

How to be happy: an Introduction to Time Line Therapy™

‘The longer we dwell on our misfortunes, the greater their power to harm us.’ – Voltaire

Carefully avoiding stepping beyond the clearly demarcated stone road in central Cambodia in 2003, dirty, sweaty and mosquito-bite ridden, I contemplated the objective meaning of years of civil strife, landmine-dotted fields and limb-less beggars. I found that there was none, other than the subjective meanings we choose to ascribe to these events.

As a European, brought up in the age of French Protectionism, German inferiority complexes, the break-down of physical East-West boundaries, and a Yugoslavian Civil War I had expected the Khmer to be disillusioned and resentful of the West, the Khmer Rouge, or at least the Vietnamese. In Europe we spend a lot of our time being disillusioned and resentful of our neighbours, friends and former allies – often because of events that happened decades or even centuries ago. So, as I was weaving between the graphic landmine-warning signs – depicting tragic-comic scenes of bombs and limbs, and talking to cheer-fully smiling Khmer citizens I could not help but be struck by the positive attitude of these wonderful people. There was a meaning in the paradox.

This attitude, I realised, was a result of interpretation and communication. Every Khmer I spoke to, in one way or another, expressed the same view echoed in the West by Charles Hummell - ‘The past cannot be regained, although we can learn from it; the future is not yet ours even though we must plan for it ... time is now. We have only today’. These people had consciously or unconsciously succeeded at something that so many people in the West fail to do – to forgive, to let go and to find an empowering meaning for past events. Instead too many people in our societies punish themselves by holding on to past events, negative emotions and restricting beliefs about their own capacity as human beings.

There is a great scene in the Oscar-winning movie ‘Crash’ with Sandra Bullock engrossed in a telephone conversation which illustrates this point beautifully.

‘I sent her out for groceries, and that was two hours ago, Carol. Well, you are one to talk. You go through, like, six housekeepers a year? I’m not snapping at you! I am angry. Yes! At them! Yes! At them, the police, at Rick, at Maria, at the dry cleaners who destroyed another blouse today, at the gardener who keeps overwatering the lawn. I... I just thought that... Carol, I just thought that I would wake up today and I would feel better, you know? But I was still mad. And I realized... I realized that it had nothing to do with my car being stolen. I wake up like this every morning! I am angry all the time, and I don’t know why. Carol, I don’t know why! And I... Yeah, yeah, call me back. Bye.’

I was intrigued by how the Khmer succeeded at letting go, because I thought the technique must surely be extremely valuable both emotionally, spiritually, and physically, and of use to a great deal many Sandra Bullocks in the West.

It was at this point in Cambodia that I became interested in advanced psychology and its modern results-focussed version of Neuro-linguistic Programming. When I read that Alfred Korzybski contended that all emotions require time to express meaning, I became more and more curious about the topic of time, emotions and whether there was a therapy that utilised these concepts for results with clients. I was to eventually find that there was - and a great deal of pieces fell into place.

‘Imagination is more important than knowledge’ – Einstein

The basis of human personality is time. The notion of time - the sum of memories and past experiences - determines our emotional state and behaviours. Human personality is but a collection of memories, and everyone has their own personal perception of time, which is mostly spatial in nature.

Aristotle first spoke of the stream of time in Physics IV, and Sir Isaac Newton described time in his Principia Mathematica in 1687 as a single line, or a rail-road track with an infinite beginning and end. Einstein added to our perception of time even more when in his Theory of Relativity he abandoned the notion of absolute time in favour of the notion that each observer has his or her own perception of time, a concept endorsed by University of Cambridge theoretical physicist Stephen Hawking.

It is this personal perception of time which is the reason why Time Line Therapy™ is so effective. Created by Dr Tad James in the Mid-1980s it is now considered as a 'giant leap forward for the psychological community',¹ as one of the premier therapies for unhooking negative emotions and limiting beliefs from the past.

Memories and past experiences are stored in our own personal Time Line, human beings' own internal hard drive. Unfortunately we give some memories a disempowering meaning and these memories subsequently take up a large space in the internal hard drive, making the human computer run slower as if it was infected by a virus. The meanings we attach to these memories may be so powerful that they hinder our personalities from evolving in a positive way, thus creating mental obstacles on the path to success, health and outstanding relationships.

'You can clutch the past so tightly to your chest that it leaves your arms too full to embrace the present.' – Jan Glidewell

Sir Isaac Newton said that the reason he could see so far was that he was standing on the tall shoulders of those that had come before him. Equally, we cannot revisit a memory without giving it a new meaning, one that empowers us and lifts us to view things with clarity. Every time we re-visit a memory we do so from a different perspective, thus modifying its meaning.

Time Line Therapy™ is a dissociative technique of active imagination which creates instant, positive and powerful changes, by allowing us to take positive learnings from a past event. This regressive technique does not alter the memory, but rather our subjective interpretation of it, so as to support us in the future. Time Line Therapy™ assists you to overcome mental obstacles such as negative emotions (or limiting beliefs/decisions) that prevent you from being, doing and having what you want.

'People become really quite remarkable when they start thinking that they can do things. When they believe in themselves they have the first secret of success.' – Norman Vincent Peale

Now, I get to witness the phenomenal results our clients achieve with this technique on a regular basis, knowing that there is a definite way that they can overcome old negative emotions in a perhaps similar, albeit un/conscious, fashion to the Khmers. Our internal communication and the way we choose to interpret events thus lay the foundation for how we decide to run our lives.

Having been inspired by the empowering and future-focussed Khmer I know the importance of letting go and moving on. Then again, that is only my subjective interpretation of reality. But if I were to choose, and I have, I would much prefer this empowering version of reality than a disempowering one.

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