

COULD NLP RE-VITALIZE THE HUMAN POTENTIAL MOVEMENT?

IF SO, HOW?

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Did you know that the NLP arose as one of the hundreds of off-shoots of the Human Potential Movement? I didn't know that prior to learning NLP and, in fact, did not become aware of it until many years later. When I studied the original literature of NLP, I never picked up that idea. None of the original developers ever wrote about it. True enough, they spoke of Perls, Satir, and Erickson, but not as key players in the Human Potential Movement, only as the three world-class communicators who they modeled to create NLP.

Now I do remember Richard Bandler talking about both Maslow and Rogers and speaking about the Human Potential Movement as such. But with his iconoclastic style, he spoke of them mostly in derision as he criticized their weaknesses. I supposed he did that to contrast to the new things that NLP had to offer.

Yet the fact is that NLP was only one of many dozens of birthchilids of the Human Potential Movement. Born in the 1950s through the work of Maslow and Rogers, along with Rollo May, Viktor Frankl, Fritz Perls, Sydney Jourard, Virginia Satir, and many others, the Human Potential Movement became "the third force" in psychology after Psychoanalysis and Behaviorism. It was launched and gained great popularity just prior to the development of the Cognitive Revolution with George Miller and Noam Chomsky and colleagues in 1956.

What was radical and remarkable about this "third force" in psychology is that it truly represented a new idea in psychology, namely the assumption of the incredible *potentials* of people. Prior to this Freud with his associates (Jung, Adler, Rank, etc.) and Watson and Skinner, human nature was considered either inherently "dark" driven by sex, death, and id instincts or completely mechanical driven by conditioning and environment.

Psychology, as a new discipline, had arisen originally in the medical community to deal with the strange disorders that went beyond medicine—hysteria, schizophrenia, personality disorders, etc. It arose to figure out ways to address human traumas and dysfunctions, all of the ways that people can go wrong. So no wonder psychology became almost exclusively focused on *the dark side*. Such conditions were pressing problems and demanded to be addressed. And so they were. Eventually psychology and psychiatry came up with the DSM IV, a diagnostic manual on how people are broken.

So when Maslow became captivated by two extraordinary individuals that he met in graduate school, individuals who could not be explained by all of the models and tools of psychology, he began wondering. From his curiosity explorations, he decided to begin a modeling project of those who are *people at their best*. He called the *self-actualizers*, people who actualize their best potentials, gifts, capabilities, and become fully what they were able to become. Later he called them “peak performers” and set forth the criteria that seemed in common with such people. Carl Rogers joined in to identify *human nature at its best* and people who become *fully functioning people*.

In this, the third force in psychology offered a *paradigm shift* as they shifted to explore individuals at their best and so *the bright side of human nature* rather than the dark side. One contributing developer and leading person in the Human Potential Movement was Fritz Perls who developed Gestalt Therapy and popularized the Esalen movement in California. Of course, this was the very first exposure to the Human Potential Movement that Richard Bandler experienced and so he and Grinder picked up on the modeling that Maslow initiated and from that created NLP.

Next came the work of Virginia Satir who founded Family Systems, a significant player in her own right in the Human Potential Movement with her focus on *PeopleMaking*. Along the way, others in the early NLP movement studied and brought in ideas from Maslow and Rogers. In fact, most of the *NLP Presuppositions* are simply the basic ideas and assumptions of the Human Potential Movement. To confirm that you only have to read Maslow, Rogers, May, Assagioli, or those who initiated what also became known as *Humanistic Psychology*.

Only recently have I come to realize this, and to appreciate that NLP was but one of many new models of therapy, psychology, education, and learning that grew out of the Human Potential Movement. I began my exploration in this from the need to more fully distinguish *remedial* psychology from *generative* psychology in order to identify the cues between someone needing therapy (healing of the past, the self-esteem to be okay and up to average, living in the present, and the ego-strength to take on challenges) versus someone who is past the domain of therapy and ready for something new like coaching.

I was first awakened to this when I started thinking about the difference between *remedial* and *generative* change. It was at that time that I began studying all of the “change” models that I could find. When I did, I discovered something that truly shocked me. All of the change models in used in coaching, education, and trainer were based on therapy change models. There were no

change models that were based on a generative psychology.

