

The Truth Beyond Magic

Dr. Richard Bolstad

Fundamental To NLP?

The idea that *magical* results happen when you understand certain *linguistic structures* is implied in the title of the very first NLP book (*The Structure of Magic*) and various interpretations of that notion have been both the curse of NLP and one of its major contributions to personal change.

When I run NLP trainings, during my demonstration of each process the demonstration subject frequently experiences major change. This is partly due to the effect of the "demonstration therapy" conditions. Ernest Rossi says (Rossi, 1996, p. 202) "The late Carl Rogers in personal communication with me agreed that the activation patients experienced in what he called "Demonstration Therapy" where he illustrated his "client centred" approach in front of large groups of professionals in training was at least in part responsible for the effectiveness of single session psychotherapy. Other therapists have wondered why single session therapy, particularly when demonstrated in front of a large group, is so effective that we may ask whether such therapy illustrates the dynamics of "Miracle Cures" (Barber, 1990)" Joseph Barber, cited by Rossi here,

suggests that modelling demonstration conditions could give us important clues about how to do effective one-one therapy. The demonstration itself sets up this powerful expectation of success because people think "Wow, if he's willing to demonstrate it in front of us all, he must be sure it's going to work." In a way, I am taking advantage of an almost "magical" view of NLP when I do such a demonstration.

This demonstration therapy usually "works," but it also raises some complex issues, which I want to explore in this article. Some people are put off NLP by the stage-hypnosis-like appearance of, for example, five minute NLP phobia cures. They wonder if we should really be presenting NLP as "magic." After all, it doesn't always "work."

The Shorter Oxford Dictionary gives two definitions of magic. Firstly, it describes magic as "The supposed art of influencing the course of events and of producing extraordinary physical phenomena by the occult control of nature or of spirits." I'll call this magic¹. This sounds like a definition of an applied science given by someone who doubts its effectiveness. Secondly it describes magic as "An inexplicable and remarkable influence

producing surprising results." I'll call this "beyond-explanation" definition magic².

My guess is that when we claim there is a *structure* to magic, most NLP practitioners are saying that inexplicable and remarkable results (magic²) are generated by a scientific utilisation of natural phenomena (magic¹). Of course, the question is: knowing that there is a structure to magic¹, do we tell our client that NLP is an applied science with its own limits and achieving its results sometimes by simplistic "sleight of mind," or do we leave them thinking that NLP is magic².

The question is only complicated by the metaphor which forms the frontispiece of "The Structure of Magic." In this story, a Prince does not believe in the existence of certain things (such as Princesses) because his father has told him they do not exist. He then meets another man who shows him that these things do in fact exist. Finally, his father points out to him that both the father and the other man are magicians. By their magic, each of them creates a "reality" in which he will see, hear and feel certain things, and in which he will not see, hear and feel other things. When the son asks what the *real* truth is, his father emphasises "There is no truth beyond magic." An implication that I take from

this metaphor at the start of a book on "The Structure of Magic" is that the book may unpack the "how" of achieving certain results, but it will not of course answer the question as to what is "real." Reality is whatever we make it out to be, since our maps of reality (however accurate they may seem) are always just maps.

The Advantages Of Magic: Use The Force!

The belief that NLP change techniques are "beyond explanation" has some specific positive results. The positive benefits affect both the practitioner and the client.

- The practitioner believes that her/his actions will achieve the desired result, almost regardless of what the client does. There are no resistant clients, says the NLP presupposition, only an insufficient application of magical skills. The ability of the practitioner to hold this belief is very significant.

A research study by Dr. Milton Erickson illustrates this significance (1980, pp.1-3). This study was done with a group of hypnotic subjects who were able to readily demonstrate all the known hypnotic phenomena of deep trance, without exception. The subjects were referred to various groups of hypnotherapy students, whose instructions varied from group to group. "For example Group A was told emphatically that Subject X was a remarkably fine somnambulistic subject and could develop all the phenomena of the deep trance with the one exception

of anaesthesia... Group B was given the same instruction about Subject X but told that, despite adequate ability in other regards, X could not develop auditory hallucinations. Group C was told that Subject X could do anything except visual hallucinations, and Group D was instructed that Subject X could manifest everything except posthypnotic amnesia." In each case, the "predicted" flaw in the subject's ability was apparent during the students' attempts to hypnotise the subject. Ernest Rossi explains "Each group of students involuntarily and unknowingly betrayed their expectations via minimal sensory cues (voice dynamics, non-verbal behaviour etc.) to their hypnotic subjects..." The study showed clearly that subjects are able

to detect a hypnotist's expectations and respond to them, despite what the hypnotist is trying to convey consciously.

- The client in a session where magic² is in use comes to believe that they cannot rationally explain what is happening in an NLP session, and so cannot "unpack" or "obstruct" the process. This is also useful in some ways, and could be described as the "placebo" effect of NLP.

