

The following is an edited transcript of a conversation between Doug O'Brien and David Gordon that took place on November 9, 2005. This was a telephone conference call with several listeners and was recorded for the purposes of this transcription. No significant content was edited from the dialog. It was edited simply to facilitate cohesion.

- Doug O'Brien: We have with us David Gordon, author of several books on NLP and Ericksonian Hypnosis, including "Phoenix", "Therapeutic Metaphors", and his new book on Modeling co-written with Graham Dawes entitled, "Expanding your World – Modeling the Structure of Experience." We're honored to have him with us this evening. Welcome, David.
- David Gordon: Well, Doug, I have to apologize. My voice was getting much better today and then, as the evening approached, you can hear, it's gotten weird again. So, I'm going to talk and I'll just have to sound like an old geezer or something.
- Doug: Well, maybe we'll just pretend you're Milton.
- David: There you go. There you go.
- Doug: You're just channeling Milton. Well, would it be all right with you if we talked some NLP before we got into doing some...
- David: Whatever you want, we're just talking.
- Doug: OK, I want to talk about lots of things that I'm curious about from you. I know that you've been around NLP since, well, was it before it *was* NLP?
- David: Yep.
- Doug: Can you give us some background about that because most of us don't know about those days? So, where did you start with it all and how did that happen?
- David: Well, let's see, this must have been 1972, I believe.
- Doug: Wow.
- David: It was '71 or '72, but I think it was '72. I met Richard Bandler who, at that time, was just starting some evening group in Gestalt therapy.
- Doug: OK, and when you say, "met him," how did you meet him, in a grocery store, or...?
- David: No, no. That's silly. I met him in a bank.
- Doug: (laughing) Oh, well, sorry.
- David: In fact, I met him in a bank where my wife was a bank teller. Debbie knew him as a customer, and he happened to be in front of me in line when I went to see her. And, so, she introduced us, and we talked for a little while and he invited me to join a new group he was starting that evening, in teaching Gestalt therapy. And, it sounded interesting and he seemed interesting, so I went. He was conducting two separate groups at that time and in one evening group, he had John Grinder as one of his students.
- Doug: Grinder was a student?
- David: Yeah, a participant in the group, learning Gestalt therapy, as I believe Judith DeLozier was, I'm not sure because I wasn't in that group. I was in the other group where there

was Leslie Cameron, who became Leslie Cameron Bandler, and some other people who are still around or have fallen away. So anyway, you know, we spent, I guess, that year learning Gestalt therapy from him and doing all kinds of very interesting things. At that point he was already pretty familiar with work that Virginia Satir was doing in family therapy. So, we were doing some of the things that he had learned from her. And, somewhere along in there, he and John put their heads together and applied John's knowledge of transformational grammar to looking at the work that therapists were doing, that Richard had been studying, in terms of their technique.

Doug: And, at that time, it was Virginia Satir and Fritz Perls?

David: Right, and somehow, what bubbled up out of that caldron, and I was not involved in making that brew, so I can't tell you, specifically, but somehow what bubbled up out of that caldron, was the meta model. Also, then, along about that time, Richard and John really started working together and started experimenting with all kinds of bizarre things. Basically, what we did in those early days, was we would get together with Richard and John, a group of us once or twice a week at Richard's house, and we would bring people who had problems or we would bring people who could do something interesting. And, we would work with them and try and figure out how they did what they did, whether it was a problem or an ability, and then, figure out either how we could reproduce it, ourselves, or how we could change it, if it was a problem.

Sometimes, Richard and John would have done a bunch of work with somebody and come in with some discovery of theirs and teach it to us, and would experiment with each other. But, it was a period, a very rich period where, you know, we were young, we could do anything, we had these two guys who were telling us we could do anything and who were inspiring us to experiment with experience. And so, we, as a group, and as individuals, discovered all kinds of things.

Doug: So, you were experimenting with experience. Now, when you say you were trying to figure out how they did those things, were you modeling people?

