

NLP Book Review: Get the Life You Want: the secrets to quick and lasting life change with neuro-linguistic programming, by Richard Bandler.

Review by Steve Andreas
© 2009

Introduction

My wife Connirae and I trained often with Bandler from 1977 through 1990. During that time we also sponsored many seminars that he taught, and produced a number of videotapes of his trainings. We learned a great deal of our NLP knowledge and skills from him—including many finer distinctions and details that other trainers did not offer, such as careful ecology checks to be sure that changes did not have significant adverse consequences. We will both be forever grateful for his setting our feet on a path of fascinating and continuing discovery. We created the first four Bandler/Grinder books that many have said put NLP “on the map”—*Frogs into Princes*, *Trance-formations*, *Reframing*, and *Using Your Brain for a Change*—from transcripts of seminars. We are reasonably sure that Bandler did not read any of those books very closely—he was too busy doing much more interesting things. We think it is very likely that this was also the case with this book, “*Get the Life You Want*,” which lacks many of the finer distinctions, attention to detail, and ecology that make NLP work fast, easy, and elegant.

The basic message—that we can quickly and easily change what we do in our minds to make our lives better—is almost as revolutionary now as it was 30 years ago, because it is still virtually unknown in the larger field of psychology and psychiatry. By finding out how our minds work, we can choose to change how we think, what we do, and how we feel in response. Instead of punishing ourselves for our mistakes, we can enjoy using them as feedback in order to do better in the future. We can learn to prioritize and organize our time and activities to have more of the kind of experiences we want more of—more love, more enjoyment and satisfaction, more understanding and tolerance, and of course more money and sex—a message that is strongly emphasized in the book. For those of us who have learned from Bandler over many years, there is little in this book that is really new; for those who haven’t, there will be a great deal.

However, the book is much less clear and detailed about exactly *how* to accomplish this—without finding ourselves in even more trouble! Most of my commentary will be directed at clarifying this “how to,” because that is really what NLP offers the world that is new. For thousands of years saints, sages, and philosophers have set forth useful goals—but without telling us *how* to achieve them. As this book states:

“Human beings have the unique quality of being able to create their reality internally, and then superimpose it on the outside. If you’ve no control over that, you’re a schizophrenic. If you do have control over it, you’re a creative genius.” (p. 138)

Lack of control over internal reality is certainly a major problem for many. But control can also be a problem. Control can be clumsy, or directed toward goals that are self-defeating, or they may have many unanticipated consequences. It is important to learn how to use powerful tools carefully, or they may get results that are neither intended nor desired. There are tales in every culture about the results of being given power without the wisdom to use that power well. Often they take the form of being given three

wishes—and the third wish is *always* used to undo the damage created by the first two wishes.

This is a review of the *book*, and of the many useful processes presented in it; it is *not* a review of the great variety of elegant distinctions and patterns that Richard Bandler has developed and offered to the world since the early 1970's, or of his current trainings, or of *anything* else—only the book.

Overview

Overall, the book appears to be written for people with little or no exposure to NLP. Most of the book is a series of very short chapters that describe and illustrate a particular set of distinctions, and how they can be used to make changes, followed by an exercise for the reader to do. In the effort to make these processes easy for a novice reader to understand, they have been greatly simplified, and in my view often *oversimplified*. This necessarily omits a lot of “fine points,” such as specific language, ecology checks, criteria for a well-formed outcome, unique situations, “what ifs,” etc. that are often needed to make a pattern work well. The instructions are often incomplete, ambiguous, or contradictory—and in a few cases they are just plain *wrong*.

The result is a sort of “rough sketch” or crude caricature of the processes presented. Some readers will be able to follow the directions and be very satisfied with the results. Others will be happy initially, and only later find out that what they accomplished was not very useful because something crucial was left out. Yet others will find that the instructions are not detailed enough to enable them to deal with complicating factors or misunderstandings, and they are likely to be disappointed and put this book on a dusty shelf full of other self-help books that promised much more than they could deliver.

In the commentary that follows, I will work my way through the book from beginning to end, with page references, pointing out different aspects of what is presented. That makes it easy to verify quotations, examine the larger context in which they appear, and make your own determination of whether my comments are relevant and useful. Some readers may prefer to read only a few of them and then skip to the summary at the end. The comments can be read in any order.

My goal in doing this is to further develop the precision and understanding of NLP, which is all too often sadly lacking. Since Bandler is one of the original co-developers of NLP, it is likely that many readers will take the contents of this book as “gospel,” replacing “Freud said—” with “Bandler said—” rather than as a presentation of ideas and methods to be tested and evaluated by their results. As Bandler himself pointed out many years ago, that would be operating out of a “psychotheology,” making Bandler into a prophet or guru, in contrast to continually using feedback to evaluate the results of a pattern or recipe—the essence of science (with a small s).

Finally, I'd like to be clear that I am not “taking sides” in the considerable differences between the original co-developers, Richard Bandler and John Grinder. In their book, *Whispering in the Wind*, Carmen Bostic St. Clair and John Grinder wrote an extensive commentary on a number of issues in the field, mostly in regard to the nature of modeling, and they were often critical of others. In a concluding section they wrote, “Our intention is to provoke a professional high quality public dialogue among the

practitioners of NLP, as an integral part of these developments,” (14, p. 348) an invitation that I strongly welcomed. In response I wrote a detailed review of their book, agreeing with some sections and issues, and disagreeing with others.

<http://www.steveandreas.com/Articles/whispering.html> I provided them with the manuscript of my review in advance of publication, so that they could respond in the same issue. They wrote that they would respond in a future issue, but that has not happened, and after six years it does not seem to be forthcoming, casting some doubt on their stated intention to have a public dialogue. I have also reviewed the work of others, for example: <http://www.steveandreas.com/Articles/breakthroughs.html> who have typically responded with a personal attack, rather than discussing the substantive issues that I raised. I have also written two other articles taking issue with Grinder’s writing, to which Grinder has also made no response:

<http://www.steveandreas.com/Articles/mmodeling.html>

<http://www.steveandreas.com/Articles/EmperorReview.html>

The kinds of issues that I will discuss in this review have been common in NLP for many years. Whether or not my views are correct, there are many significant differences, and they need to be discussed so that a consensus about what works best can be developed, and NLP can continue as a coherent discipline. Without this, what NLP has offered the world will be scattered, dissipated, and lost.

