful? Well look at how meaningful some of these things are.

You know... here are some of the benefits of it.

The boundaries that you have.

You know...you can walk away from your job when you go home at night.

That’s hopefully the direction I think I would have pushed myself and see but my guess is in reality, what probably would have happened as I was headed down that course, I would have recognized there’s a serious psychiatric issue here and I need to get him to mental health professionals.

MJ – Uhh Jayson Blair, thank you very much for an honest discussion and I think.

JB – Thanks for having me Mark.

MJ – Coaches will be very interested in hearing what you've had to say and undoubtedly will share their thoughts and even if you don't respond, you might get something out of reading the comments that they post.

JB – I will, I will certainly read. I will certainly read.

MJ – Jayson Blair, Life Coach, thank you for joining us today.

JB – Thanks Mark.