David: Well, yes, although, we didn't call it that. You know, it was nothing explicit at that time. But, in fact, that is what we were doing. You know, it wasn't till at some point later, gosh, oh, I don't quite know where in the process. You know, these things are quite organic. And also, it wasn't just one person, it wasn't me or one person doing it, it was going through the process, it was a group that was interacting. And, so, it's really hard for me to say exactly when the notion of modeling, explicit notion of modeling, kind of came to the surface. I don't really know when I would say that happened. But, I can tell you, in those early days, it was certainly, nothing that was ever talked about or recognized explicitly, at least by any of us participating. But, we certainly, were doing that, we were doing it in an informal way, but we were certainly doing it. We were trying to figure out, you know, what's the structure? That's what NLP is about, what's the structure of experience here? And, we were trying to figure out what is the structure here and how could we describe it? And, that is the enterprise of modeling.

Doug: So, where does that term, "modeling," come from, as far as you know?

David: Well, it certainly, doesn't come from NLP. I mean, it pre-dates NLP, certainly.

Doug: How did it come into NLP?

David: I don't know. You know, Doug, I really don't know. It kind of appeared one day.

Doug: Prior to it being formalized as NLP? Or, was it after that?

David: Let me think. Formalized as NLP...I think it was, I think it did come in before it got formally named as NLP. But, I don't really know. Probably...I'll bet the person who could answer that question would be Robert Dilts.

Doug: OK, we'll have to ask him, then.

David: Yes.

Doug: For me, when I learned NLP years ago, and this was, you know, a good 15 years after you started with Richard, nobody really taught modeling. Everybody talked about modeling, used the term pretty loosely, actually. There were models of this and models of that, Milton models, meta models, all kinds of models and people talked about models. Tony Robbins changed it, ultimately, to role modeling, or something like that, I'm not sure. But, nobody really taught it. I mean, what is it, and how do you come to be doing it now? I mean, you've just released a wonderful new book called, "Expanding Your World." It's all about modeling. Is it sort of explicitly what you did back then, or what...?

David: No, no, it's explicitly what I do now.

Doug: OK.

David: Of course, it is an explication or, I guess you would say, it's a model of a lot of what, at least, I was doing then. But, I think one needs to be careful in talking about modeling and be clear about kind of what level you're talking about modeling. You know, there is the underlying process or enterprise of modeling, right? Let's call it the enterprise of modeling, which really, you know, I think is the same, no matter what approach you're taking or who's doing it. And, that is, you are constructing some kind of description of the structure of someone else's experience, with the intention of having that structure operate in you or in somebody else, be useful in you or somebody else.

Now, the form that that description takes could be very different. You know, the description could exist completely as nothing but body sensation and could have no language attached to it, whatsoever. Although, of course, you can't talk about it, then. Or, you know, the description could exist in content, as a content description, which much of the model that I do does. But, the nub of it, I think, to me, somebody's doing modeling when they are identifying in some way, pulling out in some way, this structure that is significant or essential to manifesting or producing a particular experience or behavior. That's modeling.

Doug: OK.

David: And then, you know, different people have different approaches for doing that. So...

Doug: We, in...I don't know, the second or third generation NLPers, I don't know where we are, but I wasn't there, obviously, back in the 70's with you and Richard and John and all those people. But, we sort of look back on those early days as, you know, just wacky, wild, crazy, anything goes kind of stuff, where people were doing modeling by deep trance identification and, you know, it wasn't nearly as, I don't know, codified or explicit as it is now, certainly with your experiential array, etc. It's kind of like they just became Erickson, as an example or somebody else. They did everything they could to just deep trance identify with it and it was almost an unconscious process.

David: Well, some people did that. Some people were adept at doing that and some people were not adept at doing that. We all experimented with that through...and, you're absolutely right. As I said, it was a period...it was a very rich period where, you know, we, because we believed we could do anything, we were not constrained in what we tried and what we went after. And so, it was wonderful! I mean, it was a wonderful period! It was...my God, it was fantastic! You know, we felt completely free to try anything that occurred to us to try, to delve into anything that grabbed our attention and you know, I think the one thing that unified what we did, or I have to think about it further. I don't know if it's the one thing, but it's a thing that unified what we did, was that we were always after the underlying structure and that was the thing that I think set NLP apart, which was we operated out of this reality or this presupposition that whatever people did, whatever their experience was, whatever their behavior was, it was that it is a manifestation of, or an expression of some underlying structure that's operating in them.

And, that if we know what the structure is, we can alter that structure and either affect a change in ourselves or that person, or we can take on that structure, ourselves, and start manifesting those same kinds of abilities or experiences. And, that is, to me, is what makes...gives NLP whatever identity it has in the world. And, to me, without that, you don't have NLP, period.

Doug: Without that implicit question?

