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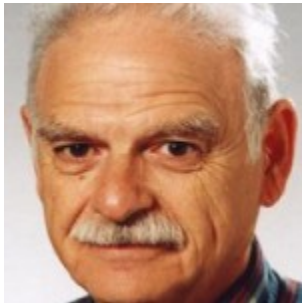
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Rob McNeilly

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On The Importance of Poetry in Hypnosis and Psychotherapy from Rubin Battino, M.S



Milton H. Erickson's use of words in hypnosis (and psychotherapy) has been characterized as "the precise use of vague language." In recent times as part of the medical model's influence on psychotherapy there has been a movement towards specific (presumably effective) protocols for a client's presenting concerns that can be codified in a diagnosis, preferably one in the DSM-IV. In medicine a particular diagnosed ailment generally calls for one of the specific treatments for that ailment. Deciding on which treatment to use depends on the clinician's experience and expertise, which is why second and third opinions are useful. Even given the physicality of medical treatments there is room for practicing the "art" of medicine. Within the realm of psychotherapy, art is perhaps a more significant factor than in medicine. This brief essay is about one of those arts – poetry.

Snyder (1971) has written about the connection between hypnotic language and poetry. The following is based on Battino and South (2005, pp. 114-115):

In analyzing for the commonalities in hypnotic poetry, Snyder found (p. 37) "... a peculiarly effective stimulus consists of words which fix the subject's attention by their rhythmic sound and make a simple suggestion on which the subject concentrates without any great mental activity." He found that hypnotic poems have the following characteristics in common: (1) An unusually perfect pattern of sound which tends to be soothing. In fact (p. 42), "Hypnotic poems in general give us heavy stresses falling regularly at half-second intervals, and so ornamented that the rhythmically inclined listener has his attention drawn to the sound rather than the sense." (2) There is in these poems a freedom from abrupt changes which can break the spell, and this especially means freedom from ideas which might compel mental alertness. (3) The poems contain a certain *vagueness of imagery* (p. 42). "The pictures presented in these hypnotic poems have such soft, shadowy outlines that one may fill in the details to suit one's fancy or let the picture remain hazy. *They foster an idle, dreamy state of consciousness like the preliminary stage of hypnosis.*" (4) There are fatigue producing elements, i.e., what Rossi calls

“depotentiating habitual mental frameworks.” These include verbal difficulties (p. 45). “Paradoxical though it sounds, we may yet have to accept the view that in the early stages of a hypnotic poem, a foreign word, an obscure phrase, or any slight difficulty that causes fatigue from strain on the part of the listener may actually promote the ultimate aesthetic effect at which the artist aims.” (5) Another characteristic is the use of a refrain or of frequent repetition. (Think of the repetition of “Nevermore” in “The Raven.”) Finally, (6) these hypnotic poems *tend to use suggestion on the entranced listener*, the suggestions sometimes having a post-hypnotic effect. In fact, the key suggestive sentence comes near the end after “... there has been a long preliminary soothing of the listener’s senses by monotonous rhythmic ‘passes’.” (p. 48, emphases added)

A metronomic delivery has been used from the beginnings of hypnosis to induce and sustain trance, and to increase suggestibility. Poetry can be introduced into hypnotic work in two ways. The first is by directly quoting an entire poem like Robert Frost’s “Fire and Ice” or lines from poems like Frost’s “Mending Walls” or “Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening” or “The Road Not Taken.” The second is to incorporate poetic language into what you are saying. I occasionally use the first method when an apt line is recalled. More frequently, and usually towards the end of a hypnotic session, I simply throw in a number of words or phrases that connect to Nature or ideas or emotional states I wish to call to the client’s attention. An example of this is:

a blade of grass ... the moon in the morning ... a raindrop ... a leaf fluttering down in the Fall ... a lazy floating fluffy white cloud ... the buzzing of an insect ... that flower ... the wind in treetops ... pine needles underfoot ... joy ... a baby’s laughter ... a smile ... a hug ... calm ... touching and being touched ... rain patter on the roof ... the burbling of a flowing brook ... this moment ... a sunset ... a glass of cold water on a hot day ... thunder and lightning ... loving and being loved ... this breath ... smelling a flower ... being, just being ... when and how and why and why not? ... a tree in winter stark against the sky ... a snowflake ...

These words and phrases are infiltrated into the hypnotic talk, sometimes randomly, and sometimes in a bunch. Sufficient pauses need to be used between the segments for the client to receive and process and wonder and reminisce. The client needs time to fill in his or her own recollections about these words and phrases, and integrate them into whatever it is they are working on in that session. My clients seem to get quieter and dreamier when I do this, and it seems to have a calming and peaceful effect. Poetry used like this is a respectful segue to the ending of the trance.

May I urge you to be poetic in your hypnosis sessions and enjoy the beauty and the vagueness of poetry?

Battino, R.; & South, T.L. (2005). *Ericksonian approaches: a comprehensive manual*. (2nd ed.). Carmarthen, UK: Crown House Publishing Ltd.

Snyder, E.D. (1971). *Hypnotic poetry*. New York: Octagon Books.