

Generative Trance

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This is an edited version of the opening remarks Dr. Stephen Gilligan made to his 12-day course in Ericksonian Hypnosis held near Hamburg, Germany, in January 2007. The transcript of the whole workshop will be published in a book entitled, “Generative Trance” (by Stephen Gilligan). All copyrights belong to Stephen Gilligan.

Good morning, everybody, and welcome to Trance Camp. I would like to emphasize from the outset this notion that trance is a very naturalistic experience; that is, it doesn't come from the hypnotist or his/her suggestions, it comes naturally from every human being's experience. In the traditional view, the word “trance” is often used interchangeably with the word “hypnosis”; in the naturalistic approach, they are quite different.

In the traditional view, trance is thought to be an artifact of hypnotic suggestion. That is, trance develops because the hypnotist says something like, booga booga booga. (Laughter). It's assumed the subject is more or less passive, being controlled (hopefully in benevolent ways) by the hypnotist. You can imagine what it would do for a client if they had this belief. At the very least, it certainly would not activate their own generative intelligence; in addition, it would probably make the subject wary of the hypnotist's control, or interested in regressively succumbing to it. None of this would be good for generative trance work. Hopefully hypnotherapy is a process of learning a greater sense of control in yourself; control not in the rigid sense, but in the generative sense of having the power to transform identity, create wonderful futures, develop great relationships, and heal old wounds. Being controlled by another person is part of the problem, not the solution. So from the outset I want to emphasize trance as a process of learning self-generativity. This requires that we consider both the role of the subject and the hypnotist in ways radically different from the traditional view

Milton Erickson's approach to generative trance was indeed a radical difference that made a difference. It might be helpful to emphasize from the beginning that it came from within his own personal experiences. It came from his own struggles, and the opportunities that he saw within them to learn some amazing things. I mention this at the outset because this is how we're presenting generative trance to clients: *as an opportunity to deeply accept every part of your life in ways that allow amazing new learnings and*

developments to unfold. Erickson was about as strange a person as I ever met, but also one of the happiest and probably the most creative. He was tone deaf (he couldn't hear music), color blind (he only could see the color purple), and dyslectic. He didn't realize the dictionary was alphabetized until he was 15; until that time, he would look up a word by starting on the first page of the dictionary and keep going until he found the word....And you think you're a slow learner! (Laughter)

When he was 17, he was paralyzed by a severe polio attack, which the doctors said he would never recover from. He learned to move and walk again by engaging in inner "experiments in learning"; he didn't know anything about formal hypnosis yet, but he did know that he had a great imagination and wonderful inner resources. So he would go inside and deeply hold the intention of rehabilitating his body and then notice different things happening. For example, he might find himself returning to a pleasurable childhood experience, say, of playing ball with his brother on the family farm in northern Wisconsin. He would become deeply absorbed in this pleasurable memory for long periods, sometimes weeks, until the muscle patterns in that memory would begin to reactivate in his present body. It was really quite an amazing thing he accomplished. And in doing so, he began to learn that generative trance is not a process of being programmed with scripts or direct suggestions, but an opportunity to access the amazing skills of the creative unconscious. When you have this confidence as a hypnotist in your own and your client's capacities, it makes things a lot easier and a lot more fun.

Guiding all these learnings was the utilization principle of accepting whatever was there and finding ways to creatively utilize what was there as opportunities for growth and change. One of the ways we sometimes describe this utilization principle is, "the problem is the solution." That is, a difficulty can be transformed into a resource by relationally engaging with it in different ways. Generative trance is a tradition for learning how to do this with yourself and others.

When Erickson became a psychiatrist, he initially worked with locked up schizophrenics and psychotics. He very quickly learned that the patients couldn't enter his reality, so that if communication was to occur, Erickson would need to accept and work within the patient's reality. There was one guy on the ward who believed he was Jesus Christ. This wasn't really a problem; after all, there's always one Jesus Christ on every ward. The problem occurs when there are two Jesus's! (Laughter). As the old psychiatric adage goes, never put two Napoleons in the same cell. (Laughter). Anyway, Erickson took an interest in this guy and approached him, asking him if he was Jesus. Jesus gave him a blessing and said, "yes,

of course.” Erickson carefully (that means hypnotically) explained that there was a building project on the next wing of the hospital and they needed a few good carpenters; and since everybody knew Jesus was a good carpenter, would he mind helping out on the project? (Laughter). So over the next months, Jesus left the ward every day, got involved in the work place, made some social connections, and began to develop some experiential identities beyond Jesus.

This is a classic example of the utilization principle. Inside of every reality, even the seemingly most bleak and desolate, are many resources and potential learnings. If you are trying to get rid of a pattern, you will get stuck in a negative relationship with it. If you can open up to it while also staying open beyond it, a lot of really interesting things can happen. Generative trance is a skillful way to do this, so you’re in for some wonderful experiences.