David: Yeah, without that, it's not NLP. It's just not NLP. You know, if it's not about structure, how structure gives rise to experience, then it's not NLP. You know, so, it gets confusing the people and people ask, "Well, Dave, what is NLP?" And, of course, and naturally, it's become associated with what I call the products of NLP, you know, all the wonderful techniques, and this and that, produced from discovering various structures and putting them in forums that give people access to those structures. So, you know, I think it's also true to say that that is, also, NLP, you know? But, for me, what NLP was, to begin with and what attraction it has for me, is that pursuit of the structure, the structures that give rise to our experiences and behaviors.

Doug: If I could just ask you a specific example in modeling, if you were to...or, if I were, or someone were to try to model a golfer like Tiger Woods, or a sprinter, or marathon runner. We just had the New York City Marathon here in New York a couple days ago. Like, a marathon runner from Kenya. What would be the value of finding out, you know the structure? I mean, wouldn't you just need to learn how they swing their golf club? Wouldn't you need to find out how they train to run that far, that fast? I mean, if I find the belief systems of that Kenyan runner, I still don't think I could run 26 miles at five mile a minute pace. I mean, I can't run one mile at five mile a minute pace.

David: Well, one thing, and this is a very good point and it's something that a lot of people get hung up with, when it comes to the whole issue of modeling, which is that modeling doesn't turn you into that other person. Modeling doesn't give you their body. Modeling doesn't give you their personal history. Model doesn't give you a lifetime of being who they are, operating with those structures and acquiring, you know, the thousands and thousands of little experiences that all weave together to support them in their ability. So, it is, I think, inappropriate, to say the least, to expect that any amount of modeling, any amount of putting yourself in touch with somebody's structure, is going to imbue you with their ability.

What modeling does, is it gives you the framework or the structure upon which to hang your own experiences. And so, the purpose, I think, or point of modeling...right now, we're talking about modeling ability, OK? It's a little different if we're talking about modeling in therapeutic change, but we're talking about modeling ability. What you want to get...what I think one wants to get out of modeling is that framework that will

allow me to approach that sport, approach running in the same way that this person who's very successful at it, approaches it, in terms of their thinking, in terms of their strategies, in terms of their behaviors. You know, how do they approach it so that they do so well?

My approaching it...of course, the assumption is that if I approach it the way they do, I will, then, have similar kinds of results, in terms of my running, in the example that we're using. It's not going to give me his muscles.

Doug: Right.

David: It's not going to give me his fat muscle ratio and all those other things. It's not going to do that. It's not going to give me his lungs and all those things. But, it can give me some things that make an enormous difference. So, for example, you know, just to pull one out of the air, here, we've got one runner whom, as he's running along, you know, in the beginning of the race, what he's holding in mind, is how far he still has to go in the race. That's what he's holding in mind, for whatever reason, for whatever reason, you know? It's how he was raised, who knows? God knows. But, it's the structure he operates out of, when he goes running. He's thinking, OK, I've only got, you know, 25 miles to go. Now, I've only got 24 miles to go.

Now, we talk to this Kenya runner, and we find out that he doesn't even think about how far he has to go, that what he's holding in mind, is how far he's been. Or, let's say, what he's holding in mind is what he's feeling in his body right now.

Doug: Right.

David: And, what's right around him right now. And, he's not thinking beyond a few steps beyond where he is.

Doug: Right.

David: I don't know, I'm making this up because I haven't modeled folks like that. Now, I absolutely guarantee you that if that first runner, who's thinking about the finish line all the time, if he starts thinking the way this Kenyan runner thinks, he's going to have a different experience. Not only is he going to have a different experience, but because we are systems and there's no such thing as changing one thing in a structure without having it affect the whole system, that by just making that one shift in his thinking, it will start affecting other thinking that he does, it'll probably affect how he breathes, how he moves. And, you know, it'll have all kinds of ramifications.

Doug: Sure.

David: So, I mean, the idea in modeling is not to give you the ability. The idea in modeling is to give you the structure that makes the ability possible. And, that's a huge difference.

Doug: It is a huge difference, and you're also talking about modeling the ability, not the person.

David: Right, exactly, yeah. You want to model the person? Forget it. I mean, that's a lifetime proposition...

Doug: Right.

David: ...that, ultimately, you will not succeed at.

Doug: Right, gotcha. And, how do you use modeling, you were saying, in therapeutic context?

