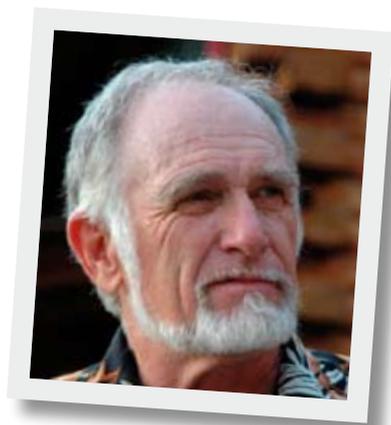


Frank Bourke

Taking NLP into the Mainstream



Meeting Frank Bourke is an experience. His passion reverberates so strongly and creates such resonance that you want the conversation to continue indefinitely. As the figurehead of and driving force behind the NLP Research and Recognition Project, Frank brings all of his wide experience, determination and wisdom to the development of a scientific process supporting NLP. Here, he talks to Andy Coote.

Sometimes things happen in our lives that change the whole focus of what we do and change our future plans irrevocably. For Frank, in common with thousands, maybe millions, of other people, a hugely significant shift began on the 11th September, 2001.

The emotional impact on Frank of that fateful day, now known forever as 9-11, and its aftermath was immense. He wrote, in the week following the shocking events of that day, “It’s the third day since coming down to New York. I helped organize twelve counsellors yesterday into a crisis intervention team and we treated between two and three hundred ‘survivors’ in the posh ballrooms of a New York Marriott Hotel. They had all lost wives, husbands, relatives, friends, or co-workers. Many of them learned of the deaths there and then. The initial grief reactions of so many people, in such close proximity, were overwhelming. It looked and sounded like one of those old war movies....deafening bombs and sirens in a background cacophony..... nurses and doctors treating patients scattered helter-skelter across beds, tables, hallways and floors. Only the “skelter” was across the posh fixtures of an upscale hotel and the gore was psychic, emotional chaos. I felt shock and disbelief. This can’t really be happening here.”

The days at the Marriott, and the year that followed, stretched Frank personally and clinically more than anything in his life. “The predominant feelings I have now when revisiting the memories are satisfaction and pride. I practiced and learned my trade for thirty-nine years before 9-11. On the angry and violent streets of Harlem NYC in the 60’s and in the “Snake Pits” of State Psychiatric Hospitals, I learned about human lives overloaded with “evil” and traumas. Unlike most of my fellow professionals and the unsuspecting workers in the World Trade Center, I had somehow “been there” and knew what to do. By focusing on their needs and inventing paths back onto safe ground from within them I had a way to be in the carnage but not of it.”

The Training in treating Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) that he had received in the eighties gave him a unique clinical skill

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that he had been improving over the years. Frank honed that skill with 100 severely traumatized survivors. “I have never felt so needed or competent, so glad to be a helper and a psychologist. I began to realise that this approach might clinically have a major effect. However when I tried to bring in three NLP practitioners, they were refused access because they were not recognised by the insurers.”

Afterwards, Frank came home to take a rest from clinical practice and the trauma of 9-11. Instead, another major event put his plans into disorder and this time it was very personal. He was diagnosed with cancer of the bladder - a terminal diagnosis with a 15% probable cure rate.

During the treatment of the cancer, Frank used NLP to deal with the operation, the pain, chemotherapy and subsequent healing. “I came through the illness and came to the realisation that I was probably not going to die and had to consider what I would do with the rest of my life.”

He decided that it might be interesting to reconnect with the NLP community and to see what had become of it.

In the mid 1970s, Frank was lecturing at Cornell University in psychology when a colleague introduced him to the work that John Grinder was doing. “The guy reported that Grinder did it just like Milton Erickson would do it”, so Frank took his friend’s opinion seriously, despite prevailing academic disdain for NLP and found a three-day workshop taking place nearby and went to see for himself.

