



# Generative Trance

The Experience of Creative Flow

Stephen Gilligan

This major new work from renowned author and trainer Stephen Gilligan reveals how life can be lived as a great journey of consciousness. The author emphasizes that reality and identity are constructed by ourselves, and explains how generative trance is crucial in creating new realities and possibilities for clients. It is a view that differs markedly from the traditional hypnosis ideas of a client losing control, as well as from Ericksonian approaches that feature a benevolent hypnotist who bypasses the conscious mind to work with a client's unconscious mind. Instead, generative trance stresses a "disciplined flow" process in which a person's conscious and unconscious minds cooperate to weave a higher consciousness capable of transformational change.

The book offers a framework for developing this creative consciousness, including step by step processes for creating it. Stephen Gilligan has been developing this work over the past thirty five years, first as a protégé of the great hypnotherapist Milton Erickson, and then as the originator of the post-Ericksonian approaches of Self-Relations and Generative Self.

William James used to say that 'the unconscious mind is the horse and conscious mind is the rider: it's the relationship between the two that is most important.' This book shows you how to harness the relationship for a much more powerful and effective therapeutic intervention.

## **Praise for *Generative Trance***

*Generative Trance: The Experience of Creative Flow*, Stephen Gilligan's newest book, is not only exciting to read, it gives new ways of looking at already-known information and adds whole new dimensions of different perspectives. Firmly built on his mentoring by Milton Erickson, Gilligan did what Erickson urged all his students to do - he took ideas from Erickson and made them applicable to new and different circumstances.

Beginning with understandable definitions, Gilligan lays out his own framework. The reader is captured with new ideas for hypnosis - an "up-dating", so to speak, of what hypnosis is. Generative trance is the "real" communication. It is not a place where the therapist provides answers and techniques for change, but where the client can have experiential learning, a reconfiguration of his own unconscious or forgotten resources. This, as evidenced by Erickson's work, is how lasting and sometimes remarkable and quick changes are achieved.

Under this umbrella of generative trance, he breaks his ideas into separate pieces. He discusses the familiar situation of a client "frozen" and seemingly unable to act, explaining how this is part of what he refers to as neuromuscular lock and literally takes apart what is happening. Then he provides clear methods of using generative trance, how client resources can be accessed and how different, more productive responses, can be learned and practiced. His approach is convincing, intriguing and eminently do-able.

His idea of centering is inclusive of what most people understand this term to mean. But typical of all of his writing, he uses words so precisely and carefully, that the reader stops to absorb his more expansive definition fully. Some of his phrases are immediately transferable to any therapeutic session - "you (can) feel both a part of and apart from an experience ... be with something without becoming it ...". He points out that when people learn to be centered, they can be vulnerable. Then with generative trance states, they can provide new and safe places within themselves and new learning and the transformation of dysfunctions can occur more easily.

Gilligan believes, as Erickson did, that people's realities and fixed meanings have to be broadened. A change in perspective allows people to respond differently; each person can create a different sense of self - a different "identity" - as all of us have done since childhood. Generative trance allows this easily and naturally.

He goes into detail with some of the ideas - for example, "Creative Acceptance" which redefines acceptance not as passivity but as an active curiosity about what

something might be if it were accepted. This counter-intuitive idea – accept something to change it – is detailed in one of Erickson’s cases – the girl with the gap between her two front teeth. Gilligan connects this to the first part of his book seamlessly.

Part of the book holds case examples in script form. This clarifies and demonstrates the uses of generative trance states. He gives explanations of what he was doing and even little, easy-for-all to do ideas, such as various phrases to insert in any hypnotic work – “trance is a learning place” and the words Erickson used so often, “trust your unconscious”. Each script is primarily aimed at one of the points Gilligan has made earlier in the book, and the how – and why – is explained. Additionally, as he points out, shorter versions of the scripts are useful to all in everyday life – we all need to be able to become more centered, to be in touch with our bodies and relax comfortably while maintaining alertness.

One of the “bonuses” always present in Gilligan’s writing is his use of meaningful, often beautifully poetic, quotations from a huge variety of sources to begin every chapter. And it’s in this book too.

*Generative Trance* is an extraordinary book ... filled with different and new perspectives, captivating, and most important – valuable. My father would be so proud!

**Betty Alice Erickson, M.S.**

Steve Gilligan is the closest I’ve experienced to being with Milton Erickson since Erickson’s death in 1980. His new book, *Generative Trance*, delivers a tour-de-force of the latest thinking of third-generation hypnosis in a charming and organized way. This is the definitive overview of a new approach in psychotherapy and change work. I continue to learn from Gilligan and look forward to returning to this book, again and again, to gain even deeper insights.

