

# Generative Trance

The Experience of Creative Flow

Stephen Gilligan



Crown House Publishing Limited  
[www.crownhouse.co.uk](http://www.crownhouse.co.uk)  
[www.crownhousepublishing.com](http://www.crownhousepublishing.com)

First published by

Crown House Publishing Ltd  
Crown Buildings, Bancyfelin, Carmarthen, Wales, SA33 5ND, UK  
[www.crownhouse.co.uk](http://www.crownhouse.co.uk)

and

Crown House Publishing Company LLC  
PO Box 2223, Williston, VT 05495, USA  
[www.crownhousepublishing.com](http://www.crownhousepublishing.com)

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First published in hardback in 2012 (ISBN 978-184590781-5).

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British Library of Cataloguing-in-Publication Data  
A catalogue entry for this book is available from the British Library.

**Paperback ISBN 978-178583388-5**  
**Hardback ISBN 978-184590781-5**  
**Mobi ISBN 978-184590782-2**  
**ePub ISBN 978-184590783-9**

**LCCN 2011940616**

# **Acknowledgments**

Creativity is not an isolated act, but rather a magical process that occurs when individual self-awareness joins with a greater field of consciousness. In this regard, the writing of this book and development of this work owes much to the support, participations, and contributions of many people. I want to thank all my teachers, students, sponsors, clients, friends and family who have been such an integral part of this development. I have truly been blessed to have such extraordinary positive resources in my life.

A special thank you to Abbe Miller, who created the cover art and all the illustrations in the book.



With each breath of belonging,  
the light in all things  
cherishes the light in you.  
With each smile of belonging,  
the light in you communes  
with the light in all things.  
The heart, the hands, the tree,  
the stars; consciousness in light,  
in stone, cosmic and ordinary,  
comfortable and divine.  
Light breathing light,  
breathing you –  
This perfect, precious light.

*Dvorah Simon*

(inspired by Abbe Miller's cover art)



# Contents

Preface ix

Introduction 1

## **Part I: The Framework Of Generative Trance 9**

### ***Chapter 1: Consciousness and the Construction of Reality 11***

The three worlds of consciousness 12

    The “original mind” of pure consciousness 13

    The quantum world of the creative unconscious 16

    The classical world of the conscious mind 19

Relationship between worlds: creative flow vs. neuromuscular lock 20

    Filters: gateways between the worlds 22

    Creative flow: when the gateways are open 24

    Neuromuscular lock: when the gateways are closed 26

    The 4 Fs of neuromuscular lock 28

Summary 30

### ***Chapter 2: The Many Faces of Trance 31***

“Just let it happen”: trance as creative flow 32

Not all trances are created equal 33

Trance is natural 34

Trance is developed by releasing the orienting response 35

Trance is integral to identity creation 37

The human relationship to trance determines its form and value 40

Summary 43

### ***Chapter 3: Three Minds, Three Levels: The Generative Trance Model 45***

The three minds of the generative self 45

    The somatic mind 46

    The field mind 46

## Generative Trance

- The cognitive mind 47
- The three levels of consciousness 48
  - The primitive level: wholeness without self-awareness 49
  - The ego level: self-awareness without wholeness 50
  - The generative level: self awareness within differentiated wholeness 52
- The *COSMIC* consciousness of generative trance 54
  - Centered 55
  - Open (and mindful) 55
  - Subtle awareness 56
  - Musicality 57
  - Intentional (positive) 59
  - Creative engagement 60
- Breakdowns vs. Breakthroughs: how problems and solutions develop 61
- Summary 63

### ***Chapter 4: The Four Steps in Generative Trance 65***

- Step 1: Preparing a generative state 66
  - Connect to positive intention 67
  - Connect to center 69
  - Connect to resources 70
  - The use of self-scaling to assess and track connections 71
- Step 2: Welcoming and weaving identity parts into generative trance 74
  - Inviting parts into a generative field 74
  - Creatively weaving the parts into a generative trance 76
  - Generative trance elements of weaving parts 77
- Step 3: Integration and transformation 80
- Step 4: Transfer learnings to real life 81
  - Marking out key learnings 82
  - Imagining a positive future 82
  - Commitments and vows 82
  - Gratitude 83

Reorientation 83  
Feedback 83  
Incorporate feedback for next cycle of work 84  
Summary 85

**Part II: The Methods of Generative Trance 87**

***Chapter 5: “Drop into Center”:  
Somatic Attunement in Generative Trance 89***

The generative principle of centering 92  
The values of centering 93  
Methods of centering 97  
    Centering through somatic attunement 97  
    Centering through positive memories 99  
    Centering through negative experiences 100  
Somatic elements of generative trance 104  
The somatic mixer model 106  
Summary 121

