

# ***The Decade That Invented NLP And Tried To Find God In A Pill***

***by Dr. Richard Bolstad***

## ***How Cultural “Times” Create Psychotherapies***

In the case study from which all modern psychoanalysis arose, Sigmund Freud’s analysis of “Dora,” Freud explains that Dora’s “hysteria” results from her indulgence in masturbation as a child. Dora’s most troubling symptom was unexplained stomach pains. Freud says sagely, “It is well known that gastric pains occur especially often in those who masturbate.” ( Freud, Vol 7; page 78). Actually, Dora died of cancer of the colon, and her stomachache had a very real cause. Most people reading Freud’s proud claim now would recognize his fear of masturbation as a phenomenon of 19th century European culture. Some would notice the arrogance of his interpretation, equally a product of his time. Strangely, only a few make the conceptual leap to questioning the history of a psychotherapy founded on this fear.

So what about NLP? How much of what we have created in NLP is also a product of the time it emerged from? Perhaps enough years have now passed for us to examine that. Doing so, I find, gives me a richer sense of what NLP is doing.

## ***Who Were Those Masked Men (...Who Developed NLP)?***

According to Terry McClendon, what would later be known as NLP emerged in the years 1972-1974 at UCLA and in the mountains above Santa Cruz. Terry describes John Grinder and Richard Bandler’s involvement with a range of popular psychotherapies including Psychodrama, Gestalt, Family Therapy, and Hypnotherapy - that’s the part of NLP’s history we tend to hear about most of course. Terry describes

John, previously employed as an interpreter in the US Army, as an organizer of at least one anti-Vietnam war march in which Richard also participated (McClendon, 1989, p 35-36). He talks about how John turned up to teach his university classes in shoulder length hair, jeans and a tee-shirt. He refers to Richard and John playing ‘raucous’ music on drums and guitar together at their workshops (McClendon, 1989, p 65). He mentions their experimenting with the teachings of Carlos Castenada about “stopping the world” by the use of hallucinogenic drugs and meditation style activities (McClendon, 1989, p 77). He notes that before teaching NLP, Richard ran a “student directed seminar on Gestalt Therapy” which linked into the popular “encounter group activities” of the university’s Kresge College (McClendon, 1989, p 9).

All these activities are not just part of the individual creative experience of two young men who co-developed NLP. They are all activities characteristic of the times in which the two men were immersed. Richard Bandler’s summary of the attitude that spurred the two is also characteristic of that time: “...in those days, people used to express the impossibility of something by saying, ‘There’ll be a man on the moon before \_\_\_\_\_ happens.’ Of course, in 1969, putting a man on the moon lost its power as a metaphor for impossibility! Grinder and I never accepted what most people assumed about the limits of human beings anyway.” But the decade from 1965-1975 was one of great optimism for most young people, not just the NLP codevelopers. It is in that context of naïve expectation of radical change that NLP emerged. That sense of the world opening up was a powerful inspiration for many social changes and many new models of personal development. In this article, I want to focus on some of the effects of the attitudes of the decade in which NLP appeared. After reminding you of the powerful forces altering American society in that era, I will return to reflect of the extent

to which NLP remains a child of its time. The five social trends I want to mention first are:

- Rock music and the new “counterculture”
- Political, especially anti-war, protest
- Hallucinogenic drug use
- Interest in eastern religion
- The encounter group movement

## *Music and the Counterculture*

On December 8th 1980, singer John Lennon was assassinated in New York. For the previous 15 years the music revolution he and his group the Beatles contributed to birthing had been both a powerful catalyst and an accurate barometer for social change. In March, 1966 in an interview for the London Evening Standard with Maureen Cleave, John Lennon had explained "Christianity will go.... I don't know which will go first, rock 'n' roll or Christianity."