**Bill O’Hanlon, author of *Taproots, An Uncommon Casebook, A Guide to Trance Land and Solution-Oriented Hypnosis***

Steve Gilligan says we are on a journey – a journey of infinite possibilities – but only if we are open and aware. Generative Trance is not another cognitive change process. It is about using trance to learn how to love and access the wisdom of your deeper mind, so that new awareness and choice can emerge. Whether you read this exceptional book for your personal development, or you facilitate others in theirs, you will discover that Generative Trance leads to a kind of sacred sight, after which your world will never look quite the same again. What a journey!

**Penny Tompkins and James Lawley, authors of *Metaphors in Mind: Transformation through Symbolic Modelling***

There is a revolution taking place in psychotherapy that sheds the limitations of naïve models of therapy and change. Stephen Gilligan is one of the most important leaders in this transformation of practice, particularly as it applies to hypnosis. His “generative trance” marks a major advance in helping us resourcefully relate to all that clients and therapists bring to a session. We enthusiastically recommend it to both your conscious and unconscious mind!

**Bradford Keeney, Ph.D. & Hillary Keeney, Ph.D., authors,**  
***Circular Therapeutics: Giving Therapy a Healing Heart and A Master Class***  
***in the Art of Performing Change***

This latest book by Steve Gilligan puts into practice the Ericksonian principles he has taught brilliantly for decades. He extends his self-relations model in several important ways, especially in the memorable sections on welcoming and weaving the identity parts into generative trance in order to allow new parts of the self to be born through generative transformation.

Though not a simple book, *Generative Trance* provides several easy-to-follow frameworks, including the four steps of generative trance and the five key generative methods presented in the book’s second section. Specific scripts are offered to help the reader learn to vocalize hypnotic suggestions so that their receivers connect with positive intentions, with the five somatic dimensions of generative trance, and can explore and engage with generative fields where creative acceptance and transformation can take place.

If you want to learn deeply from a true hypnotic artist, do not miss this book!

**Maggie Phillips, Ph.D.,**  
**Co-author of *Healing the Divided Self* and**  
***Finding Freedom From Pain***



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# Introduction

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*Let your mind start a journey through a strange new world. Leave all thoughts of the world you knew before. Let your soul take you where you long to be ... Close your eyes, let your spirit start to soar, and you'll live as you've never lived before.*

Erich Fromm

The journey of life has infinite potential. At each step of the way possibilities open, each moment bringing a wholly new beginning. But to realize these possibilities, we must live in a way that is creative and meaningful. It is easy to go on unconsciously acting and reacting in predictable, tiresome ways. This book is about how to move into more creative states of consciousness using a process that I've developed called *generative trance*. *Generative* here means *to create something new* – a new future, a new state of health, a new relationship to self and the world. As we will see, generative trance is not a traditional hypnosis where one gives up control or consciousness, but a creative art in which conscious and unconscious minds are woven into a higher consciousness capable of creativity and transformation.

The experience of generative trance is grounded in the notion of *life as a journey of consciousness*. This idea was formalized by the mythologist Joseph Campbell (1949), who noted how every culture features myths about a hero living life as a great path of transformation. (Interestingly, the *Star Wars* movies were directly based on Campbell's work.) Such a life is not primarily about fame or fortune, but about bringing a greater healing and wholeness into the world. This might be done through any of a number of domains – art, science, social justice, family, business, and so on. Most important, especially in these challenging times, is the awareness that each of us can live such a life. This book is an exploration of how to help yourself and others to do so.

There are many examples of living life as a great journey. One of my main inspirations was Milton Erickson, the renowned psychiatrist who revolutionized ideas about how trance could be used for creative healing and transformation. I studied with Erickson during the last six years of his life. He was a classic Yoda-like character by then, a wizened old healer with

twinkling eyes and amazing skills. His skills in no small part arose from his personal journey, as life gave him so many significant challenges. He was tone deaf, dyslexic (including not knowing the dictionary was alphabetized until he was an adolescent!), and color blind (purple was the only color he could “enjoy”). He was severely paralyzed with polio at 17, and suffered a related setback at mid-life. He met each challenge in courageous, creative ways, and then helped his psychiatric patients to do the same. This book looks to honor and extend that work in various ways.