***Chapter 6: “Open Beyond”: Subtle Fields in Generative Trance 123***

Opening to a generative field 124  
First method: The energy ball 128  
Second method: The energy ball and archetypal resources 135  
Third method: Generative trance as a quantum field 143  
Fourth method: Second skin as a generative field 148  
Fifth method: Celtic cross 155  
Summary 164

**Chapter 7: The Principle of Creative Acceptance 165**

- The generative principle of creative acceptance 166
- First method: The suggestion loop of creative acceptance 169
- Second method: Self-trance process of creative utilization 176
- Third method: Unfolding trance from experiential resources 181
- Fourth method: Relational mantras 186
- Fifth method: Somatic modeling of problem patterns 188
- Summary 192

**Chapter 8: The Principle of Complementarity 195**

- Generative trance methods of complementarity 202
- First method: The suggestion loop of complementarity 202
- Second method: Mutual trance 208
- Third method: “Good self/bad self” 213
- Fourth method: Reconciling opposites 219
- Fifth method: The somatic trance dance of integrating opposites 226
- Summary 231

**Chapter 9: The Principle of Infinite Possibilities 233**

- First method: Suggestion loop of multiple possibilities 234
- Second method: Generating new choices 240
- Third method: The tetralemma 244
- Fourth method: Metaphorical stories 252
- Fifth Method: The council of resources 259
- Summary 265

Epilogue 267

References 273

# Preface

*The goal of all our living is to become transparent to the transcendent.*

Karlfried Graf Durckheim

This is a book about how to live life as a great journey of consciousness. It emphasizes reality and identity as constructed, and trance as a major means to create new realities. This view of trance differs markedly from traditional ideas of a person losing control, instead focusing on its potential to elevate consciousness to higher levels of creativity.

My own experience with trance has been a long and winding road. I spent much of my childhood in trance. Part of it was in the wonderment of watching the many unspoken connections between people, most notably my family. I loved to absorb in the magical qualities that seemed to be everywhere – in my grandfather’s twinkling eyes, my mother’s loving stories, my dog’s blissful playfulness, even the “dancing dots” that swirled in the darkness after my mother turned out the lights at bedtime. This happy world had its counterpart: another part of my childhood trance experiences was in the dissociational escape from family alcoholism and violence. I learned trance as a sanctuary, a safe place to get away from the dehumanizing parts of life, to be alone and not confused and lied to by words.

I entered adolescence in the late 1960s in San Francisco, where traditional consciousness was being shaken to the core by a myriad of movements: hippies, Black Panthers, gay pride, the women’s movement, and anti-war activism, to name a few. In my all-boys, Jesuit high school, a counselor introduced me to my first group therapy, where it was possible to talk about experiences I had previously only witnessed and silently experienced. I also found my way to meditation during this time, an important balance to the “sex, drugs and rock n’ roll” ethos of the time.

At 19, I met the great psychiatrist healer, Milton Erickson, who changed my life forever. He showed me that trance could be used to come *into* the world, not just to leave it, and illuminated the uniqueness of each moment, each person, and each experience. It set me on my adult path

## Generative Trance

as a psychotherapist using trance therapeutically to help others creatively deal with the many ego-disruptive challenges that touch each human life – births, deaths, traumas, marriages, divorces, and so on. The trance work was not just for my clients, but myself as well. I am grateful that Erickson modeled and emphasized the need for each person to continue to learn and develop and change throughout life.

All of this has taught me to appreciate the deep creative consciousness that lives within human beings, and how it may be tapped into through trance. I am continually amazed how trance can help people realize their dreams, heal wounds, transform problems, and live their life callings. Not artificial trance, not trance where somebody is manipulating somebody else, but a natural state where it is possible to take a step back from having to perform some fixed role and open a creative space where new reality may be created.

This is what I'd like to share with you in this book. How to develop higher states of consciousness that can help you live beyond fears, limits, and negative beliefs. I want to describe a type of trance that requires a cooperative relationship of mutual respect between the conscious and creative unconscious minds. In other words, you don't go to sleep in generative trance, you awaken to a deeper type of creative consciousness.

This central emphasis on creative trance as a conversation between different levels of a person decouples it from the outdated assumptions of hypnosis. It sees trance as a natural experience arising whenever identity is destabilized, and hypnosis as but one of many possible social rituals for unfolding trance. Given that traditional hypnosis seeks to bypass or "knock out" the conscious mind of a person, I believe it has limited value in promoting self-mastery and creative transformation. The work here is presented as an alternative method, whereby a person can experience an integrated self-wholeness that can guide and experience creative change.

