

WAS NLP REALLY A CHILD OF THE HUMAN POTENTIAL MOVEMENT?

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When I first learned about NLP, and even in my first trainings, I did not know that the NLP actually arose as one of the hundreds of off-shoots of the Human Potential Movement. Did you? When I was first reading about NLP, no one even hinted that NLP was connected to the Human Potential Movement led by Maslow and Rogers. I did not know that when I took my Trainers Training. Nor did I discover it in my first ten years as a trainer. In fact, it was only after almost twenty years of working inside the field of NLP that I discovered this. Now, isn't that absolutely amazing?

I bet this is also true for the great majority of people in the field of NLP. When I studied the original literature of NLP, I never read anywhere that NLP was a child of the Human Potential Movement. It is not in any of the Introduction books to NLP that I know about. Nor did I learn it from Richard Bandler, with whom I first studied. In fact, none of the original developers ever wrote about the relationship of NLP to the Human Potential Movement. So, isn't it about time that someone speak up about this? I do.

Now, true enough, the original developers of NLP did acknowledge that they got their original ideas about communication magic from Fritz Perls and Virginia Satir. Bandler was introduced to Perls as he read books on Gestalt therapy and later as he then transcribed tapes for Perls' last book for Robert Spitzer of *Science and Behavior Books*, which enabled him to get the designation of "editor" for that book.¹ And that gave him the opportunity to do the same with Virginia Satir's workshops in family sculpturing.

Embedded in the Human Potential Movement

Only recently did I make the connection. It happened while I was researching self-actualization and the psychological models that Maslow, Rogers, Assagioli, May, Bugental, and many others in the "third force" of psychology used. While reading extensively I discover some facts that put it together for me.

First, a little bit about this research. I started out to specify *the generative psychology* governing

human development *after* therapy, the psychology of healthy men and women as they continue to develop in becoming all that they become. I wanted to make explicit the model, variables, principles, and practices of the Self-Actualization Psychology that governs the field of Coaching.²

So I read the books of Maslow and Rogers, then other key players in Humanistic Psychology. That, in turn, what led me to read some books on the history of Esalen. Ah yes, Esalen, the place where the “growth centers” of the Human Potential Movement emanated. The place that served as the Meca of the Human Potential Movement. Esalen, the small community at Big Sur not far from Santa Cruz.

Here’s what surprised me. The first resident scholar at Esalen was none other than *Fritz Perls*. No wonder Gestalt Therapy was a leading influence in the “third force” and why no wonder Perls played such a key role. And get this, the last resident scholar to actually live at Esalen was none other than *Gregory Bateson*. And the first person in charge of Research and Training was *Virginia Satir*. That’s a virtual *who’s who* involved in the origin of NLP!³

Incredible isn’t it? Three of the key *foundational contributors to NLP* who were also at Esalen were key players in the Human Potential Movement, e.g., Fritz Perls, Virginia Satir, and Gregory Bateson. So before Perls’ and Satir’s communication skills were modeled, they were contributing to the generative psychology of the “bright side” of human nature. Perls had founded a “therapy” from Wertheimer’s Gestalt Psychology. This is the same Wertheimer who served as one of the primary self-actualizers that launched Maslow’s work in modeling self-actualization. Virginia had founded Family Systems and had written *PeopleMaking*. And both of them were operating from the very premises that Maslow and Rogers were popularizing.

What were these premises?

That people are not innately broken and defective, that people have within their potentials the resources to self-actualize and to become authentic as persons, that we do “people-making” within our family systems, that how we use language fundamentally affects and influences how we frame and can reframe things, that meaning is a function of our framing, that sometimes shifting a small variable in a system can have system-wide generative change, we cannot not communicate, etc.

“Say, don’t those premises sound a lot like the NLP Presuppositions?” Yes, you bet they do! In fact, nearly all of what we call “NLP Presuppositions” are simply the basic ideas and assumptions that governed the *Human Potential Movement*. For years we have known that Richard, John, Judith, Leslie, Robert and others got most of the NLP premises from Perls and Satir. I discovered that back in the late 1980s when I reread Perls and Satir looking for their contributions to NLP. But now, the “standing on the shoulders of giants” phenomenon takes yet another step backward to the previous giants that the founders and developers of NLP stood on Maslow and Rogers.