California, where NLP evolved, was central to this cultural revolution. Since the 1950s, an Annual music festival had been held at Monterey, south of San Francisco. In 1958 it was a jazz festival, in 1963 it became a folk festival with Joan Baez and Bob Dylan playing, and on June 16-18, 1967 it was America’s first “pop” festival, attracting over 50,000 people to listen to blues and rock acts like Otis Redding, The Who, Jefferson Airplane, The Byrds and Jimi Hendrix. Musical forms which had emerged in African American culture at the time when it was segregated from white culture now flooded into the new multicultural American mainstream. The Monterey festival was filled with those who had been living in San Francisco’s Haight Ashbury district and celebrating the 1967 “summer of love.” John Phillips of the rock group The Mamas and the Papas wrote, in the lyrics of a song advertising the 1967 Monterey festival, “If you’re going to San

Francisco, be sure to wear some flowers in your hair.... If you come to San Francisco, Summertime will be a love-in there.”

The Monterey Rock Festival was topped two years later by the most famous music festival of the era, Woodstock, held at Max Yasgur’s 600 acre farm near Bethel, in New York State on 15-17 August, 1969. Although 10,000 or 20,000 people were expected, over 500,000 attended, most of whom did not pay admission. The Woodstock Festival represented the culmination of the 1960s “counterculture” - an alternative society with its own values and cultural forms (such as rock music, community living, long hair styles and “psychedelic” art and clothing) which many people envisioned growing up like a peyote mushroom in the midst of America. By the time NLP was developing in the early 1970s, the euphoria of 1967 had passed, but the counterculture continued, with its “raucus” music, political dissent, drugs and fascination with transcendence and “personal growth.”

## ***Hey Dude; Who Stole My Army?***

The political movements blossoming on American campuses in the 1970s included what were then called gay liberation, women's liberation, black power, youth liberation and a number of other “one issue” campaigns. However, many who were involved in one of these movements were involved in all of them they could be, and saw them as part of a unified revolutionary tide (see Rubin, 1970, for example). If one political movement could be said to be more central to the counterculture than any other, it would be the movement to halt the Vietnam war. In the early 1970s, the United States was engaged in what would be its longest war on record. In that war, over 58,000 American soldiers

died along with around 3,000,000 Vietnamese. By 1970, the war was a hot topic in the USA and around the world. On 14 March 1970, the army released the full text of an investigation into the 1968 massacre of the Vietnamese village of My Lai. Those involved in the “counterculture” began to see their own country’s army as brutal mercenaries.

On May 4th, 1970, the United States national guard opened fire on a student demonstration at Kent State University killing four students. In their defense, the guards argued that they had not only had rocks thrown at them, but had been goaded into action by being called “motherfucking cocksuckers.” It was a measure of the dramatic disengagement of the two American cultures. As a million students went on “strike” over the next days and universities came to a standstill, it became clear that the “war” had come home. This was the political environment in which John Grinder and Richard Bandler were operating at the University of California as they developed NLP.

The Vietnam war cost America \$25 billion a year to run, but the cost in terms of social cohesion was even higher, and by March 1971, over 50% of Americans polled believed that the war was morally wrong. On April 21st - 22nd, 1971, more than half a million protestors thronged into Washington DC as part of the building national mobilization against the war and 800 Vietnam veterans threw back their medals at the Capitol hill. Rebellion even spread to the troops in the field. In one of the most publicized such events, on 9 October, 1971, Members of the US First Air Cavalry Division simply refused an assignment to go out on patrol. On 22 June, 1971, the United States Senate passed a non-binding resolution urging the withdrawal of all American troops from Vietnam by the end of the year. However, if any-

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thing, the war escalated, and it was 1975 before true withdrawal occurred. North Vietnamese troops marched into South Vietnam's Saigon city on April 30, 1975, and the war came to an end. The divisions in the USA over the war were nothing unique in themselves. Comparable numbers of United States citizens opposed the War of 1812 against Britain, the US-Mexican War, and World War I, but never before were hundreds of thousands willing to take to the streets and never before did their protest actually seem to have forced the war to a close. The belief that mass action could literally change the world was a powerful legacy of the early 1970s.