Detailed Commentary on *Get the Life You Want*

p. xxii: **Aversion.** In a discussion of approaches that don’t work, the book mentions aversive conditioning as one of them. “They would take smokers and give them a cigarette, and shock the hell out of them.”

However, on p. 85, step #5 of the exercise, “Falling out of love” the reader is instructed to use aversion: “Take something that is disgusting to you and move the image of the person into the submodalities of the disgusting image.”

There are differences between these two examples, but what is common in both is to associate an unpleasant experience with a behavior or response that you want to stop. On p. xxii this is criticized; on p. 85 it is recommended. Aversion can suppress behavior, giving someone something to go *away* from, but it does not provide a positive alternative to go *toward*. Aversion always creates conflict, and often people are very good at finding ways around the conflict. When you have something more attractive to go toward, there is no conflict, and aversion is not even required.

p. xxvi: **Phobias/Fears.** “Starting at about 1974, right up to the present date, I have yet to have a single individual come in with a genuine phobia and walk out with it.”

In Bandler’s two-part YouTube video “The Hypnotist” at the end of part 2, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RczTTZqBSYw> the woman with a fear of flying has just completed a plane flight with Bandler on board the same plane with her. Bandler apparently spent most of a day working with her, since the video shows small segments of quite a variety of interventions in several different contexts. However, at the end of the flight, she is still apprehensive about flying, saying in a high-pitched strained voice (verbatim): “I didn’t put my seat back, though; I was too nervous. . . . I think I’m finally conquering the phobia I’ve had for over 22 years, and the biggest problem is that I have

to do it all over again on the way back.” Clearly—both verbally and nonverbally—she is still struggling with being anxious about flying; “conquering” presupposes a conflict to be overcome by force, and not yet achieved, and “problem” indicates that flying is still difficult for her.

That is not the kind of resourceful response that occurs after a successful change, and it is very different from the responses of the clients in the three successful videotaped Bandler sessions from the 1980s that the book mentions on p. xxvii.

For a *very* striking example of how a client responds after a successful cure of a fear of flying, watch <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZNtESnHSeUs> in which a woman who had been afraid of heights and couldn't fly stands happily in the open rear cargo door of an old military transport plane flying at 3,500 feet! I have some disagreement with how that was achieved, but you certainly can't argue with such clear-cut results! Bandler's claim to have never failed over a period of 35 years seems to have at least one recorded counterexample. There is no shame in failing at something, but claiming to have *never* failed is another matter altogether.

For another example of what a successful outcome of overcoming a fear looks like, see a follow-up test of Bandler's method of spinning feelings, which is a method that is featured throughout the book: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dWKwxWarJ54>

p. xxvii: “I could teach it to people in a short twenty-minute session.” While this claim is usually true, in the video described above Bandler apparently spent *much* more than twenty minutes with the client, since they are shown together in an office, an elevator, a movie theater, a ride in a van, an airport, and finally on an airplane flight—yet *without* success. This indicates that Bandler's claim in the book, “I have yet to have a single individual come in with a genuine phobia and walk out with it,” (p. xxvi) is more than a bit overblown.

pp. 10-11: **Spinning Feelings.** Bandler's discovery of spinning feelings is a major advance in the field, one of the simplest and fastest change methods in NLP that I know of. I have been experimenting with it a lot, with great success. Based on this ongoing experimentation, I find the description in the book vastly oversimplified.

a. In the discussion of spinning feelings, the following statement is made: “It is only by having them take their hand and rotate it forward and backward, to the right and to the left, that we can find out which way their feelings are moving in their body. These are the only dimensions really available.”

The illustration on p. 11 shows a vertical circle at the midline of the torso, and a horizontal circle in the chest area. But even if we restrict ourselves to a circle in one of the three major spatial dimensions, there is a third choice available, namely a vertical circle that moves *left and right* rather than front and back.

b. Both the illustrations and the text indicate that feelings always move in a circle, a closed loop that stays within the body. However, I have found that the loop is often not a circle, but a more convoluted loop, and that it sometimes leaves the body, moves through space, and then returns to the body. For instance, a feeling often starts in the lower abdomen, rises up the back to the head, and then comes forward, loops through the space in front of the body and reenters the lower abdomen. Sometimes it is a *double* loop

rather than a single one, rising up both sides of the body in parallel loops.

c. However, often the feeling does not move in a loop at all. For instance, one of mine started in my right foot, rose up through my leg to my torso, and then in a diagonal toward my left shoulder. Other feelings have started in my lower right abdomen and then moved toward my left shoulder.

To summarize, the description and illustrations in the book are *greatly* oversimplified, omitting much of the individual variation that can occur, and which can sometimes be very interesting and useful in making changes.

p. 13: **A great quote:** “Since most problems are created by our imagination and are thus imaginary, all we need are imaginary solutions.”

pp. 14-15: **“How to Feel Wonderful Exercise.”**

“1. Think of a time you felt wonderful.

“2. Close your eyes and imagine that time in vivid detail. See the image clearly, hear the sounds loudly, remember the feelings as they were then.”

These two steps will be familiar to most NLPers as a way to elicit a full physiological response to a memory. However, “imagine” and “image” have connotations of being “made up” rather than real, so “re-experience” would be a better word.

Some wonderful memories are in candlelight so they won’t be clear, and the sounds may be soft rather than loud, so the instructions to see *clearly* and hear *loudly* may not match the client’s experience. It’s much better to simply say, “See what you see, hear what you hear, and feel what you feel,”—all in *present* tense to amplify the elicitation. “Remember the feelings as they were *then*” creates a distinction between the present and the past, and directs attention to the past, rather than present experience.

“3. Imagine yourself stepping into that experience and imagine being in that memory as if it’s happening now. See what you’d see, hear what you’d hear, feel how good you’d feel. Make the colors stronger and brighter if that helps. Notice how you were breathing back then, and breathe that way now.”

Here are two more uses of the word “imagine.” “Stepping into the experience” presupposes that the reader was previously *outside* the experience, dissociated (The previous instruction is not specific about association/dissociation) so that will be a bit of a jar to those who were already *inside* their experience.