To live life as a journey, we must consciously choose to do so. There are, of course, other possibilities. Campbell suggests three available paths: (1) *the village life*, where we play out the routines of the ego ideal; (2) *the wasteland*, where we sink into the shadow world of cynicism and despair; and (3) *the journey*, where we live life as a great call to adventure.

## **The village life**

This is the conventional path of the ego ideal, where you live a “normal” life within the roles and social strictures of mainstream society. Here “the good life” moves through a clear sequence. For example, in the “American dream” (if it still exists), you are born into a happy family, obey your parents, do well at school, graduate and get a job, marry and have kids, buy a house and make a lot of money, then retire and die. This is the village life, and as Campbell points out, there is nothing wrong with it. For some people it is their main path.

Others, however, cannot or will not live in the village. Membership may be denied by virtue of having the “wrong” skin color, sexual orientation, religion, gender, or socioeconomic status. You may be exiled by something like a trauma, which shatters the “ego trance” and drags a person into the underworld. Or you may voluntarily leave the village, unwilling or unable to work within its orthodoxies or hypocrisies. Whatever the case, it raises the question of what lies outside the village.

## The wasteland

The dark alternative to the ego ideal is the shadow world of what T. S. Eliot called *the wasteland*. Its inhabitants reject (or are rejected by) the shallow “happy face” of the village. Based on negation, the predominant experiences are cynicism, apathy, and destructiveness. You drop out of the mainstream and live alone or with some isolated subculture. The wasteland could be the despair of depression, the numbed glaze of television, the hatred of gossip and prejudice, or the toxic worlds of drugs, alcohol, and other addictions. Self-awareness and human dignity disappear, and consciousness descends into disconnected despair.

When people seek help, they are typically mired in the wasteland, unwilling or unable to participate in normal village life. Often the request, explicitly or implicitly, is to get them back to the village, so they can just be “normal”. It is important to realize that this may or may not be possible. In generative trance, we see that the experiences that led to the “village exile” may be a “soul signal” that some deep transformation is needed – that a person can no longer continue in the restrictive role assigned to them. Luckily, a third alternative exists.

## The (hero’s) journey of consciousness

The ego ideal of the village and the shadow world of the wasteland are polar opposites, each containing what the other rejects. The *journey of consciousness* is a third path that integrates and transcends these dualities. Here you are neither blindly following the established rules and roles, nor cynically rejecting them. Instead, you “go where no man (or woman) has gone before,” in the words of the old *Star Trek* series. On the journey, life is a great mystery unfolding daily deeper into greater awareness and possibilities. Many great people have spoken about this living of life as a great adventure:

*Some men see things as they are and ask why. Others dream things that never were and ask why not.*

George Bernard Shaw



*Figure 5.1a Ego-contracted somatic self. Person neuromuscularly locked in physical body without access to the creative flow of the quantum field*



*Figure 5.1b Generative somatic “body of bodies”. Person centers and opens connection to the quantum field of the creative unconscious, creating a subtle body that can fluidly attune to both worlds*



Lest you think this too esoteric, I would reiterate that any time we feel at our best, this embodied sense of wholeness and light is present. In optimal performance, it feels like this “greater presence” opens around us and moves through us; we must remain present and intentional, but also receptive to its intelligence.

This chapter explores how to develop and make use of this subtle body in generative trance. We first examine the general principle of mind–body centering, seeing how it allows attentional stability, connection to a mindful presence more basic than thought or action, an intuitive channel, and an integral base for unifying the disparate elements of experience into a powerful expression. We then move to exploring the different somatic dimensions of generative trance, emphasizing how a creative state arises from optimizing levels of relaxation, absorption, musicality, openness, and groundedness. In all of this, we are guided by the principle that reality is created from a state, so you want to be in the highest possible state to create the most rewarding experiences.

## **The generative principle of centering**

We dance around in a ring and suppose,

But the Secret sits in the middle and knows.

Robert Frost, “The Secret Sits”

Centering is an experience of mind–body unity wherein all the dimensions of experience and expression are integrated into a calm, powerful, and mindful state. The distinction is especially found in performance arts such as dancing, acting, martial arts, and sports; it is also crucial for creative leadership, optimal performance in a challenging situation, and navigation through emotional difficulties. High-level performers know how to “drop into center,” find the non-cognitive base of awareness “beneath and before” thinking, and use it to steady, relax, inform, and guide creative action. Centering is a core dimension of generative trance.