## ***Hey Dude; Who Stole My Brain?***

Between 1954-59, Timothy Leary was the director of clinical research and psychology at the Kaiser Foundation Hospital in Oakland, California and had published extensively in scientific journals and had written a highly acclaimed psychology textbook. During a research trip to Mexico, Leary first consumed the hallucinogenic mushroom, *Psilocybe*, and began to write enthusiastically about its "mind-expanding" or "psychedelic" (mind-pleasing) perceptual effects. In 1967 Leary came across the related hallucinogen Lysergic Acid Diethylamide-25 (LSD or "acid"), an extract of the Ergot fungus which infects rye grass. The pharmaceutical company Sandoz had been marketing LSD as a psychiatric cure-all since 1947. In its LSD related literature, Sandoz laboratories suggested that psychiatrists take the drug themselves in order to "gain an understanding of the subjective experiences of the schizophrenic." From 1950-1955, research on LSD and other hallucinogens generated over 1,000 scientific papers and LSD was prescribed as treatment to over 40,000 patients.

Research on LSD continued into the 1960s. In a 1966 amendment to the Federal Food, Drug and Cosmetic Act, the non-research use of hallucinogenic drugs, including LSD, was banned. Augustus Owsley, a chemistry student from the University of California at Berkeley, then set up an illicit LSD laboratory in Northern California and became the most recognized source of LSD worldwide, directly supplying people from the Beatles to Professor Timothy Leary himself. By 1970 it was estimated that between 1,000,000 and 2,000,000 Americans had taken an LSD trip (McGlothlin and Arnold, 1971). Timothy Leary reported the research results enthusiastically. "In the study by Savage, 90 percent of subjects claimed "a greater awareness of God or a higher power." Studies published by Leary revealed that over two thirds of a sample of sixty-seven ministers, monks and rabbis reported the deepest spiritual experience of their lives." (Leary, 1971, p 69).

Others were to make the connection between modern hallucinogenic use and ancient religion even more clear. Anthropologist Carlos Castaneda was granted a Ph.D. by the University of California Anthropology Department in 1973 for his writings about his meetings with a Yaqui Indian medicine man, Don Juan Matus. Don Juan taught him how to use peyote (called 'Mescalito'), datura (Jimson weed), and *Psilocybe mexicana* mushrooms to see into the world behind this one. Whether Don Juan actually existed, the books sold over 8 million copies.

Timothy Leary's close friend Richard Alpert (dismissed from Harvard University in 1963 with Leary) took this anthropology research a step further around the globe. In 1967 he had travelled to India and given LSD to a number of Indian gurus. Some told him it made no dif-

ference; some asked where they could get more. One (Neem Karoli Baba) impressed him so much that Alpert became his disciple, changing his name to Ram Dass (servant of god).

Indian teachers had been coming to California for 100 years, and not for the hallucinogens. Paramahansa Yogananda (Self Realization Fellowship) arrived in 1920. Jiddu Krishnamurti first taught there in 1922. Maharishi Mahesh Yogi (teacher of Transcendental Meditation or TM, who visited in 1958) and A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada (founder of the Krishna Consciousness Movement or Hare Krishnas, who visited in 1965) were relative latecomers. The increase in interest in their teachings in the early 1970s was part of what came to be known as the “new age” movement. Admiration for rigorous ancient meditation techniques went hand in hand with extreme western individualism and hedonism in this “brave new world” of the 1970s. According to Robert Wuthnow’s research (1988, p 166) the results in terms of full commitment to eastern religion were small, but the effect in terms of social change was large. Throughout the 1970s in the USA “About 1% of the public claimed to be involved in Eastern religions, about 4% said they practiced TM, and about 3 percent claimed they were involved in yoga.”

Another quasi-spiritual stance characteristic of the years 1965-1975 was new-age millenarianism. John Lennons claim that Christianity might be about to end was echoed throughout the decade in a revival of apocalyptic visions such as the Hopi prophecies about the end time when the long haired “rainbow warriors” will save the earth from ecological catastrophe. Horror writer Steven King explained in 1987 that his 1970s writing was “a mirror that reflects the majority of my genera-

tion....It’s about knowing something’s wrong somewhere.... If any of us are around to see 1990, I’ll buy you a beer. Or we’ll drop acid. You got it.” (Gottlieb, 1987, p 389-390).

