Discerning When Patterns Don't Serve

Milton Erickson and Learned Limitations

Milton Erickson was the foremost practitioner of medical hypnosis of the 20th century. He was noted for his often unconventional approach to psychotherapy and his extensive use of metaphor and story. He was also noted for his extraordinary ability to evoke startling changes—even in the most ingrained behavior—often in only a single session. Erickson developed his astounding perceptual skills in part from time spent in an iron lung in his late teens, immobilized from his neck down by polio.

"Stuckness" is often a sign of a learned limitation. A learned limitation, as Erickson explained, is a habitual pattern of thought or behavior that once served us, but now often does not. It limits our adaptability or effectiveness in a given situation.

Erickson developed an unshakeable belief in the capacity of an individual to heal or overcome any internal obstacle. Transcending learned limitations entails first recognizing a pattern that does not serve, and then learning to interrupt that pattern by adopting a new, more appropriate behavior. Erickson believed that making such changes need not be an arduous process.

Erickson's change theory is a simple, powerful change theory. He believed that change is produced by:

- Changing Context
- Changing Perception
- Changing Behavior
- Changing Belief

He believed that most change efforts fail because people try to accomplish this process in reverse. As a change agent, he saw himself as responsible for changing the context that would trigger changed perception, behavior and belief.

The Woman Who Smoked Four Packs a Day

> *One day, a woman from out-of-state came to see Dr. Erickson for help to quit smoking. She immediately announced that she had been to two dozen of his colleagues who had all failed in their attempts to hypnotize her—and that he would fail too. Erickson readily agreed and told her they could take that topic off the table. He listened attentively and without comment as she told her story of being a lifelong four pack per day smoker. When she finished, Erickson asked her what she intended to do about her emphysema (which he had diagnosed from her body language, breathing, and speech). She was completely thrown off by that question. Erickson then went on to say that what he was really interested in was why an intelligent woman would be trying to kill herself with cigarettes.*
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> *In a quiet voice, the woman responded, "Because I killed my father."*

She then told the Erickson that when she was a little girl, her father had suffered a massive stroke and was bedridden and on life-support. She had convinced herself that her father would live as long as she kept constant vigil at his bedside. But eventually the moment came when her attention momentarily lapsed and when she turned to look at her father, he was dead.

In the most compassionate voice, Erickson replied, "I think the little girl deserves her little girl understanding."

In that moment, the woman realized she was not responsible for her father's death and had no further desire to punish herself. In an instant, she had no need of cigarettes.

Beyond being a striking example of Erickson's change theory at work, that story illustrates the importance of holding ourselves and our assumptions and patterns with compassion. We all have learned limitations based in such unexamined and unconscious developmental understandings.

If we can learn to hold ourselves in compassion, it will help us hold others in compassion, too.

Embracing "Unknowing"

One of the patterns that has emerged is the pattern of expecting that every situation has a known "fix;" that knowledge is the key to creating Gracious Space.

I think a respect for "unknowing" is equally important.

This story about "unknowing," was shared by a rocket scientist who made a right turn. Bernie Glassman earned a Ph.D. in Applied Mathematics, and was working as an aeronautical engineer, concentrating on interplanetary flights for McDonnell-Douglas in 1960, when he first encountered Zen.

By 1976, he had been ordained by two schools of Zen, becoming the first American so honored. Roshi Glassman established the Zen Peacemakers Order, training peacemakers to go into the most conflicted areas of the world as emissaries for peace. He also leads two "Bearing Witness" retreats. The retreat to the Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camp is to remember those lives lost, while those participating in the street retreats bear witness to the suffering of poverty and homelessness.

"A Swiss social worker in Zurich once asked me how much food, clothing, and blankets we bring with us to give homeless people when we're on the streets. When I told him that we bring nothing with us, and that instead of bringing things we actually end up needing the same things street people need, his mouth fell open.

'Then I don't understand you,' he said. 'If you don't bring anything with you, what are you doing?'

A Korean Buddhist monk I know worked for many years with teenagers who were classed as mentally retarded. Together, they built a temple in Korea and he ordained them as Buddhist monks. People thought he was crazy. What did it mean to ordain people who were mentally retarded? What was he giving them? He replied that he was giving them nothing, for there was nothing to give, they were all Buddhas, all enlightened beings. And then he added, 'In Buddha's eyes, we are all retarded.'

I tell this story not to draw a parallel between street people and the mentally retarded, simply to clarify our actions. We don't go to the streets to bring things to people or to convince them to change their lives. There's nothing to bring and no one to change. There are simply the issues of eating, sleeping, peeing, defecating, and staying warm and dry—all while living on the streets.

And still, many people tell me that going on the streets is crazy. And in some way they're right, it is crazy. What I like to do is put holes in people's paradigms. As part of teaching the practice of unknowing, I try to push people toward the experience of certain things rather than their concept of them. Whenever I do that it creates problems with the concepts. When our paradigms and concepts stop making sense, we get upset…"

- Bernie Glassman

When we live out of unknowing, we're shedding our suit of armor. Each time we let go of our fixed ideas about ourselves and others, we're letting go of our individual system of survival. Although these systems may have once helped us survive, they are now destroying us. They are destroying our ability to act spontaneously, to respond directly, or to take care of any situation that arises.

Living out of unknowing, we are naked. We go from one situation to the next, from one person to another, from one system to another, and we respond to each directly and appropriately. One day we have a job, the next we don't. One day we have our family around us, the next we've lost someone we love. When we live from unknowing, we have no expectations of what will be and how we will feel. We are disarmed, going from one situation to the next, and bearing witness.

As Roshi Glassman puts it, "Behaving according to your norm doesn't cause a shift anyplace.

Gracious SPACE

Inquiry/Reflection/Sharing

1. Invite participants to take 20 minutes in silent reflection to examine one time in which they have transcended a learned limitation. There are no limits on how this reflection can be done, as long as it is silent.

2. At the end of the silent reflection, ask participants to share their reflections in pairs. Give each person five minutes to share.

3. Reconvene as a large group to further share the learning by addressing the question: "What made transcending this learned limitation possible?"

- Submitted by Bruce Takata for the Center for Ethical Leadership