The “as if” frame lends a bit of unreality, as does the repetitive use of “you’d,” which is future conditional tense, in contrast to present tense.

“Notice how you were breathing back then,” sends attention back to the past, and then “breathe that way now” brings it back to the present.

This kind of careless and sloppy use of verb tense and language is frequent throughout the book—so frequent that I will not comment on most of it. It may not make much difference to a flexible or compliant reader, but others will find it frustrating and annoying, and at best it will weaken the response that the exercise is designed to elicit.

pp. 26: **Enough is Enough (Threshold Pattern).**

First paragraph: “Over the years I have discovered that the moment people really change is when they simply decide that enough is enough.”

This is restated just as strongly in the next paragraph, and it certainly can create *motivation* to change. This is a pattern that Bandler developed, called the “The Last Straw” threshold pattern, which we wrote up long ago in *Change your mind—and Keep the Change*, ch. 6. However, many phobics reached this point of intense motivation decades ago, but without knowing *how* to be able to make the change they wanted so badly. It is certainly a good way to create motivation, which will impel people to seek ways to change, but it doesn’t necessarily result in change, as the book states.

pp. 26-28: **Effortful Language** There are three examples of using the word “push,” as in “Push the picture out into the distance.” “Push” has connotations of difficulty and resistance, so it is much more elegant to say something like, “*Allow* that picture to move out into the distance,” or “Watch as that picture moves out into the distance,” presupposing that it will do that unless the reader actively interferes with it.

p. 27: **Moving an Image** “You have to take a hold of the image and do something with it. You have to push it all the way off so that it’s twenty feet away, move it across your midline, and pull it up on the other side into the submodality qualities of uncertainty so that what was a strong belief becomes uncertainty.”

I agree that it is very useful to have someone physically hold the image and move it, utilizing the kinesthetic system to change their visualization. Bandler taught us to move an image out into the distance in order to move it past the midline in the early 1980s, and it certainly doesn’t hurt. However, I have found that it is seldom necessary, and only use it as a “back-up” method if the client has difficulty moving an image past their midline. This only appears to be necessary when the client has a “digital divide” between the right and left sides of their body. “Pull” (like “push”) also has connotations of effort, so again “*Allow* it to move” would be more graceful.

p. 27-28: “**The Belief Change Technique (Belief Swish Pattern)**”

“2. Think of a resourceful belief you do want to have. For example, that you will be free from your problem for the rest of your life and live very happily.”

In this exercise, no criteria are provided for the new resourceful belief, and the example given has serious problems. A really good resourceful belief is a well-formed outcome, for which NLP established a number of very important criteria many years ago. These include the absence of negation, appropriate contextualization, attention to process rather than result (“I can learn to be more decisive,” in contrast to “I am decisive,”) etc.

In the description above, “free from the problem” is equivalent to “not problem” (negation), and “for the rest of your life” is an explicit absence of contextualization. It is also a violation of a fundamental NLP presupposition, that “Every behavior (including a “problem” one) is useful in some context.” “Happily” is a quality or aspect of some more satisfying behavior or process, but no process is specified.

A belief that is ill-formed will not work well. Either events in the real world will quickly weaken or destroy it, or the person will live in a delusion and deny corrective feedback. Lots of people also have “positive” beliefs that can be *even more* limiting than the negative beliefs discussed in this chapter, and I would have liked to see at least *some* discussion of these in the book. If this process is used without carefully specifying the

new belief, it will create more of these.

This process is labeled as a “swish pattern.” However it is *not* a swish as originally developed and described by Bandler in *Using Your Brain for a Change*, ch. 9. Two other additional early sources on the swish pattern can be found in our books *Change Your Mind—and keep the Change*, ch.3, and *Heart of the Mind*, ch. 17). A detailed description of the swish pattern can also be found in my article at: <http://www.steveandreas.com/Articles/kinesthetic.html>

The pattern in this chapter of the book takes a limiting belief and weakens it by moving it into the location of something uncertain, while at the same time that it takes a desired belief and strengthens it by moving it into the location of something certain. This is a very useful pattern, but it is not a swish. It was originally called the “submodalities belief change pattern” in *Using Your Brain—for a Change*, ch. 7. In later chapters of *Get the Life You Want*, several other different patterns are described as a swish. It doesn’t matter too much what a pattern is called, as long as the name is used consistently. Using the same name for different patterns, or different names for the same pattern, created confusion, making it very difficult to know what someone is talking about.

p. 31-33: **Timelines**

It’s perhaps a small point, but there is no credit given in this book for Connirae’s and my discovery and development of personal timelines, first published in *Change Your Mind—and Keep the Change*, ch. 1. Yet Bandler’s book obviously draws from our work, since it uses the same trivial behavior (brushing your teeth) that Connirae and I picked to use for our personal timelines exercise.

This book’s section on timelines is very limited. Only the two major general categories of timeline are presented, “in time” (front to back) and “through time” (left to right). This is a *huge* oversimplification that omits the wide individual variations that occur *within* each category. Some timelines have some characteristics of “in time” and some aspects of “through time.” For instance, the past may be behind the person as in a typical “in time” configuration, while the future goes to the right, as is common in a “through time” configuration.

The diagram on p. 32 shows timelines as straight lines, which is another huge oversimplification, ignoring the *greatly* varied paths of most people’s timelines, which often have curves, and may have sharp bends, divergences, cusps, etc. There is also no mention of the different ways that images on the timeline can be represented. Images can be large or small, color or black and white, and can vary in many other ways—brightness, clarity, transparency, etc—on different portions of the timeline. These unique features are often very significant in creating a basis for people’s problems or skills, as we discussed in some detail over 20 years ago in *Change Your Mind—and Keep the Change*, ch. 1, and *Heart of the Mind*, ch. 19).