David: Well, an approach to therapy, you know, it's my approach and I think it's the approach that we certainly took in the early days of NLP and I know it's still taught in places, is to take the approach that, OK, for me to know what to do with you, you know, to helping you change, I need to be able to do what you do. And, that's how we would know that we understood our client, is that we could do what they did. So, what we would routinely do, is sit down with a client and gather information, and as we're gathering information, what we are trying to do in our own experience, is reproduce what they do. So, if they're sitting there going, "Oh, you know, whenever I get to work, my boss starts talking to me in a certain way. You know, I feel defeated and then, I fall into this spiral." You know, what I'm going to be doing, is gathering the information I need, in order to step into that world of that client and have my own experience effected in the same way because once I can do it to me, then, not only do I understand the structure, but I can, then, start making changes in my own experience, to find out what do I need to change in this structure, in order to get the desired outcome.

Doug: Right.

David: And then, I use that, then, as a basis for knowing what to do with a client.

Doug: So, therefore, like Erickson, every intervention could be very different because their structure is different than anybody else's, so where you intervene would be different, as well.

David: That was the early...that was the ethos that we operated out of in the early days. And, you know, to a certain extent, we became victims of our own successes, in that, you know, we developed certain techniques.

Doug: Like, the phobia pattern became...

David: Yeah, which, by the way, came from modeling...

Doug: Sure.

David: ...people who fixed themselves. You know, and for instance, the changed history pattern came from a woman who came to the group. She said...I don't remember exactly what she said, but basically, she said, "Well, you know, I don't have any problem with the past. If anything happened to me bad in the past, I just go back and change it." Oh, really? Let's find out about that! And, you know, so out of working with interesting people who did interesting things in their experience, techniques were created. Well, they came to the forefront and they became what people learned to do to work with clients.

And, you know, I think what got lost along the way was the whole approach of sitting down with a person and finding out, who is this person? You know, what is the structure of this person's experience? What is the world that this person lives in? What kind of intervention would be meaningful or significant in that person's world?

Doug: So, for you, then, it was kind of the evolution of that way of thinking that led to this new...well, for me it's new...this experiential array that you have in your book, the "Expanding Your World" book?

David: Yeah, well, the array came out of...in 1988, when Graham Dawes and I were conducting...we were often, going around, doing the testing weekend in practitioner, master practitioner trainings and we were training in Belgium. I guess it was practitioner training. At any rate, people were, as part of their final thing, they had to work with clients. And, they had to gather information and people would go gather information and

Graham and I would walk around and ask them, “OK, so tell us about this person? What’s going on with this person?” And, they would proceed to open up their notebooks and go through page after page after page of notes they’d taken. They’d just written down everything the person had said and they thought just by repeating everything this person said, they were answering the question as to what is going on with this person.

And, what we realized, of course, was that you know, these folks had no way to know...keep track of what information they had, what was the nature of the information? What did it tell them about the structure of experience? And, what was redundant and what wasn’t? And so, that night, we created this format and it’s just an information gathering format for organizing information into different areas of experience and for keeping track of it and start using it, and found that not only was it extremely effective in helping people gather information in doing therapy, but we pretty quickly, tumbled to well, oh, this is a format for doing modeling of any kind. And so, we started massaging it and applying it in that realm. But, that’s what it is, it’s a format for doing the modeling, one of many that are out there.

Doug: Is it still evolving?

David: Well, I hope so. I’ll tell you what, the form of it is not evolving, currently. It has, over the years. Originally, it was just four boxes and now, it’s got some boxes inside of boxes. But, it’s stayed the way it’s been for probably the last four years. What has evolved, however, is how we use it, some of the distinctions, how we use some of the distinctions, how we identify some of the distinctions that have evolved. In fact, I’m currently doing a seminar, as you know, in New York, a modeling seminar, you know, and the people in the seminar have just, in the last two meetings, have come up with refinements to the approach, you know, in how we use the array, that I think are wonderful. You know, they still have to be tested out, but my gut feeling is that, you know, these are really refinements.

So, you know, I hope it will continue to evolve and you know, maybe some day, we’ll come up with even a better...

Doug: A revised edition of...

David: Yeah, yeah, in life.

---about this point in the conversation we experienced technical difficulties and the recording was lost. We will redo our discussion about David’s history with Milton Erickson and his understanding of Erickson’s methods of therapy and hypnosis. Look for it soon.