

Virginia Satir & Origins of NLP

by Dr Robert S. Spitzer

Virginia had many different feelings toward Richard Bandler at various times in her life. I remember being surprised by the extent to which she was touched when he sent her flowers toward the end of her life when she knew she was dying.

I often felt responsible for Richard and John since I had introduced them to her. Those are two guys you don't want to feel responsible for unless you have a profound belief in a benevolent God.

For me, it all began when my wife, Becky said "Bob, you've got to talk to him." She was referring to the 17-year old that she had asked to teach our son Dan how to play the drums. This was 25 years ago in 1967. The 17-year old was Richard Bandler (who was skinny and scrawny in those days). He was a junior in high school and helped put on big time rock concerts.

Becky had been impressed because of Richard's interest in philosophy and the intellectual approach he used in teaching music. Our son took to Richard and to drums. Before long he had a group and I was driving him over to play with friends more than I wanted to.

Richard went on to Foothill, a local junior college, where he had an exciting and tempestuous academic career driving some of his professors crazy (sometimes refusing to compromise on what I thought were insignificant details).

Richard was handy and could do almost anything. We had a cabin in the country near Santa Cruz and when Richard switched to U.C.S.C., it was a good deal for both of us when he built himself a small place on our property and became a care-taker with his dog and girl friend. They felt like family. It was at this cabin that Richard first met Virginia Satir. She was doing a family reconstruction of an Israeli friend. About 30 of us gathered together to be role players and watch Virginia work.

Shortly after that, Richard went with Becky and me to visit Bud and Michele Baldwin in Reno. Bud had helped start the medical school there and he had arranged for Virginia to do a workshop which included working with two families. Everything was filmed and out of it came the wonderful tape, *Family In Crisis*. In this videotape, the identified patient (an 18-year old Eskimo girl) had an epileptic seizure apparently triggered by the increased intimacy and touch that Virginia had introduced into the family system.

I then asked Richard to audio tape and transcribe a month-long workshop Virginia led in Canada. We hoped a book would come out of it. Becky and I also thought it might be good for Richard, but it was before I had attended a workshop myself that I actually experienced how meaningful it could be.

I have had the unique experience of being both Virginia's and Richard's boss. For some years, Richard worked at Science and Behavior Books where he went from warehouseman to editor to author. Before that, technically I had worked as Virginia's boss teaching family therapy at the Mental Research Institute in Palo Alto. This was the first training program in conjoint family therapy in the

world and a psychiatrist was needed to get a government grant. As a woman and social worker, Virginia was a real trail blazer.

Richard was quite taken by Virginia. Those of you who have seen her in a 1-day workshop know what a powerful experience that can be. A month-long workshop was something else. There was an accumulative effect as Virginia was superb in building a sense of community.

Richard spent several months transcribing the audio tapes and after awhile developed many of Virginia's voice patterns and mannerisms. He said this was how he learned music. Richard would listen to the music of someone he admired over and over until he sounded just like the person being imitated. He was not worried about imitating or losing his identity. Apparently musicians often use a form of deep identification in their learning processes.

About this time, Fritz Perls died. He had given me an unfinished manuscript which we published as *The Gestalt Approach* and Richard helped edit it. We did a second book *Eye Witness to Therapy* which was essentially a transcription of teaching films Fritz had made. Again, Richard spent day after day wearing ear phones while watching the films

- making certain that the transcription was accurate. He came out of it talking and acting like Fritz Perls. I found myself accidentally calling him Fritz on several occasions.

While still an undergraduate, Richard started running gestalt groups on the campus. John Grinder (then a young Professor of Linguistics at U.C.S.C.) dropped in to observe a session and soon became a co-leader.

Meantime, Richard had moved to a second piece of property Becky and I had which had been a creative commune for midwives and artists. We had the publishing company there. Gregory and Lois Bateson moved to the property originally because of Lois' interest in home birth. Then John Grinder also moved in. Virginia had been the Godmother for Gregory and Lois' daughter, Nora. The land may have suffered from inattention but it became an intellectual hotspot. At one point, Virginia talked about moving there.

I don't know who made what specific discoveries in NLP. I know it was Gregory's idea that they study Milton Erickson along with Virginia and Fritz Perls. Both Virginia and Gregory wrote enthusiastic introductions for *The Structure of Magic*. (Richard by the way

did the warehousing as well as selecting the painting on the jacket and most of the editing on both volumes. I'm pleased to say they are selling well.)