The diagram on p. 32 also shows a person standing *on* a timeline, indicating that it is external to the person and dissociated. In fact, many people have a timeline that goes *through* their body—usually at the abdomen or chest, and this arrangement results in more full-body association into experiences on the timeline. Making changes in this distinction can often be very significant and useful in altering someone’s experience. If you want access to a much wider range of material on timelines and how they can be

utilized, check out the sources given in the previous paragraph (*Change Your Mind* and *Heart of the Mind*). These remain excellent sources for our original research in this area.

pp. 37-41: **“Getting Over Bad Suggestions”**

The example given in this section—a woman who got nervous around other people in response to a “negative suggestion” voice—includes several different interventions somewhat mixed together.

1. Changing the volume of the voice to change its impact.
2. Using a change in location to change the impact—move it closer, then farther away, then behind her, then farther and farther behind her.
3. Changing the tone of the voice to that of someone who you know is lying, so that it is no longer believable.
4. Eliciting the submodality differences between the “bad suggestion” and the “biggest lie,” and then transforming the bad suggestion into the submodalities of the lie.

Curiously, the exercise that follows uses *only* the last intervention, #4 above.

But more important, there is no ecology whatsoever. The goal is to “get rid of” the voice (p. 40) which is a negative outcome, and there is no inquiry whatsoever into any possible positive intention or protective function that the voice might have. Simply ignoring the voice might—and often does—eliminate a very important protective function. This lack of attention to ecology is evident in *every* exercise in the book, a very serious omission.

pp. 44-45: **“Building Better Suggestions Exercise” (Changing Personal History)**

First, this is not the “Changing Personal History” pattern as originally presented in *Frogs into Princes*, which was a simple anchoring process. This is a very sketchy outline of Bandler’s pattern, the “Decision Destroyer” in which you go back in time, create a positive experience, and then come forward through time carrying this new experience as a part of yourself, in order to change all relevant subsequent experiences. The decision destroyer is one of my *most* favorite interventions, both because it can be used with so many different kinds of problems, and because it changes them throughout the person’s life. It was first published in *Heart of the Mind*, ch. 4.

In step 1 there are no criteria whatsoever for what “a more useful suggestion that you want to believe” is. A reader who believed that they were worthless and undeserving could easily want the opposite belief, “I’m worthwhile and deserving, and everyone else is worthless.” Making this belief certain would create an arrogant, self-centered, insensitive prick—and I think there are quite enough of those in the world already.

There is also no mention of two essential aspects of creating a new experience: 1. Eliciting the submodalities of an actual life-changing experience and using those to build the new memory, and 2. Making sure that the new experience has a great deal of sensory detail, so that it is believable and compelling, and not just a vague intellectual construction.

Some people will be lucky enough to “fill in the blanks” in the exercise appropriately and have a good and lasting experience; most will not.

I have written up the decision destroyer, including all the different important

aspects of it, in great detail at: <http://www.steveandreas.com/Articles/DecisionD.html> If you read my article, and compare it with the exercise in the book, it should be strikingly obvious what a “bare bones” outline the exercise in the book is, and how many *very* important details are left out.

pp. 47-50: **“Enough is Enough Pattern (Threshold Pattern)”**

This is a second presentation of what Bandler once called “The Last Straw Threshold” pattern, which is mentioned on p. 26, and which I discussed earlier.

pp. 51-52: **“Fast Phobia Cure Exercise”**

Again there is a “bare bones” sketch of Bandler’s very useful process which we described in much more detail, with an example, twenty years ago in *Heart of the Mind*, ch. 7. There is also a very serious error in sequence. Step 2 “Imagine yourself in a movie theater, watching yourself going through the scary experience” occurs *before* the second step of dissociation, which is not presented until step 3. If the client can successfully accomplish step 2 (and many will *not* be able to) then step 3 is unnecessary. Step 3 should come before “watching yourself going through the scary experience” in order to complete the two-step dissociation *before* running the movie of the disturbing memory.

Even with the second step of dissociation, some people will not be able to maintain it without additional help. For instance, gently holding the head straight back in the “Marine” dissociation posture is one way to make it possible for them to do this—a “small point” that can make the difference between success and failure.

Another “small point that can make the difference between success and failure is to give instructions that result in occupying the kinesthetic system: “As you sit there in the theater seat, you can feel the hard arms of the chair under your arms, and that peculiar feel of the texture of the seat cushion under you.”

Finally, the introduction of circus music in step #5 introduces content that may not be useful. Many years ago I experimented with adding circus music to an experience. It works for some people, but others become annoyed or angered, and the pattern works fine without it, so it is unnecessary.

pp. 56-58: **“Reversing Anxiety Exercise”**

As mentioned before (pp. 10-11) the book says, in regard to the spinning of feelings that “it has to spin forward or backward, or to the right or to the left, because, *geometrically, those are the only possibilities.*” This is patently false, because geometrically there is certainly a third possibility: a circle that goes up one side of the body and down the other (or the reverse). The book also leaves out many other possible directions and loops that could combine any or all of these three fundamental spatial dimensions. For instance, the feeling could move from lower right front to upper left back, and then loop to the right and forward, and then back to the lower right, a path that utilizes all three spatial dimensions—and as I mentioned earlier, it doesn’t have to loop at all.

“See a set of red arrows” is an imposition of content that may not match the person’s experience. “Turn the circle blue” when reversing the movement is another imposition of content. It is *much* more respectful and elegant to simply ask the person

what color the feeling is to begin with, and then ask them to change that to a more pleasant or comfortable color when reversing the direction, leaving the choice of colors completely up to them—a perfect match.

The book describes discovering the path of the feeling, and then asks which way the feeling is spinning *along* this path, and this is consistent with the illustrations on p. 11.

Nick Kemp’s version of spinning feelings includes an additional distinction, which I have found very useful. In Nick’s version, you ask, “Which way is it spinning *as it moves along* this path,” a slightly different question. For instance, the feeling could *spiral* to the left or to the right *as* it moves along the path. I have found reversing this kind of spin to be very effective, both for me personally, and for others I have worked with. For more detail about this, click on the URL below and scroll down to section 2, “Spinning Feelings.”

http://www.provocativechangeworks.com/provocative_change_works_process.php

pp. 66: **“Changing Your Bad Memories Exercise”**

“1. Think of a memory you want to stop thinking about.

“2. Notice the submodalities. Freeze-frame it and shrink it in size.” (Exactly which frame to freeze is unspecified.)