Frank had previously worked at the Institute of Psychology in London with people working in behavioural therapy around the area of phobias. He watched Grinder do a phobia cure and found that it was “just remarkable”.

“When they asked for volunteers, my hand went straight up. I had a shark phobia and was soon up on stage finding out if this thing really worked. My friendship with John built from right there on the stage.” A warm and friendly relationship built over the next two years in which he challenged John over a number of areas. “I was critical of his exaggerated claims, of his denigration of other professionals and of his



unwillingness to measure the outcomes of what he was doing.” Frank still has “marvellous and fond memories of John Grinder’s care and concern for my cares and concerns, especially after workshops and over dinner. I still feel warm towards him.”

Frank moved away from NLP as his academic career precluded active involvement in NLP because he disagreed with the ‘organisational tenets’ of NLP at that time.

Following his remission from cancer, Frank booked on a Robert Dilts and Judith de Lozier workshop. “I discovered that it was a very alive community and that Robert and Judith had made it a way of life with their NLP University and other activities. I also came into contact with Steve Andreas who in my view had taken the material 20 years ahead. I saw enough substance here - enough functional community - that if it got research then it could be of use in the clinical environment. I felt that there were enough people with well-developed material, integrity and a community spirit to take it forward. There was a group of people who have substantive clinical gifts. They can be trusted to do what they do in a professional way - in the same way as a medical professional - and I thought I’d better give it a shot to see what might come of it.”

Robert and Judith put him in touch with IASH who said “do this with us and do it as part of our organisation. That got us started and got the right people involved, but the ultimate project was too big for IASH to handle. The project is now a separate not-for-profit organisation and has benefited from my experience of leading businesses, especially in the mental health space.”

“I suppose you could say that I have always been preparing for what I’m now doing. My training as a researcher, my early training in NLP, my training in many clinical approaches and my organisational and entrepreneurial background all prepared me for the development of a large project from square one.” The NLP Research and Recognition Project (<http://nlprand.org/>) started in September 2006 to support and develop research on NLP in the U.S. and abroad.

After two years of “a quixotic charge at the windmill” it does appear to be taking off. “It is a genuine gift and the material will help thousands of people. For instance if after 9-11 we had had 500 NLP therapists licenced to work there, the amount of psychic pain and harm would have been reduced considerably.”

NLP, Frank believes, must pass the criteria for evidentiary medicine to be used in clinics supported by the federal government. Evidentiary medicine requires that clinical tools demonstrate their effectiveness in peer-reviewed journals. “We have chosen Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) as the best starting point. We have seen remarkable clinical effectiveness in the use of NLP with PTSD.”

“There are no grants in place yet and we have been bidding for the last seven months for grants to work with veterans coming back from Iraq. That would just be the first big piece of work for rollout. We feel there is sufficient interest and money to do that at a very high clinical and scientific level. There is a 90% probability that in the next six months we will start producing the first real clinical research into NLP.”

“When I wrote the plan, I was very clear that it needs a properly resourced foundation at its core for the next 10 to 20 years in order that it can measure, publish and grow the material. Once the material grows, we have to face the question of how you translate it into training, certification and continuation. We may have only half discovered all of the detail. The other half might lead us into other areas in neurology and education that will be at least as useful as the current material is. The next generation will be using the principles that are in there and may get double the benefit as the area develops.”

Frank looks forward to being able to retire. He is currently working 70 to 80 hours a week, working with a very talented team and having fun. However when the funding is there to put together a proper structure, “it will be a relief to be able to hand across elements of the work and start to take a back seat”.

We discussed the vision that landowners had when they planted trees and parkland that would only be visible at its best long after their lives had ended. “From where I live, I can see those forests every day. What the application of these personal skills can do across the board for our own management we can only speculate. We are aiming for a higher consciousness using NLP material as one of the routes to get there. In a number of people working in the NLP field recently I can see that there is a higher state of consciousness at work. We may be looking at spiritual evolution in which NLP material may provide some of the best spiritual growth in the world.” ●