The work of New Zealand energy healer Cliff Sanderson illustrates this second reason why the magic of NLP is useful. Sanderson has spent 20 years practising what he calls *intentional healing* around the world. In his book "Making Outrageous Claims"

he documents the results of five separate research projects on his work in the Soviet Republics, mainly with the children who are survivors of Chernobyl. After his work with them, the number of children with immune system deficits dropped from 4.17% to 0%. The number of children with high level radiation in their urine dropped from 38.89% to 9.09%. All of the children reported losing the 24 hour migraine headaches they had suffered. Sanderson says of these changes "This is simply accomplished by the unfettered intentions of the "healer" placing him or herself in close proximity with the seeker and allowing expansion of being to recognise the all pervading, infinitely present universal unity. It may, after all, be simple unencumbered love."

In his audiotape "The Witchdoctor's Wisdom Clinic," Sanderson reveals more of his model. Accused by a local reporter of being a "witchdoctor" he says, "Well I haven't quite taken to wearing the paint and the feathers yet. But you see, the other thing that *they* knew by doing that is that they become exotic to the people they're working with. If we look at the tribal history then, these men (and in some cases women also) grew up with their siblings and others going to the same school, shall we say; but at some stage they were selected or chose to become witchdoctors or the bearers of the spiritual knowledge of the tribe. And they then became separated. They lived in huts outside the village; they painted themselves exotically; so that the mind of the patient when coming for a consultation was unable to grasp who they were and put them into a little, careful pocket. And I think that's one of the most powerful things

about healing: is to be exotic to the person you're working with so there is space for transition... I often use some Tibetan words and some of the Maori words that I was authorised to use, because the person won't know the meaning of them. And so it isn't the content of the chant (or it may sound like a prayer) but it's that it again unlocks the mind from being able to assess who and what I am and what I'm doing." In this case, Sanderson knows that he is merely creating a placebo effect (unlike Milton Erickson's students in the experiment described above), but he is able to act in ways which create powerful responses regardless.

The Dark Side Of The Force

There are two main problems with the magic² approach though.

- If the magic doesn't produce the desired result at any time, the client still has no way of determining what happened or didn't happen, and may decide that there is no magic at all, and that therefore NLP "doesn't work" or "can't work" for them. They then give up using processes which could deliver them very effective results at least some of the time. This leaves them *more* susceptible to the claim we are cautioned about by communications researcher Paul Watzlawick, author of "How Real Is Real?" Watzlawick discusses how radically new ideas have often been greeted initially with dismissal. He compares this to a first time piano player who says: "Piano playing does not exist. I have tried it several times, and nothing came of

it." (Heller & Steele, 1992, p.1). Unfortunately, when one is not taught the "science" of piano playing, and merely shown the magical results, this dismissal is even more likely. Furthermore, if the magic doesn't work the client may then abandon the other very useful presuppositions linked to NLP such as the notion that they are in charge of their own life, or that people can and do often change their ways of behaving easily and permanently.

- The notion of magic² is itself apparently inconsistent with many of the accepted presuppositions of NLP. For example, consider the presupposition that the client is always in charge of their own brain and results (Dilts, 1998, p. 7-10). In her article on "The Miracle Cure," Shelle Rose Charvet points out that a little use of the NLP metamodel helps dispel the fantasy of the guru with the final and magical cure (Charvet, 1992). She encourages us to ask "How specifically have *you* changed yourself?" "How does going to see this person equate with doing something for myself?" Shelle observes in relation to the "guru" fantasy that "Even highly trained people using powerful technologies like NLP seem to believe it. The quest for the latest and greatest." But if our clients change as a result of believing that we have magically altered them, they are effectively disempowered from taking charge of their life at future times when they may wish to. Seeing this danger, Richard Bandler says "You know, I mean, I want clients when they leave [changed so] that the thought of staying fixed is a lot better than the thought of coming back. I like

that. And they think 'I could call Richard on the phone, or I could just do it myself.' I want them to go, 'I'll just do it myself.'" (Bandler, 1987). If magic² implies that the client can't "just do it themselves" then it contradicts the basic NLP attitude expressed by Bandler here.

Finding A Third Way

The fact, as Charvet notes, is that there is no "miracle cure" for everyone and everything. The craving for a solution to everything, and a solution that doesn't require any discomfort, is itself a core problem in life. (Shelley suggested that if you filled in her coupon and mailed it to her, she would

send the secret of escaping the miracle cure forever, but I guess that offer has expired since that was a decade ago).

For NLP to provide a life-changing technology, it needs to deal with the reality that life generates challenges. Psychologist Martin Seligman (1997) notes that, over the last century, people's expectations have changed to the extent that they believe everything in life should turn out the way they wanted it to. As a result, when things don't, they assume that something awful has happened, and they get depressed. He describes this response as learned helplessness. The ability that is missing is the ability to reframe challenges as opportunities. The most successful people

in the world are not those who have had everything work out perfectly, but those who know how to find usefulness in each situation.