“3. Skip to the end of the memory and freeze-frame it, and imagine a whiteness knob and grab it, whiting it out really quickly.

“4. Repeat this three times.”

In the description that precedes the exercise, the reader is told to “literally grab a whiteness knob in your mind and turn it very quickly so that it goes blank-out white, phhhhhp. Very quickly, so the whiteness replaces the memory so you can’t see it.”

This intervention is very different than the previous ones that reduce or amplify feelings; it is one that creates *amnesia*. Whenever you create amnesia, there is always the danger that something very useful about the experience may be lost—some learning, some information about what kind of person or situation to avoid in the future, etc.

Amnesia should *only* be used after a very careful check to be sure that all useful information is extracted and remembered. Even when this is done, I consider it an intervention of “last resort,” because you can *never* be sure that you have extracted all the useful learning from an experience. There is always the possibility that you could go back to it later and learn even more from it. If you white it out entirely, that possibility would no longer be available to you.

“5. See yourself in the end of the movie and run the movie backward, seeing the sights backward and the sounds backward and spin the feelings in your body in the opposite direction.”

First, if the memory is actually whited out completely several times to create amnesia, there should be no memory movie at this point that could be run backwards, so let’s assume that the memory is only weakened, not completely eliminated.

The reader is instructed to “see yourself” in the movie that is run backwards, so the reader is told to be *outside* the experience. However, in the fast phobia cure described in the book, (p. 51, step 5) running the movie backwards is done while being *inside* the experience. I have found that doing this inside the experience is *far* more effective.

If the whitening out process is done thoroughly, it should have already neutralized the feelings in response to the memory, so there should be no feelings to spin backwards, and this part of step #5 would be completely redundant.

p. 73: “When people lose a child, they are, of course, going to hurt, and they’re going to hurt for a long time.”

About 20 years ago Connirae and I developed a dependable pattern for resolving grief, which was first published in 1989 in *Heart of the Mind*, ch. 11. In a 1987 videotaped session, “Resolving Grief,” Connirae used this pattern with a man who had recently lost a baby. There is a follow-up interview with him in which he describes finding himself happily playing peekaboo with a small child that evening at a restaurant. Previously any contact with a small child had evoked his grief; happily playing peekaboo was a nice spontaneous confirmation that his grief was completely resolved.

pp. 76-77: “**Getting Over Grieving Exercise.**” The general instructions given for resolving grief are appropriate, but again, it is only a “bare bones” outline. Connirae and I modeled grief resolution in detail many years ago, and created a complete process for doing it thoroughly. Compare the exercise in the Bandler Book with our article, “Resolving Grief,” available at: <http://www.steveandreas.com/Articles/grief02.html>

p. 82-84: “**Falling Out of Love.**” The book advocates using the “last straw” threshold pattern yet again—running a bunch of unpleasant memories of a loved person back to back. As I mentioned before, I think the threshold pattern should be a pattern of “last resort.” It only eliminates an existing set of responses or behaviors, without providing something else in its place, so it can leave a person in a very uncomfortable “limbo.”

p. 84: “Then I asked him to think of what he thought was the most disgusting thing he had seen on planet Earth, and he looked at me and said, ‘chopped liver—just the smell of it, the sight of it makes me want to puke.’ I had him look at a big plate of chopped liver and smell it until he got that bad feeling. In the center of that picture, I had him open up a picture of her smiling face to the point that every time he thought about her, it turned into chopped liver.”

Is it really going to improve someone’s life to feel disgusted when they see all their memories of someone they once loved? I don’t think so. Experiences of being in love are very special resources. Making them all disgusting is worse than discarding them, because now the person has a bunch of additional disgusting experiences to think of.

p. 85: “**Falling Out of Love Pattern Exercise**”

“2. Remember all the good experiences about being with them by seeing yourself in the memories. See the movies run backward and make them all in black and white and small.”

This is truly “throwing out the baby with the bathwater,” because all those good experiences are positive resources. Dissociating from them by seeing yourself in them,

and running them in black and white and small is a way to throw them in the trash heap. Someone might have *30 years of happy experiences* with someone. Perhaps now it's appropriate to fall out of love with them, but throwing away 30 years of happy experiences in order to do it is like killing a fly with a shotgun; it will work, but the cost is *far* too high.

On p. 74, the book offers *opposite* advice; Bandler speaks of working with a woman who had lost a 16-year-old son to cancer, and was still grieving deeply after three years. "I turned to her and asked if she would rather I put her in a hypnotic trance and give her amnesia, so it would be like she had never known her son. Would she give up all the memories of his sixteen years of life in exchange for not feeling the pain that she had now? She looked at me quite angrily and said no, and I said 'Good. The reason you don't want to give up those memories is because if you gave yourself amnesia from ever having known somebody you loved, you'd miss out on all the good times.'" This is the opposite of the instruction to the reader in step 2 above, and supports my contention that amnesia, as created by whitening out an image is seldom or never a good thing to do.

If you decide to use the last straw threshold pattern on bad experiences you have had with someone (which is steps 3 and 4 of this exercise) that should be more than adequate to fall out of love with them. There is no need to ruin all the good experiences you have had with them over the years.

Step 5 uses aversion to make your thought of the person disgusting, which is even more overkill—like using *two* shotgun blasts to kill a fly—and the result is to create yet another large set of disgusting memories, which is not what most people need in their lives.

pp. 88-89: **"Shut up!"** "Often we say nasty things to ourselves and criticize ourselves continuously. To change this, we can learn to interrupt these negative thought patterns by repeating a mantra. My favorite mantra is "Shut up!" because it works so well."

"Shut up!" doesn't work very well on other people, and it works no better on an internal voice; it is even more primitive and ineffective than a Gestalt Therapy dialogue, or the "talking back" to voices that is a basic process in Cognitive Behavioral Therapy. It creates yet more conflict, in contrast to the resolution that can occur by asking the voice for its positive intent in order to join with it, find better ways for it to express its positive intention, and make it into a supportive ally. For more extensive discussion about attempting to stop internal voices, read my article, "Silencing Internal Voices" at: <http://realpeoplepress.com/blog/silencing-internal-voices>

p. 90: **"Changing Your Mood Exercise"**

"3. Move the negative images away and replace them with positive images that make you feel the way you want to feel.