Using that as my launching pad, I began a search to understand how a *generative change model* would differ from the therapy change models and I began modeling master coach Michelle Duval to see what she did in her change work that was different from what a therapist does. The result was the *Axis of Change model* based on four meta-programs that I developed with Michelle (*Coaching Change, Meta-Coaching Volume I*).

That discovery then encouraged me to look further. What model do we have for self-actualization itself? Are there any? This revealed another shocking surprised—there were none! While the Human Potential Movement was exploring and detailing out *the bright side* of human nature and how people have all kinds of possibilities and potentials to be actualized so that they can become authentic, fully functioning, and at their best, these were more *grand ideas and ideals* than models. There were no models.

Not only were there no models, but Carl Rogers had instituted one of the central tenets of the Human Potential Movement via his *non-directive client-centered therapy*. That is, he had presented the process of self-actualization as so organic, so natural, so innate that he believed that it would naturally and automatically occur if we simply *got out of the way* and did not interfere. Interference, in fact, in Rogers' view was the key problem for the process of self-actualization.

Rogers said we only need to offer empathy, unconditional positive regard, and our own authenticity. And so this, for the most part, became the battle cry of the Human Potential Movement. Be real, be authentic, be caring and empathetic, let people be, stop interfering, and all will be well.

Paradoxically and sadly, however, the effect this had on the Human Potential Movement was that it left the movement without the very things it needed to thrive: a model (or several models), some key patterns and technologies, and a discipline to follow. So as time progressed in the 1970s into the 1980s the Human Potential Movement splintered into a hundred different approaches and never become a School of Psychology as has been noted in numerous journals, textbooks, and conferences.

So what happened to the Human Potential Movement? Where did it go? Where is it today? The answer is that it dispersed into many, many schools —NLP being one. IT also lost its dominance as “the third force” in psychology. This even occurred before Maslow's death in 1970. Prior to that he launched yet another movement, “the fourth force” in psychology, Transpersonal Psychology. As a result, this siphoned off much of the power and focus on the Human Potential Movement.

Yet here's a surprising little tid-bit from history, in 1986 when Simon and Schuster printed *Unlimited Power* by Anthony Robbins. In the Preface of that book, Dr. Kenneth Blanchard, the best selling author of a pre-Coaching book *The One Minute Manager*, wrote,

“I think this book has the capacity to be the definitive text in the human potential

movement.” (p. 12)

How about that? He considered a basic book on the NLP Practitioner content as the possibility of becoming *the definitive text* of the Human Potential Movement! But sadly, it did not. Events between Bandler and Robbins led Tony to move away from NLP and to create his own version with the result that today he will not mention those three letters.

So where is the Human Potential Movement today? It is dispersed everywhere around the world in a vision that so many people share about human nature as they see human potential and possibility as nearly limitless and as they view themselves and others through the lens of *the bright side*. It is everywhere, and yet, it is nowhere. No single group, person, or model carries on the work of Maslow and Rogers.

Yet psychology in a general way is still moving in the same direct that the Human Potential movement initiated. Interesting enough in 1998 Martin Seligman and Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi launched *Positive Psychology* which somewhat picks up the thread. Yet like Bandler and Grinder, they have presented so many of their disagreements with the Human Potential Movement that they have positioned Positive Psychology as something very different from it. They are also going in a different direction as they are seeking to make Positive Psychology academically and scientifically credible. In these ways then they are not in the lineage of Maslow and Rogers.

So who is? And who is carrying the torch for the Human Potential Movement and self-actualization today? Could NLP or Neuro-Semantics do that? The answer is a resounding *Yes* for me. What we have in both NLP and especially in *Neuro-Semantics* as the latest development of NLP, can take self-actualization to a whole new level. To do that we only need to acknowledge our roots within the Human Potential Movement and then focus on taking it to the next level. Already we are grounded in all of its basic premises and operate from the vision that Maslow and Rogers began. It would therefore be easy for us to take up the cause of the Human Potential Movement by presenting the specific models, patterns, and technology for people to truly and actually *unleash* their potentials.

At least that’s the vision I have caught and what I am working to do in Neuro-Semantics with the Self-Actualization Quadrants, the Matrix of Self-Actualization, and several patterns for Unleashing Potentials.

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