All this too was part of the milieu in which NLP developed. The ready availability of Owsley’s LSD and Maharishi’s meditation techniques created a sense of a civilization about to be transcended. And yet, at the same time, others were urging that Americans literally needed to come back to their senses. And that’s where Esalen fits into the story....

## ***Esalen and the Encounter Movement***

In its brochure, the Esalen Institute explains “Esalen was founded in 1962 by Michael Murphy and Richard Price as an educational center for the exploration of unrealized human capacities. It soon became known for its blend of East/West philosophies, its experiential workshops, the steady influx of leading philosophers, psychologists, artists, and religious thinkers, and its breathtaking grounds blessed with natural hot springs. Once home to a Native American tribe known as the Esselen, Esalen is situated on some 200 acres of spectacular Big Sur coastline [south of San Francisco] with the Santa Lucia Mountains rising sharply behind.”

Two of the central models studied by John Grinder and Richard Bandler were deeply involved with Esalen. Fritz Perls taught and lived there for much of the last 6 years of his life (1964-1970). In a previously unpublished statement on line at <http://www.gestalt.org/fritz.htm>, he says, “What the Bauhaus was in Germany for the creation of a new style in architecture and the arts, Esalen is as a practical center of the third wave of

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humanistic psychology.” Virginia Satir first visited Esalen in 1964 and lived there as a Director of Training from 1966 to 1969. It was there that she experimented herself with LSD and many of the body therapies that were available (King, 1989, p 26).

Satir said of Esalen, “I saw that there were whole areas that I didn’t know anything about - what we called the “effective domain” at that time. There were practices represented by different people who were outside the mainstream, things about sleep research, drug research, the LSD stuff and research in altered states. I became acquainted with people from all over the world. People like Elmer and Alyce Green, Ida Rolf and all the body people, Charlotte Selver, Fritz Perls - all people I knew well. For many of us the stimulation we had at Esalen fit. We were into a different place than the rest of the world. For me it was like opening up a whole level of resources. I was very impressed with what happened with body therapy, massage and therapeutic massage, because this was getting close to health. That also coincided with the development of the flower children in the sixties. I saw this as an outcome of trying to make the world a better place, and Esalen was a center of a new freedom in a new way.” (King, 1989, p 27).

The types of group experiences facilitated by Satir, Perls and others at Esalen were heralded by psychotherapist Carl Rogers as “the most rapidly spreading social invention of the century, and probably the most potent - an invention that goes by many names. “T-group,” “encounter groups,” “sensitivity training” are amongst the most common.” (Rogers, 1970, p 9). Rogers observed that when he offered to train people to run such encounter groups in San Diego, 600 people signed up for the first weekend and 800 for the second.

“This indicates a spontaneous grass roots demand of unbelievable strength and size.” (Rogers, 1970, p 17).

Esalen encounter group facilitation trainer William Schutz said, “Encounter is a way of life, not just a therapeutic technique. It concerns itself with relations among people and offers an alternative to the present structure of society, a structure which is based on deception (“diplomacy”), masking feelings (“tact”), disowning the body (“primitive, irrational, obscene”), and similar duplicities. The encounter movement follows the counter culture.... The encounter culture stresses individual responsibility. You are responsible for whatever you are; therefore, you can change.”( Schutz, 1973, p 24-25). It was in this context that John Grinder and Richard Bandler ran their first therapy groups and trainings.