"4. Use the mantra ['Shut up, shut up'] to stop your negative internal voice from saying whatever it says to make you feel bad. Replace it with good suggestions, statements, encouragement, and compliments to yourself."

"5. Notice what direction the feeling is spinning. Spin the feeling in the opposite direction."

Steps 3 and 4 replace unpleasant images and feelings with pleasant ones, so that after completing step 4, the reader is now feeling *pleasant* feelings. Then step 5 tells the reader to *reverse* the spin of these pleasant feelings, which will *diminish* them or *eliminate* them. This is a mistake. If readers actually did this, it would completely nullify the goal of the exercise.

(Again there are no criteria for the “good suggestions, statements, encouragement, and compliments to yourself.”)

p. 109: **“Switching Your Craving (Swish Pattern) Exercise”**

“The habit you have to build is saying to yourself powerfully, *Not cigarettes. No.*” This is a negative command. “Not cigarettes” works the same as “Not blue elephants,” creating an image of whatever is negated, and bringing it to your attention.

Again the pattern presented is not a swish, but a simple chain, starting with the craving, whiting out the image, and replacing it with “an image of yourself engaging in a new behavior, looking happy and being free.” If it were a swish pattern the self-image would be one of an evolved self, *not* engaging in a specific new behavior, and the two images would be linked by two different submodalities.

pp. 110-112: **Whose Client?**

The “clean freak” woman client is described in this book as a client of Bandler’s. However, this is the same client that is described in *Reframing* (pp. 5-7), where she is described as a client of Leslie Cameron-Bandler’s! If you compare the two stories, you will find that the more recent one is *greatly* embellished and exaggerated over the original 1982 story. This makes the reader wonder, “How many of Richard’s other stories about working successfully with clients were “borrowed” from others, and then embellished?”

pp. 115: **“Become More Determined Exercise”**

“1. Think about something you feel very determined about. Find out the submodalities for determination for you. Notice the feeling of determination and which way it spins in your body. (A)

“2. Stop this and think of a habit or compulsion you want to change. Find out the submodalities of it. (B)

“3. Imagine a small image of changing in the corner of this image of determination, (B) in the corner of (A).”

This is *very* confusing. First, what is the “image of changing”? Is it the image of what you *want* to change, or something else? Whatever it is, it is to be placed “in the corner of this image of determination, (B).” However, the image of determination has been labeled as A, *not* B. The next phrase, “in the corner of (A)” is also puzzling. So the instructions are to place a small image of “changing” in the image of determination, which is to be placed in the image of A, which is also determination? Ambiguous or incomplete instructions are one thing; contradictory and confusing ones are quite another.

p. 116: **Label:** A persnickety point. The label of one of the columns is “Determined” and the other is “Changed Behavior.” This label should be titled “Behavior

to be Changed” or something similar, since that is what is being compared in the exercise.

p. 121: **Disappointment** “Disappointment always requires adequate planning” is a cute sentence that Bandler has used for years, drawing attention to the role of expectation in disappointment. If you have no expectations, you can’t be disappointed. However, on p. 135 we find an opposite statement, “The trick to getting through tests is adequate preparation.” Adequate preparation is also discussed on p. 126 in regard to planning to get back on a diet when someone falls off the diet.

The truth is that disappointment requires *inadequate* planning. If your planning is adequate, you *won’t* be disappointed, because your planning prepared you well for subsequent events.

Like many people, this section talks about being “on” a diet, and “falling off” of it, implying that you are higher than the diet, and that it is easy to accidentally “fall off” of it. It is much better to think of a diet that is something you are *in*, or *under*, so you would have to go to some conscious effort to climb up out of it, or out from under it.

“Abreaction is about having a polarity response.” Abreaction is defined as, “to release (repressed emotions) by acting out, as in words, behavior, or the imagination, the situation causing the conflict.” This is quite different than a polarity response, which is an *opposite* response to what someone has said or done—for instance, a “No” response to a “Yes” statement.

p. 127: **Determination**

“Every failure is something that you should ignore, and every failure should mean that you should try even more.”

First, notice that this is a universal statement, with “*every* failure” repeated, with the repeated “should,” a modal operator of necessity. Determination is the main theme of this chapter, and it is a very valuable skill that many people need more of. But every (yes, *every*) skill will also be a serious limitation in certain contexts. There are times when it is completely appropriate to give up on determination, because for whatever reasons, the goal isn’t worth the effort. There *are* times when failure should be paid very careful attention, because it might indicate that you are doing something ineffective, that your outcome—for instance perfection—is unattainable, or that it has serious ecology issues, that the goal would interfere with other important outcomes, etc.

p. 128: “When you would say to them [great musicians and concert pianists], ‘You are so fabulous,’ they would look at me and say, ‘Not really, I could be better,’ because they always believed they could be better so they kept getting better.”

That statement advocates continual improvement. However, on p. 135 the following statement advocates the opposite: “If people keep on revising things over and over again, all it does is create stress.” This book evidently followed the second statement rather than the first.

p. 135: **Perfection**

“If you can imagine the perfect state, that will work much better for you. What

would you look like in the perfect state?”

The word “perfect” indicates that nothing could be better, in contrast to the musicians mentioned on p. 128 above, for whom continual *improvement* is always possible. Using the word “perfect” is a poor match for someone who believes in continual improvement, and will amplify the frustration for anyone who is troubled by struggling for unattainable perfectionism.

Happily, the exercise that follows, “**Doing an Excellent Interview**” does not use the word “perfect.” However, I would have liked *some* mention that *feeling confident* is not the same thing as *being competent*. This exercise is great for accessing an appropriate state for someone who is already competent. However, some very *incompetent* people are very confident, and that is not a good combination, particularly in airline pilots, politicians, doctors, and others who have responsibility for other people’s lives and property. If the reader is incompetent at something, and uses this exercise to become confident and get a job doing that, someone may suffer.

p. 139: “**Getting Through Exams**”

5. “Begin to answer each question, but imagine being back in your room.” [the study context]

“But” creates opposition between the first part of the sentence and the last part, and tends to diminish or erase the first part, and “imagine” introduces connotations of unreality. It would be much better to say, “As you begin to answer each question confidently, be aware of what it is like to be back in your room.” “As” *joins* the exam context and the study context (rather than separating them) and presupposes both “answering the question,” and “confidently,” which is an important theme of the exercise.