The first base of centering is somatic. You feel the physical center point of your body, attuning to it so all your movements can coalesce and be

unified around it. In primarily movement domains like martial arts or dancing, the center is located right below the navel, as this is the actual physical center (if you were measuring with a ruler). For other activities, the center may be most felt in the heart or the gut, or even the “third eye”. All of these chakra centers lay along the mid-line, so that the right and left sides may be in balance.

Just as the center is physical, it is also mental. It is not based on muscular tension but rather on subtle awareness attuned with a physical center. Free of neuromuscular lock, it allows consciousness to flow with relaxed concentration.

## The values of centering

Figure 5.2 lists the important values of mind–body centering. Let’s consider each in turn.

*Figure 5.2. The values of centering*

1. Attentional stability
2. Calm alertness
3. Non-judgmental experiencing
4. Connection to life force (*chi*)
5. Gateway to creative unconscious
6. “Sanctuary” or container for disturbed experiences
7. Allows cognitive/experiential differentiation/integration

## **Attentional stability**

We need stability in one way or another in order to function well. The most typical ways involve neuromuscular lock around a fixed content. We cling to a rigid belief or ideology (fundamentalism); we need a person to always be there in a certain way; or we assume that a past experience represents what will always happen. While it may seem puzzling as to why someone would operate so rigidly, it makes sense when we appreciate that it satisfies the need for stability.

Centering is a superior stabilizer since it is content-free; it doesn't require a neuromuscular lock on some content. Consequently, you are open to the creative unconscious and free to have a stable and intentional attention that can creatively flow through many possibilities.

This is especially needed in trance work. Trance unbinds the identity filters defining the conscious mind, thereby opening to the vast networks of the creative unconscious, where you can "go anywhere from anywhere". By centering, you can keep a stable awareness and self-connection even while in deep or difficult waters.

## **Calm alertness**

Centering both calms you and heightens your awareness. When your primary attention is resting in your somatic center, you are not stressfully reacting to the "soap operas" of everyday life. The "one point" of attention allows you to stay connected with each changing moment, with the relaxed attunement needed to creatively engage with whatever comes up.

## **Non-judgmental experiencing**

In the non-dual awareness of centering, you are not caught up in "good vs. bad" evaluations as primary; you are able to sense things more directly. Of course, you can still discriminate and operate intentionally, as evidenced by centered high-level performers. It is just that you are not lost in your head and its judgments, and are more directly attuned to the wholeness of each moment.

And so you really can experience X in so many interesting and helpful ways. I'll give you another example ...<sup>23</sup>

When presented under the proper conditions, the stories typically dissolve the neuromuscular lock of fixed maps and open the quantum field of the creative unconscious. Each story and its elements float within this oceanic field, with the generative state allowing different positive meanings and applications to develop.

### **Steps 5–7: Integration, future orientation, and reorientation**

The different possibilities implicit in each story may be integrated into a new identity map, followed by a future orientation and reorientation process. These steps can be done in any of the ways already detailed in earlier chapters.

When Frank reoriented, he shared a very interesting process. As he listened to the story about a shy person, something began to resonate in his chest. A dark film dissipated around his heart and some younger version of him began to emerge. At first he was afraid, but as the story continued he began to connect with the “younger Frank,” a shy, almost mute boy who was deathly afraid of the anger in his home. When he opened to the presence, a great feeling of relief and love filled him. The content of the story and the trance rhythms of the story-telling seemed to provide a safe place and deep permission to make this reconnection.

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23 In working with his students, Milton Erickson would often start the day with a simple question: “What do you want to learn today?” It was good to have a goal prepared since Erickson was remarkably responsive to specific requests. But often he would answer with stories or other symbolic (e.g., trance phenomena) responses. He might tell five or six stories, connecting each with the statement, “I’ll give you another example ...” After an extended period (sometimes hours) of such entrancing presentations, he would stop and say, “Any other questions?” We would usually laugh, as the original question could not be remembered in the wake of the entrancing answer.

## **Step 8: Further work**

Trance changes typically need to be further developed. For Frank, his shyness became a tender part of him that needed both recognition and protection. We explored how to bring a stronger “yang” part of him to shield this shy and gentle “yin” part, especially appreciating how the gentle part was really the more sensitive and subtle consciousness of the two. This led to a variety of explorations on how to integrate the two sides in a creative partnership.

Stories are of course one of the oldest teaching methods the world over. They absorb attention and speak directly to the symbolic language of the creative unconscious, thereby allowing deep learning to occur. As with all generative trance processes, the key to using them successfully is to establish and be guided by deep relational connections at many levels. They are not techniques to do *to* someone, but creative processes to explore *with* someone.

