

COYOTE, CHAOS, AND CONFUSION

By Peter Blum

I spent some time looking through my hard drive for “What? WHAT?!?” - Confusion, Ambiguity, and Vagueness”. I was pretty sure I had written a short paper with this title, as I have presented it as a workshop at several hypnosis conferences over the years. And yet, when I searched my computer, I could not find anything with this title. I guess I was confused. Which is a good place to start, and subsequently led me to rethink it and write it now.

Hypnotists who have been inspired by the groundbreaking approach of Dr. Milton Erickson have also learned that something called “the confusion technique” is a very useful tool for inducing trance. Although I cannot find the reference, allegedly Dr. Erickson referred to confusion as a “blessed state”.

The world can be so uncertain and confusing that it is natural to try to find order, logic, and predictable patterns and outcomes. In “The Guru Papers: Masks of Authoritarian Power”, authors Joel Kramer and Diana Alstad claim that research indicates the reason people join cults, follow charismatic teachers and become fundamentalists is the basic human “need for certainty”. As the old gossip rag The National Inquirer used to say, “Inquiring minds want to know!”

That is the way of the conscious mind to seek certainty... particularly those tasks and abilities usually assigned to the “left hemisphere”. Within the past few decades, the term “chaorder” has entered our vocabulary. Chaorder arises from the fusion of chaos and order, a delicate balance between the two. It harnesses the creative potential of chaos while retaining the stability and structure of order. Embracing chaorder allows us to navigate complexity, inspire transformation, and embrace change. This seems to be absolutely in the mythical domain of Coyote, master of chaos and confusion.

Dr. Lewis Mehl-Madrona, in his series of recordings on Sounds True, introduces us to the Lakota word/concept of Woaonchela - which is a way of explaining that we are “thrown into a world in which we are relatively puny and insignificant little people, amidst huge cosmic forces, that are in conflict... and that are raging around us - most of which have nothing to do with us, and could care less about us. And that, within that context, that we’re expected to make sense of things, that don’t make sense!”

If it is so undesirable and uncomfortable, that we will do almost anything to gain clarity rather than feel confused, why is confusion so valuable?

I believe many traditional medicine people utilize the same understanding of the value of confusion as expressed in this quote from “The Wisdom of Milton H. Erickson, Vol 1” (Ronald A. Havens, Editor): “Erickson noticed that few things capture attention more effectively than confusion. Perhaps because people are so highly dependent upon their ability to decipher the meaning of stimuli in order to decide how to respond appropriately, confusion or a lack of understanding is a startling and disarming event. When confused, people become dumbfounded and their awareness withdraws inward in a search for understanding or escape. This may explain why the single most frequently used and most effective ingredient in Erickson’s repertoire of induction and suggestion techniques was confusion... Confusion of conscious awareness forces people to resort to unconscious patterns of thought and response, a circumstance that can then be emphasized and utilized by observant hypnotists and willing subjects.”

Typical physiological responses to being overwhelmed with confusion range from catatonia and blank stares, to rapid eye blinks, twitches, head shakes, or the need to take a nap or get furiously active. We have all either observed or experienced variations on these responses at times in our lives.

Many examples of confusion can be found in the rhetoric of politicians. To quote former President Richard M. Nixon: "I didn't say I didn't say it; I said I didn't say I said it..." One's mind tends to repeat these words, attempting to make sense of the masterful use of double and triple negatives. Though confusing, eventually it does make sense.

Great examples of celebrities and famous comic figures who could be considered contemporary heroes of confusion are Gracie Allen, The Marx Brothers, Steven Wright, Monty Python, and Yogi Berra. One of the more famous "yogi-isms", "No one goes there nowadays, it's too crowded." Or "You've got to be very careful if you don't know where you are going, because you might not get there."

Syntactical ambiguity is also an important confusion technique. "When can you continue to change if you're about to decide that isn't now a good time?" NLP also identified something called a "phonological ambiguity", often involving the use of homonyms, or double entendres. "I can see you've got a good pupil, said the optometrist to the 4th grade teacher". "Which eye can see my pupils?" answered the teacher.

Confusion can be induced not just through words but actions as well. Think of the "Heyoka" or backwards medicine person. According to Wikipedia, "The heyoka is a kind of sacred clown in the culture of the Sioux (Lakota and Dakota people) of the Great Plains of North America. The heyoka is a contrarian, jester, and satirist, who speaks, moves and reacts in an opposite fashion to the people around them."

Masks and costumes have often been used by traditional healers as well as strange music and lights, creating a kind of "Magic Theater". These healing ceremonies involve disorientation of the senses, a feeling of having entered a different, alternative reality, where anything could happen. The usual rules don't apply.

In my almost 40 years of studying and practicing hypnosis and trance, I have encountered a great many misrepresentations and

misunderstandings by serious people who thought they had captured truth and were the sole owners of it. Much of the abuse of power in therapy and in politics can be found to be tied to this illusion that there is only one answer, only one “correct” way. Heyoka or Coyote challenges these, often by breaking the “rules”.

Here’s an example of a confusion inducing response in one on one hypnotherapy: A client comes in for a second session and say, “My depression is worse than before our session last week. In fact, it’s probably the worst it’s been in a long time.” A heyoka response might be “Wow. That’s fantastic! How did you manage to do that so quickly? You’re pretty powerful!” Not the typical therapeutic “Can you tell me more about that?” Or a noncommittal, “Is that so?” Or, in the middle of a very complicated and logical analysis of a situation, throw in “If your problem is this and the solution is that, then this and not that is the solution to this or that problem?” And then continue on with a straight face in a logical manner.

"Defined simply, a 'confusion technique is one based upon the presentation to the subject of a series of seemingly but only loosely related ideas actually based upon a significant thread of continuity not readily recognized, leading to an increasing divergence of association, interspersed with an emphasis on the obvious, all of which precludes subjects from developing any one train of association, yet stirs them increasingly to need to do something until they are ready to accept the first clear-cut definite suggestion offered."

—Milton H. Erickson, M.D. (circa 1940's)

Erickson here suggests that there is method to his madness, so to speak. The frustration created by confusion creates an ever greater desire for clarity. This scrambling of the circuits allows hopefully for new wiring to take place in the brain. Confusion of the conscious mind can, under the right circumstances, allow the unconscious mind to facilitate insight and clarity. What’s the most important thing that you’re just not thinking of right now?