If NLP is to be a useful change model, it needs to be delivered in a way that challenges learned helplessness. Those who suffer from this condition are the most likely to clutch on to the magic² model of NLP. They are also the most likely to abandon NLP in horror after finding that it doesn't "work" perfectly. As I have said repeatedly in other publications, "NLP doesn't work. You work...NLP just explains how you work, perfectly." (Bolstad, 2002, p. 126).

Equally, part of reframing involves the client understanding that they themselves are able to make amazing

changes; that they themselves are a magician. I want them to know that "whether you believe you can, or you believe you can't... you're right!" I think it is this sense, and in this sense only, that magic² is totally consistent with the presuppositions of NLP. A case example explains what I mean.

In 1952, a British medical practitioner, Dr. A. Mason, wrote up for the British Medical Journal a report on his use of hypnosis. His subject was a 16 year old boy who had a very painful and unpleasant looking skin condition called congenital ichthyosiform erythroderma. His skin was scaly and cracked easily, weeping fluid. This condition had been present from birth and was due to an abnormality in the structure of the skin itself. The condition was known to be incurable, but Dr. Mason put the boy into a hypnotic trance and suggested that the skin would begin to clear on his left arm. Within less than a week, the horny layer of scaling had cleared on that arm and a few days later healthy skin was apparent there. Over the next weeks, the doctor extended the area of healing across his body. Sometimes the cure was rated at only 50% successful for an area, but most of the boy's body took on a normal appearance for the first time. Following Mason's report in the medical journal, a number of hypnotists replicated his results. The important fact for our purposes here is that this cure had been considered scientifically impossible. Put in terms that any doctor would use before Mason's report, it was impossible. And Mason's results were magic. But this magic does not imply something magical about Dr. Mason or his technique. Dr. Mason simply discovered that this magical ability existed in the boy. The boy's own body cleared up the congenital condition. No-one knew, before this experiment, that such magic existed in a person. Once it was discovered, many people were able to replicate it. NLP's first book was called the *Structure of Magic*. It studied the structure of the words that Virginia Satir used to help clients produce magical effects. It said far less about the structure of the magic inside a person, which enables these words to lead to changes. The magic inside our clients is the most significant magic.

I don't want my clients to think of me as the magician who cured them. Instead, I want them to think of *themselves* as that magician. And this is also my answer to the person who cynically dismisses NLP as "mere placebo."

There is magic in the world; the magic of taking charge of one's own life. The magic of allowing one's own body and mind to heal. The magic of choosing love and relationship. And despite all our studies, this remains magic² ("An inexplicable and remarkable influence producing surprising results."). When I am teaching, and when I am working individually with someone, this is the magic I seek.

© 2002 Dr. Richard Bolstad



Richard Bolstad is an NLP trainer and magician and can be contacted at richard@transformations.net.nz or at Phone/Fax +64-3-337-1852

BIBLIOGRAPHY:

- Bandler, R.** State of the Art Audiotape series from NLP Comprehensive, Boulder Colorado, 1987
- Barber, J.** "Miracle Cures? Therapeutic consequences of clinical demonstrations" in Zeig, J. and Gilligan, S. *Brief Therapy: Myths, Methods and Metaphors*, Brunner/Mazel, New York, 1990
- Bolstad, R.** *RESOLVE: A New Model Of Therapy* Crown House, Bancyfelin, Wales, 2002
- Dilts, R.** *Modelling With NLP* Meta Publications, Capitola, California, 1998
- Erickson, M. H.** "Expectancy and Minimal Sensory Cues In Hypnosis. Incomplete Report." in Erickson, M.H. *The Collected Papers of Milton H. Erickson on Hypnosis. Volume II* Irvington, New York, 1980
- Mason, A.A.** "A case of congenital ichthyosiform erythroderma of broc treated by hypnosis" p. 422-423 in *British medical Journal*, Vol. 2, 1952
- Rossi, E.L.** *The Symptom Path To Enlightenment*, Palisades Gateway Publishing, Pacific palisades, California, 1996
- Sanderson, C.** *Making Outrageous Claims*, Fast Books, Glebe, Australia, 1993
- Seligman, M.E.P.** *Learned Optimism*, Random House, Sydney, 1997
- Payer, L.** *Medicine and Culture*, Penguin, 1988, Harmondsworth, Britain
- Heller, S. and Steele, T.** *Monsters and Magical Sticks*. Los Angeles: Calabasas Press, 1992
- Charvet, S.R.** "The Miracle Cure" p. 16-18 in *Anchor Point*, Vol. 7, No. 10, October 1993