In his introduction Gregory Bateson said:

"They have tools which we did not have or did not see how to use. What happens when messages in digital mode are flung to an analog thinker? We did not see these various ways of coding: visual, auditory, etc. are so far apart, so mutually different even in neurophysiological representation, that no material in one mode can ever be of the same logical type as any material in the other mode."

About this same time, Virginia asked me to go with her to Winnipeg to see some videotapes Maria Gomori had made of Virginia working with different families at the medical school there. They are superb and unfortunately have never been distributed. Before seeing each family, Virginia was given just the presenting symptom and the names and ages of all the family members. She then talked about the many thoughts that occur to her before seeing a family just based on the barest family fact chronology. She then explained how she tried to clear her mind before going in to see the family so as to be sensitized but not biased. This was 1975 and good

tapes of Virginia working with actual families had not been done (with the exception of *Family In Crisis*).

I gave my copy of the video to Richard and John and they played the video over and over. (Incidentally Richard had taught John to play the guitar by this time and I'm sure they approached it like musicians.) They came out of the experience with a thorough understanding of some of Virginia's 'favorite licks' (an expression they used at the time). They were able to show Virginia the tape and translate what she had done into their terminology. From this came the book, *Changing With Families*.

The family in the video presented problems related to three teenaged sons but after a half hour of clarification by sculpting their problems it became apparent to Virginia that poor communication between the parents was central.

Thereafter, she worked with the parents and the boys became observers. The father was an athlete and a coach who was jealous of his attractively dressed wife. He wanted contact, to be touched by her. She felt blamed and not appreciated by him. Virginia talked to them about their different "communication channels."

Virginia explained the wife's desperate need to be observed visually by her husband and his need to be touched by her. She explained and sculpted how each was a blamer in their own way. Finally she had them sit facing each other with their knees touching. She asked them to hold hands and covered their joined hands with her hands. She explained to them that in this way the husband would be reassured by the close contact and could learn to tell his wife (in words) what he saw about her that he admired. Each one practiced putting into words their needs and checking whether the other understood.

This technique of sitting close together facing each other, holding hands and looking directly at each other worked well for them. While in this position, Virginia had them practice resolving future problems in this way. She then had them agree to do this procedure on a regular basis and had them practice ways in which each could ask for it.

Virginia routinely did these kind of things when she demonstrated family therapy to students. She taught clients and students about the importance of sensory modalities which she called communication channels and referred to as holes or orifices, the eyes, ears, mouth, and skin.

These became described as representational modes in Neuro-Linguistic terminology.

Her methods of clarifying the presenting problems were a precursor of the meta-model as described in *The Structure of Magic*. Virginia did not use the linguistic term nominalization for example but if a father said he wanted "respect," Virginia would ask the father to sculpt what "respect" would look like to him, what the different family members would need to do in action so that he coded it "respect." In this way she gave the family a picture with which they could more meaningfully agree or disagree.

Virginia demonstrated anchoring and future pacing when she had the father and mother hold hands and rehearse future problems in this ritual she gave them. In a similar manner, techniques of reframing are found throughout Virginia's work particularly in her *Parts Parties*.

Virginia's Early Years

I believe Virginia's appreciation of the different sensory modalities was related to a period of deafness that lasted several years when she was quite young. She taught herself lip-reading and I believe learned non-verbal communications as a second language. While she was

deaf (whenever she would close her eyes) she could experience consciousness without vision or hearing. When hearing did eventually come back she had the opportunity to compare what added learning or confusion came from the addition of this modality. Most of us take consciousness for granted and assume it includes all our sense modalities but particularly vision and sound.

Virginia had the advantage so to speak of growing up knowing that consciousness was composed of different sense modalities. It was natural for her to describe communication in terms of the communication stances: blaming, placating, super-reasonable, and irrelevant, which in a way were the alphabet of the nonverbal language she learned while deaf.

In *Conjoint Family Therapy*, Virginia wrote "Within a few moments, I am making mental pictures of the people in front of me and translating them into physical postures that represent their ways of communication."

On a Final Note

In a way, Richard and John were like prodigal sons who never came back. They obviously learned a great deal from Virginia which has been part of the base of Neuro-Linguistic

Programming. They went on to study other people and also to develop their own techniques which are very powerful. However, neither personally experienced a family reconstruction in the context of an extended training. I think such an experience for either of them would have added an new dimension of appreciation of Virginia and life. Richard and John also had very limited contact with Virginia during the last 10 years of her life and missed the full expression of her spiritual development.

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