## **Fifth method: The council of resources**

The creative unconscious is guided by ongoing feedback at many levels. As Csíkszentmihályi (1991) noted, an optimal flow state requires the setting of general goals, along with testable sub-goals that can indicate whether one is properly on track. One major type of feedback is through the mentors and guides that support us on our journey. Each represents a viewpoint that can indicate different possible ways to proceed. One way to make use of them in generative trance is through what I call the *council of resources* method, represented in Figure 9.8.

Figure 9.8. *The council of resources method*

1. Identify goal
2. Develop (and spatially locate) council of resources
3. Preparation step
4. Attune to goal: self-contemplation of direction
5. Attune to each council member and receive their advice
6. Reorient to goal, integrate all positions
7. Future orientation
8. Reorientation

## **Step 1: Identify goal**

The process begins with the setting of a goal. This simple but not always easy step should be done carefully to ensure that the goal is positive, succinct (five words or less), and resonant.

## **Step 2: Develop (and spatially locate) the council of resources**

The second step involves developing a trance field of resource guides to support the goal journey. A general way to introduce the process is as follows:

So you've identified this very important goal of [name goal]. To achieve it, generative trance can be helpful in many ways. One way is to ask your creative unconscious to help you develop a positive resource team that can guide and support you on this journey. We

all “get by with a little help from our friends,” and all rely upon the loving and wise feedback of beings who deeply support us on the journey. Carl Jung used to say that we each need to find our “community of saints”; that is, those beings who really support and love us on our life path. What Jung called the “community of saints” I would like to refer to as the council of resources that can be used to consult and guide and support the journey.

To develop your council of resources, it’s good to start by sensing who might be a really good positive resource or guide for you on this particular journey of [state goal]. There are many types of guides who can support you in different ways. They might give you encouragement, provide safety, make specific suggestions, answer questions, provide a listening ground, be good models, motivate you, and so forth. In terms of who might constitute a guide, it could be someone you know in real life – a teacher, a family member, a friend. It could be a historical figure, a spiritual being, or a mythical character. It might even be something like the river or the forest. The important thing is that you find those guides that will be most helpful for you on this journey. Does that make sense?

(Answer any questions.)

To develop the council, a person first centers and attunes to their goal, then asks their creative unconscious to bring forward whatever guides might be most helpful. Generally, two or three guides are optimal for the process.

For each guide identified, a few moments are taken to sense their optimal spatial location (in the surrounding field). This spatializing helps to sense the guide as a distinct experiential presence (rather than merely as an intellectual concept), and also expands the field of awareness beyond the body. Both shifts contribute to generative trance.

As with all generative trance processes, encouragement is given to just let the images and awarenesses come. Any signs of neuromuscular lock are met with relaxation suggestions. For example:

Relax your forehead, relax your shoulders ... that’s good ... just let it happen ... that’s good ... just be curious as to which image your creative unconscious brings forward.



Stephen Gilligan, PhD, has become a leading figure in Ericksonian hypnotherapy. He is the developer of the Generative Self approach to personal growth. A licensed psychologist, Stephen maintains a private practice in Encinitas, California.



“*Generative Trance* is an extraordinary book ... filled with different and new perspectives, captivating and – most important – valuable. My father would be so proud!”

**Betty Alice Erickson, MS**

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**Bill O’Hanlon, author of *Taproots, An Uncommon Casebook,*  
*A Guide to Trance Land* and *Solution-Oriented Hypnosis***

“Steve Gilligan says we are on a journey – a journey of infinite possibilities – but only if we are open and aware. *Generative Trance* is not another cognitive change process. It is about using trance to learn how to love and access the wisdom of your deeper mind, so that new awareness and choice can emerge. Whether you read this exceptional book for your personal development, or you facilitate others in theirs, you will discover that *Generative Trance* leads to a kind of sacred sight, after which your world will never look quite the same again. What a journey!”

**Penny Tompkins and James Lawley,**  
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“There is a revolution taking place in psychotherapy that sheds the limitations of naïve models of therapy and change. Steve Gilligan is one of the most important leaders in this transformation of practice, particularly as it applies to hypnosis. His “generative trance” marks a major advance in helping us resourcefully relate to all that clients and therapists bring to a session. We enthusiastically recommend it to both your conscious and unconscious mind!”

**Bradford Keeney, PhD and Hillary Keeney, PhD, authors, *Circular Therapeutics: Giving Therapy a Healing Heart* and *A Master Class in the Art of Performing Change***



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