So beginning from an exploration to more fully distinguish *remedial* psychology from *generative* psychology for distinguishing therapy from coaching, suddenly I was discovering that much

more of NLP originated in the *Human Potential Movement* than I had ever suspected. After I finished my work on exploring “change” and creating a new change model based on four meta-programs (*Coaching Change: Meta-Coaching Volume I*, 2005), I decided to look further.

Embedded in Self-Actualization

I wanted to see if anyone in the *Human Potential Movement* had made Self-Actualization Psychology explicit. After eighteen months of research, I realized that no one had. Maslow would have. He even had plans to do so, but then he died suddenly in 1970 at a young age of 62. In my search, I was asking, “What model do we have for the process of *self-actualization* itself? Are there any actual models?” After the shock wore off that there are no fully developed models for unleashing potentials, I began work on modeling self-actualization for the purpose of creating an explicit model (See *Unleashed: A Practical Guide to your Ultimate Self-Actualization*), believing that we have most of the ingredients in NLP.

Certainly from a theoretical standpoint the Human Potential Movement had explored and detailed *the bright side* of human nature. Maslow’s foundational model, the Hierarchy of Needs had identified the positive motivational and value nature of people and the rich potentials to be actualized for becoming authentic, fully functioning, and at their best. So while there were *grand ideas and ideals*, but no models that identify *how* the unleashing of potentials works.

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

Rogers said that only three things were needed to facilitate the “growth of a person” for becoming a “fully functioning person” (his way of talking about self-actualization): empathy, unconditional positive regard, and one’s own authenticity. And so this, for the most part, became the battle cry of the *Human Potential Movement*. Be real, be authentic, be caring and empathetic, let people be, stop interfering, and all will be well.

Years ago in a training, I remember Richard Bandler speaking about both Maslow, Rogers, and the Human Potential Movement. Of course, being as iconoclastic as he is, he mostly spoke of them in derision and criticized their weaknesses, giving no indication that NLP was built on their idea of modeling healthy people. The joke according to Bandler was that when he met Rogers, he told him, “There are two other representation systems other than kinesthetic.” And reportedly, Rogers responded, “So you *feel* that there are two other representation systems?” Whether that actually happened, of course, is another question.

Here then is an mostly unknown fact about the history of NLP—NLP is a child of the Human Potential Movement. It arose in the early 1970s during the heyday of the Human Potential Movement. It was one of the many dozens of new therapies and fields that were given birth by that movement that was launched in the 1950s through the work of Maslow and Rogers, along

with Rollo May, Viktor Frankl, Fritz Perls, Sydney Jourard, Virginia Satir, and many others.

Embedded in Modeling

Maslow launched his modeling of self-actualizers in the 1940s. He even conducted a longitudinal study for years, a study that he called “Good Humans Study.” And like many of us in NLP since, he studied and modeled highly successful, positive, and productive people, both those living and those who had died.

Maslow began his modeling project of self-actualizers because he was absolutely captivated by two extraordinary individuals that he met in graduate school (Ruth Benedict and Max Wertheimer) after he earned his doctorate. He said these individuals could not be explained by all of the models and tools of psychology at the time. Curious about them, he began a modeling project of *people at their best*. He called them *self-actualizers*—people who actualize their best potentials, gifts, capabilities, and become fully what they were able to become. Later he called them “peakers” and set forth the criteria that seemed in common with such people. Carl Rogers joined in to identify *human nature at its best* and people who become *fully functioning people*.

Maslow initiated a true *paradigm shift* in psychology. He shifted the focus from studying pathology and all of the ways that people are broken, traumatized, and neurotic, to exploring individuals at their best. In this, it was Maslow who shifted psychology to *the bright side of human nature* rather than the dark side. In NLP we inherited this legacy from the Human Potential Movement.

So What Happened to the Human Potential Movement?

After looking into the *Human Potential Movement* for a number of months, I suddenly realized that the movement was gone. Today, there is no “Human Potential Movement” any longer. So, where did it go? What happened to it? And, why did it disappear? Did someone kill it?