6. “See yourself vividly and notice the way you are smiling, breathing, standing, and moving. Move in that way.”

In step 5, the reader is already told to associate into the experience of the exam. In step 6, the reader is told to “see yourself” which is dissociated, and then to “move in that way,” which implies association again. However, the use of “that” indicates something far away, implying separation and dissociation; “this” would support association better. To summarize, in these two steps the reader is instructed to associate, then dissociate, then associate, yet with “that” which implies disassociation. This kind of sloppy, careless use of language is also evident in other steps in this exercise, and in most of the other exercises in the book.

pp. 177: “**Changing Your Feelings About Something (Visual Squash)**”

Putting an image of your future goal in your right hand, and an image of your present state in your left, and then filling in all the images in between is an excellent way to develop a specific and detailed pathway in order to reach a goal. However it would be better to title this process “step-wise planning,” “backward planning,” or something similar, because that is what it accomplishes. Although it will also result in a change in feeling, the important part is creating a continuous pathway of images that show you exactly what to do to reach your goal, not the change in feeling.

The instruction to put the goal in the right hand, and the present state in the left hand will be a good match for someone who has a typical “through time” timeline that

goes from left to right, with the future on the right; but it will be a poor match for someone with a reversed timeline that has their future on the left. And for someone with an “in time” timeline with their future in *front* of them, it would be much better to match that by filling in the images from where the reader is to the future image in *front* of them.

Although this is a very useful and worthwhile pattern, it is *not* a visual squash, which was first described by Bandler and Grinder in 1976 as “sorting and integration of polarities” in *The Structure of Magic, volume II*, (pp 77-78), and a detailed example was provided in *Heart of the Mind*, ch. 13. Although the visual squash is a very dramatic process, it is also somewhat violent and crude, requiring some time for the person to unconsciously integrate and organize the jumble of experiences that result from using it successfully. There is no ecology within the process itself, and the results of using it are varied and unpredictable. Since polarities often—if not usually—involve conflicting aspects of identity, the methods presented in my book, *Transforming Your Self* offer much gentler and more ecological ways to achieve the same kind of integration.

I could comment on many other aspects of this book, but I have probably already offered more than most people are interested in reading.

Summary

NLP is a wonderful set of methods, which is why I have chosen to devote much of the last 32 years of my life to developing them further. As an old proverb says, “The devil is in the details,” which have not been well attended to in this book. Someone with a lot of good training and experience of NLP could use this book as a point of departure for trying any unfamiliar processes, as long as they examine them very carefully, and they are able to fill in the missing details.

However, the book appears to have been written for people who are just being introduced to NLP, and I don’t recommend this book for newcomers. It has far too many mistakes in procedure, language, confusing instructions, lack of ecology, lack of detail, and other omissions. It only provides a crude caricature of NLP, so it can’t give a novice a current and effective “state of the art” experience. It is oversimplified, shoddy, sloppy.

Since the book is authored by one of the original co-developers, it is likely that many might accept its contents at face value, and that would be a *huge* mistake. *This book ignores almost all of the finer distinctions that Bandler himself made over twenty years ago!* It also ignores all the developments that have been made by others in the field during the last 25 years. If the book were to be widely taken as authoritative, it would set back the development of the field enormously. I have written this detailed review in the hope that I might be able to keep that from happening. This ends my book review; what follows is some commentary about the “field” of NLP, stimulated by the many problems in this book.

About the Field of NLP: a Historical Perspective

How has this kind of situation come about? Primarily because of the lack of communication between different people doing NLP, and in particular the lack of the kind of critical feedback that I have written above. This is particularly ironic, because from the very beginning, one of the key aspects of NLP that distinguished it from

mainstream psychology and psychology was the use of *immediate* feedback—both verbal and nonverbal—to verify that someone had actually *accomplished* what they had been asked to do at each step of an NLP process. This lack of communication and feedback in the field has a long history.

Until 1981 NLP was a very small club; although there were differences of opinion, pretty much everyone talked to everyone else. That ended with the split between the co-developers and their colleagues and students in 1981. For the next several years there were three different major training organizations, run by Richard Bandler, John Grinder, and Leslie Cameron-Bandler. Although each initially had a somewhat different orientation and specialization, they all embraced the same underlying presuppositions and methodology. Connirae and I were the only students who refused to “choose up sides,” because we wanted to continue to learn from *all* of them—a diplomatic dance that was often difficult, but also very valuable to us. The three different groups continued to diverge and develop in different directions, and their students also began to explore different developments.

While this separation of organizations sometimes enabled original new patterns and discoveries to emerge, free of the restrictions of any particular orthodoxy. But it also resulted in further fragmentation, and sometimes more vigorous confrontation and conflict. Having to sell NLP trainings in a very competitive marketplace—what I call *the curse of marketing*—has led many to assert huge differences between trainings, whether or not that was true, and often to make exaggerated promises. Articles in the few—and usually short-lived—NLP magazines have little or no new content, and are mostly self-serving “infomercials,” rather like the parallel play of very small children who do not really interact with each other. Sometimes NLP has been combined with other approaches with very different foundations and assumptions, making these divisions deeper and more fractious.

Over the years, this fragmentation has increased exponentially. Most trainers don’t attend trainings by other trainers, and neither do their students. They speak with only a small number of other trainers who agree with them, and many will not talk to each other at all, so most have little or no direct experience of others’ work, and no opportunities to exchange or discuss ideas, or compare processes.

Annual conferences (only once every *two* years in the US) are more like trade shows for lawn furniture or outdoor barbecues. At both trainings and conferences the purpose is usually to teach specific skills and processes. Each trainer presents, while participants mostly listen, and many trainers do not attend. There really isn’t a forum in the field for differing views to be presented and vigorously discussed.

As a result, the title “NLP” is now used for a *very* wide range of trainings, presenting very different—and sometimes contradictory—patterns, theories, and attitudes. Many trainers provide trainings that have only a very loose connection with NLP principles, while some others include a variety of ancient tribal teachings, numerology, or shamanism, and are much more like religious cults. This is like what typically happens in many religions as they fragment into various different churches, each with their own individual prophets, holy scripture, and rituals.