To practice utilization, to find the solution within a problem, you need to learn how to sit with something in a curious, non-judgmental way. This is a major aspect of generative trance; you drop into a place where you don’t need to judge or control or run from anything. You get the opportunity to open this great, safe energy field filled with resources, and then invite anything in that you want to work with. For Erickson, it was healing his body; for you it might be the intention of starting a new business, or healing an emotional relationship, or developing a new skill. Whatever it is, generative trance allows you stay deeply connected to yourself while you do this, so that you’re always in a space deeper and wider than whatever you’re working with. This gives you the freedom and confidence to explore many new ways of creating and expressing any pattern or energy.

Why can’t we generally do this all the time? Because we tend to get caught in the limiting boxes of ordinary reality. In hypnosis, we call this *identification with the conscious mind*. The conscious mind is not a bad thing, as long as it’s a servant rather than your master. It allows you to create maps and frames to make meanings and effectively navigate through your world of experience. It works well, except when it doesn’t. (laughter). That is, the conscious mind can get you through ordinary challenges and experiences very competently, but can’t generate new identities or patterns beyond its own box. It can be a great manager, but a lousy innovator or visionary or healer. So as long as you have a normal task, you don’t need trance. But say something comes along which is outside of your past patterning. Maybe you get married, or divorced, or have a baby, or get a new job, or develop an illness. Maybe you find yourself at a new threshold on your journey, needing to create something you’ve never created before. At

those points where you need a change at the level of identity, using your conscious mind as a lead system will get you into a lot of trouble. Einstein said that we cannot solve a problem from the same level at which it was created; we must generate a new level that “transcends yet includes” the previous level (to borrow Ken Wilber’s phrase.) That’s where trance is needed, when you need to create new realities.

Interestingly, this is precisely where a person is most likely to develop symptoms. If you give a person something called a “life changes check list” that lists these sorts of major life events—marriage, birth, death, divorce, illness, job change, residence change, etc.—and ask them to check any that they have experienced within their family in the past six months or a year, you find out that the number of checks is an excellent predictor of who’s most likely to develop a medical or psychological symptom. Does that make sense? The more major identity changes, the more at risk you are for developing a symptom. Interestingly, it doesn’t matter if the changes are positive or negative; it is the fact that it is an identity change that makes the difference.

In the utilization approach, we see these symptoms as natural trances that have been triggered by a pattern break in the conscious mind. That is, anytime you break the box of conscious identity, a trance naturally occurs. The conscious mind can’t handle the new challenge so it falls apart; the unconscious activates in response, ready to create a new identity. But whether this new identity is created or not depends on a person’s capacity to positively utilize the naturally occurring trance state. That is, if you disconnect or curse or otherwise negatively relate to the natural trance, it will show up as a negative trance. That’s how we see stuff like anxieties, depressions, addictions, etc.; as attempts by the unconscious to transform identity that are not being positively accepted and utilized by the person’s conscious self. Trance can be negative or positive, depending on the relationship to it. And you are the relationship!! Let me repeat that: YOU are the relationship. It’s what YOU do in relation to your unconscious that determines whether it’s a resource or a problem. This is great news, isn’t it? That means that if you find a problem state, it means that it’s an unconscious process that’s trying to wake up into the world....but for whatever reason, the previous relationships with it have been negative. No problem. By setting up a generative trance, you can find a new, positive relationship with it, and in doing so change a problem into a solution.

I hope you’re getting a sense of the difference between traditional hypnosis and Ericksonian hypnosis. Traditional hypnosis sees trance as an artificial state where you do programming; Ericksonian hypnosis sees trance

as a vital part of life that occurs whenever you disrupt the conscious mind. It further sees trance as potentially negative or positive, depending on the context, and you are the context. In this naturalistic view, hypnosis is one of the social/psychological traditions whereby you can create a ritual space that can welcome and utilize the naturally occurring trances of the unconscious mind. You can access and heal negatives trances that have been around for a while (i.e., symptoms), or create new ones that allow new possibilities. Whatever the case, hypnosis is this special experiential context that can provide a gentle but resilient container in which new resources can be added, new patterns can be formed, and new realities can be created. Who could ask for anything more?

One of the major foci of generative trance is how to move to a higher state of consciousness. We say, you're only as good as your present state. To be generative, to go beyond where you've ever been before, you have to develop a high level state. We will explore how in hypnotic induction this means holding an intention that is succinct (five words or less), positive, and resonant. We will see how hypnotic induction includes the skills of developing complete relaxation, but also deep absorption, as well as flexible and playful attention, and a radiant peripheral field of awareness. We will see how we tune the conscious mind to relational principles of accepting what's there, balancing it with complementary resources, and expanding the field to include many resources beyond the problem or goal. We will see how to move from a pattern's surface structure to its deep structure so that many new surface structures can be created. And we will see how to tap into generative healing and transformation. It's a great thing to realize that you have this capacity within you, and you can help others to realize the same things for themselves. Again, who could ask for anything more?

So I welcome you to trance camp, and look forward to many further adventures of the deep kind. Let's take a brief break and we'll be back for more in just a bit.