There are numerous suggestions. In fact, various psychologists and theoreticians have posited numerous explanations in the *Journal of Humanistic Psychology*. While Esalen has continued through the years, 200 or more Growth Centers ended by the mid-1980s and its energy was dissipated into scores of other disciplines. The HPM was undermined by having no explicit model or pattern that could direct the self-actualizing process. It depended mostly on “encounter groups.” It was dissipated also as many people shifted to Transpersonal psychology, the entrance of mysticism and religious practices, the strong counter-cultural bias of the 1970s, and the lack of academic research.

By the mid-1980s the *Human Potential Movement* as the Third Force in Psychology, having splintered into scores of different approaches, had failed to become a School of Psychology. This has been noted in numerous journals, textbooks, and conferences. So what happened to it? Where did it go? It dispersed into other fields—Integral Psychology, Transpersonal Psychology, Brief Psychotherapy, and NLP. So, today while the Human Potential Movement is gone, the vision of actualizing human potentials continues as it is presented in a hundred different formats.⁴

Can the Human Potential Movement be Re-Lauched?

- Can we reinvigorate the Human Potential Movement?
- Is it possible to launch a new initiative for self-actualizing and to create a new human potential movement?

In researching and building the new models of the self-actualization process for Meta-Coaching, one day I entertained an absolutely fantastic idea. “What if NLP could take upon itself the mantle of the Human Potential Movement and Self-Actualization Psychology?” I told you it was a fantastic idea. “What if, instead of being connected to therapy and sales, NLP could be re-positioned as the 21st version of self-actualization?”

Personally I believe that what we have in NLP offers several things to the *Human Potential Movement* that could give it a new start. We could offer the cognitive dimension. After all, NLP is also a child of the Cognitive Revolution in Psychology that was launched by George Miller and Noam Chomsky and their colleagues in 1956. We could also offer specific processes as the actual mechanisms that facilitate self-actualization. It would therefore be easy for us to take up the cause of the Human Potential Movement by presenting the specific models, patterns, and technology for people to truly and actually *unleash* their potentials.

In fact, believing that it is possible for us to pick up and carry the torch for the Human Potential Movement and self-actualization psychology today, I have been working to that end. My vision is to first formalize Self-Actualization Psychology and make it explicit as a psychology, to incorporate the best of NLP and Neuro-Semantics into this new model, and to take it to a whole new level. To that end, having modeled a great deal of the self-actualization process and having identified many of the psychological processes involved in unleashing human potentials, in Neuro-Semantic NLP, we are moving to making this our primary approach and brand. Our aim in developing this as a new focus, is that of taking self-actualization to the next level.

Summary

Whether we realize it or not, acknowledge it or not, today we stand on the shoulders of the original developers of NLP. And they stand on the shoulders of Perls, Satir, Erickson, and Bateson, and they, in turn, stand on the shoulders of Maslow and Rogers and the other contributors to the *Human Potential Movement*. Given this, let’s begin to acknowledge that our roots go back to the Human Potential Movement. I hope to see this in NLP Introduction books in the future.

I also believe we can learn a lot from the disappearance of that movement. Already we are grounded in all of its basic premises and operate from the vision that Maslow and Rogers began. But I’ll save that for another article.

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References:

1. Dr. Robert Spitzer, publisher of Science and Behavior books, invited Richard when he was a student to edit Fritz Perls last book, *The Gestalt Approach and Eye Witness to Therapy*.
2. The models of Self-Actualization Psychology are now a part of the Meta-Coaching Training System and will soon be published as a book, *Self-Actualization Psychology*.
3. Michael Murphy and Richard Price founded Esalen in 1962; the list of people who lived at Esalen or who were teachers there over the years makes up an incredible list of creative people: Aldous Huxley, S.I. Hayakawa (General Semantics), George Lenard, Abraham Maslow, Alan Watts, William Schultz, James Pike, Roberto Assagioli, Werner Erhard, Timothy Gallwey, etc.
4. In the forthcoming book, *Self-Actualization Psychology*, I have identified a dozen reasons that many in the field of Humanistic Psychology have postulated for the demise of the Human Potential Movement. These will become part of the next article.

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