The first NLP groups, as Terry McClendon describes them, fit this definition of encounter groups. There was very little ecology-checking in the “learning experiences” McClendon describes. In one group, for example, a woman named Devra was told she would be given her end-of-course present while blindfolded. She was led out to an 8 foot high cross (as in crucifixion). “Devra was led out blindfolded and was then tied onto the cross. John then put some lighting fluid at the bottom of the cross and proceeded to set it ablaze. Devra at this time began to smell smoke and was wondering what was going on.... Richard took her blindfold off and gave her a knife which she could then use to cut herself off the cross. To this day I don’t think that Devra has ever forgiven Richard.... Richard did have a serious discussion with her after about how she could learn from the experience, however I don’t think she was listen-

ing.” (McClendon, 1989, p 46) Schutz says of encounter groups, “You are responsible for yourself and for whatever happens to you. It’s your choice whether you attend the group or not, whether you bow to pressure or resist it, whether you go crazy, are bored, get physically injured, learn something, stay or leave or whatever.” (Schutz, 1973, p 72).

## *The Legacy of the Seventies*

Being born in 1955, I was a teenager in the early seventies. I spent a year as a full-time organizer of a protest movement, organized two rock concerts, took numerous psychedelic drugs, joined a group organized around the teachings of an Indian guru, and trained as a facilitator of encounter groups. I do not see those events as an aberration in my development to becoming an NLP trainer, and I do not regret them as a “waste” of a decade. Much of what I am comes from the experience of those times. When I ran NLP training in Sarajevo, I had that same feeling of participating in making the world a better place that I had in the 1965-1975 protest movements. When I run residential trainings on NLP and Spirituality, I recognize the sense of immersion in change that fired my own excitement with meditation and with encounter groups back then.

However there was a dark side to the “flower power” generation too. Annie Gottlieb (1987) has re-examined this formative decade in her book “Do You Believe In Magic?” While looking for the signs of its positive influence on future generations, she also acknowledges its limitations. For example, about the anti-war protests she says, “We saw our leaders as racist, fascist imperialists: Nixon saw us as communist dupes. (Again, there was some truth in both allegations)” Acknowledging that the very black-and-white simplicity of the movement was part

of its strength, she also refers to “a very unconscious programmed response, an arrogance that was part of people’s politics then.” (Gottlieb, 1987, p 65). Indeed, there was naivety to rival the Hitler Youth movement in the counterculture’s glorification of such authoritarian regimes as Mao Tse Tung’s China and Fidel Castro’s Cuba. And discussing hallucinogenic drugs, Gottlieb says, “Yes, LSD catalysed the vision of the Sixties. But the fact that so much of that vision came rushing through a drug may well have been the cause of its rapid evaporation, the widespread feeling that it was all a mirage.” (Gottlieb, 1987, p 192-193).

Gottlieb’s book studies “graduates” from the Sixties/Seventies who “dropped back in” and yet held on to their ideals. An example is Marc Sarkady, who in the Seventies ran an underground newspaper, a New Age church (the Kozmic Energy Church) and a community counselling centre. By 1986 he was a consultant and trainer working with the management of companies such as British Airways and General Motors to create responsible organizations that value conflict resolution, ecology and social justice. He also was working to improve the Moscow-Washington DC hotline with an official group called the Nuclear Negotiation Project. Sarkady says, “The challenge is to run the world better. It means developing form. It means being good at something, not just running around with naïve or heartfelt beliefs. It’s an ongoing challenge. But it can be done.” (Gottlieb, 1987, p 341).

Sarkady’s own personal transformation is a nice metaphor for the changes that NLP has undergone. If we are watchful enough to notice it, we too may be able to sift out and remove from our NLP work those Sixties residues such as:

- Black-and-white “I’m right and all other models are wrong” thinking that blocks our sharing in the collective discourse of human learning.
- Naive and mirage-like hopefulness that evades real life planning, testing and research.
- Unecological “Devra’s cross” style interventions which feel exciting but may achieve little.

In return we may be able to nourish those seeds which the seventies bequeathed NLP, such as:

- A belief that the world can change for the better.
- A belief that human beings can take charge of their own lives.
- A willingness to step back and ask more fundamental questions about the intention of our actions.
- A willingness to develop and embrace a diversity of new cultural forms and discard old ones that no longer suit our needs.

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