Although behavioral testing and immediate feedback at every step is an integral part of every NLP pattern, many have said that NLP cannot be tested scientifically, a

curious contradiction that places NLP squarely in the realm of superstition.

As a result, NLP has a *very* mixed reputation. Some people have been disappointed by one trainer, and come to the quite reasonable conclusion that what they experienced is true of all of NLP. Others have been impressed with the power of what they have learned, and then been puzzled (or shocked) by what they found in other very different trainings. I know many NLP-trained business consultants who *never* mention that what they are doing is NLP, in order to avoid the concerns, objections, and discussion that would usually follow.

An Invitation, and a Call to Action

If NLP is to become a coherent field, rather than “a herd of cats,” and if it is to gain any kind of wider acceptance and scientific respectability, we will need to find ways to foster more communication and exchanges of ideas. And we need to follow this with some rigorous *testing* of differing ideas and methods, in order to winnow the wheat from the all too abundant chaff.

The “What” I think a useful first step would be to create a list of some simple definitions and understandings that we could all agree upon, as a basis for further discussion. The questions given below are simply examples of the *kinds* of topics that I have in mind. There may well be a better list.

“What are the different modalities or representational systems?”

“What words, tones of voice, head postures, etc. are dependable indicators that someone is using a given modality, and which are ambiguous?”

“Shall we describe the vestibular system as an independent representational system, or as a result of comparing information from the kinesthetic and visual systems?”

“What list of submodalities can we define and agree upon?”

“Is ‘sparkle’ an independent submodality, or is it a combination of brightness, location, and changing intensity?”

“What are dependable behavioral cues that indicate use of a particular submodality, such as association/dissociation?”

“What are the essential components of a swish pattern?”

“Can a swish pattern begin with a dissociated cue?”

“What are the differences between a swish pattern and a simple chain?”

“What is an operational definition of a ‘logical level’?”

“What are the different kinds of nonverbal signals that we can all agree are evidence of incongruity, or internal conflict?”

If we can’t agree on a topic, we could set that one aside for later discussion, and move on to something else that we *can* agree on. And we *can* always return to a topic and redefine it in the light of further investigation or reflection, as any scientific field does. Perhaps other questions would be more useful to discuss, but we need to find *some* way to build a foundation of agreement or we may as well stop pretending that NLP is a “field.”

The “How?” With some basic agreement on *what* we are talking about, we could begin to build on this foundation by establishing ways to clarify *how* we think about the “what.” When there are different/conflicting ideas or processes, we could create some

agreement on how to test them to determine which is more useful, as all other branches of science do.

“How can we distinguish clearly between content and process?”

“When is it appropriate to introduce a content change, and when is it appropriate to make a pure process change?”

“If an image has an overall color (such as rosy tint) shall we call that a submodality variable (color vs black and white) or is that content—one color out of the spectrum of colors?”

“If we ignore nonverbal incongruence in a client’s stated outcome, are there any consequences, and if so, what are they?”

“Is it more effective (or efficient) to deal with an incongruence before an intervention to reach the stated outcome, or is it more effective (or efficient) to deal with it later?”

“Is it ever appropriate to use aversive conditioning, and if so, when?”

“For a simple habit change, is a swish more effective than a simple chain, and how could we make a decision about that?”

“If someone is associated into an experience in the moment, while simultaneously viewing a dissociated image of themselves from a different point of view on an imaginary TV screen, shall we call that associated, or dissociated, or both?”

Again, these may not be the most useful questions to use to reach agreement, but they are examples of the kinds of topics that we might discuss. As in any developing field, there is no end to the fascinating questions that we could ask, and hopefully often answer. With this kind of foundation of shared understanding, NLP could begin to create a basis for a scientific field, rather than being only a basket of different unfounded and untested superstitions.

Those who are not interested in coming to this kind of agreement, or who believe that NLP is not a science, or could never be, might be willing to do what they do elsewhere under a different name.

Or perhaps those of us who believe that some coherence could emerge from the current chaos of NLP could separate ourselves from the chaos by creating a new name for what we want to accomplish, and go play in a different sandbox.

This is really the question that has motivated me to spend so much time reviewing Bandler’s book, which so clearly illustrates the mess that the “field” is in now.

References

1. Andreas, Connirae. “Resolving Grief” (DVD) Evergreen, CO, NLP Comprehensive, 1987.
2. Andreas, Steve. *Transforming Your Self: becoming who you want to be*. Boulder CO, Real People Press, 2002.
3. Andreas, Steve. Book review of *Whispering in the Wind* by Carmen Bostic St. Clair, and John Grinder. 2003.
<http://www.steveandreas.com/Articles/whispering.html>
4. Andreas, Steve. “Breakthroughs and melthroughs” 2003

- <http://www.steveandreas.com/Articles/breakthroughs.html>
5. Andreas, Steve. "Modeling Modeling." 2006.
<http://www.steveandreas.com/Articles/mmodeling.html>
6. Andreas, Steve "The Emperor's New Prose" 2006.
<http://www.steveandreas.com/Articles/EmperorReview.html>
7. Andreas, Connirae, and Andreas, Steve. *Heart of the Mind*, Boulder CO, Real People Press, 1987.
8. Andreas, Steve; and Andreas, Connirae. *Change Your Mind—and Keep the Change*, Boulder CO, Real People Press, 1987.
9. Bandler, Richard. *Magic in Action*. Cupertino, CA. Meta Publications, 1984
10. Bandler, Richard. *Using Your Brain—for a Change*, Boulder CO, Real People Press, 1985.
11. Bandler, Richard; and Grinder, John. *Reframing*. Boulder CO, Real People Press, 1982.
12. Grinder, John; and Bandler, Richard. *The Structure of Magic, volume II*. Cupertino, CA. Meta Publications, 1976.
13. Kemp, Nick. "Provocative Change Works."
http://www.provocativechangeworks.com/provocative_change_works_process.php
14. St. Clair, Carmen Bostic, and Grinder, John, *Whispering in the Wind*. Scotts Valley, CA. J & C Enterprises, 2001.