I wrote the book for individuals who want to live life as a creative journey, as well as for people-helping professionals working with clients in such ventures. It needs to be emphasized that the work is not a substitute for essential medical or psychological care, nor should unqualified professionals use it to treat serious maladies. What it can do is help reawaken the wonderment of being alive, and allow realization of a happy, fulfilling life.

We live in challenging times. The longing for deep transformational change often clashes with rigid ideological "fundamentalisms," resulting

in a “betwixt and between” state, suspended between old realities that no longer work and new ones that have not fully ripened. Such times present great opportunities for growth and transformation. May this work help you to make creative use of each moment of your life, no matter who or where you are.



# 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

## Generative Trance

*Do not go where the path may lead, go instead where there is no path and leave a trail.*

Ralph Waldo Emerson

*Seek out that particular mental attribute which makes you feel most deeply and vitally alive, along with which comes the inner voice which says, "This is the real me," and when you have found that attitude, follow it.*

William James

The journey is often initiated by what Campbell termed "the call". Something touches a deep place in your soul. A sense of magic or amazement awakens, and an awareness dawns of what you are in the world to do. When I first met Milton Erickson at the ripe age of 19, a fire ignited in my soul, and a quiet voice said, "This is why you are here". I often ask clients if they can remember similar moments of "soul awakening" or magical mystery in their lives, especially as children. Interestingly, most initially say no, but as we continue they begin recalling such moments. Maybe it was when reading poetry, or playing with animals, or drawing or painting, or becoming absorbed in science and technology, or feeling deep connections flowing between people.

Some hear the call and don't look back, their lives coalescing around it. Campbell called this "following your bliss". While often misunderstood as an irresponsible encouragement of hedonism and debauchery, he was actually inviting people to notice when they are touched by wonderment or passion. This "bliss" tells you what you're in the world to do.

Others hear the call and turn away from it. You might be hypnotized by the suggestions that "it's not realistic" or "you should be doing something else," and then try to lead a village life to make others happy. Campbell observed that sometimes we climb the ladder all the way to the top, only to discover that we've placed it against the (wrong) wall of other people's expectations. You can live away from your soul force and then die, "not with a bang, but a whimper".

But for many there comes a wake-up call: at some point (often in mid-life), symptoms begin to appear – health problems, relationship failures, depression or addiction, you name it. In generative trance work, we see such symptoms as "calls to return" to soul resonance, to reconnect one's

outer self with the callings of the inner self. In this way, we see problems as openings to deep transformation, if met with positive and skillful human presence.

I start with these three life paths to emphasize generative trance as a tool for living the third path of life as a journey. It is not primarily to “fix abnormalities” so one can live within a sanitized village world, nor to get “lost in trance”. Rather, it is a set of practices for living life at its highest levels, replete with many creative possibilities: joy, transformation, great accomplishments, and good health.

The book explores the approach in two main parts. The first part overviews a framework for generative trance work. Chapter 1 presents the key premise that reality and identity are constructed (through reality filters) and may be deconstructed and reconstructed when needed. The principle of *creative flow* is central to this skill, while the process of *neuromuscular lock* prohibits it. Chapter 2 examines trance as a process of creative flow that is naturalistic, necessary, and capable of many forms and values (both positive and negative), depending on its context. We will touch upon generative trance as a high level state based on the creative interplay between the conscious and creative unconscious minds.

Chapter 3 outlines the basic model of generative trance. Three minds are distinguished: *somatic*, *cognitive*, and *field* – along with the three levels of consciousness at which they can operate: *primitive*, *ego*, and *generative*. The general goal of the work is to move each mind to a generative level, thereby awakening new dimensions of consciousness capable of significant creative transformation. Chapter 4 outlines how this can be done in four steps: (1) *preparation* (developing the generative state); (2) *weaving the identity parts into a generative trance*; (3) *transformation and integration*; and (4) *the return into the ordinary world*.

The second part of the book focuses on how to implement the model. Chapter 5 explores somatic methods for developing generative trance, emphasizing *mind–body centering* as the central principle, along with how to optimize the five somatic dimensions of a generative trance: *relaxation*, *absorption*, *openness*, (*musical*) *flow*, and *groundedness*. Chapter 6 explores *generative fields* as subtle spaces of mindfulness that can hold and transform their contents. For example, we will see how trance can be used to develop an “energy ball” that contains and allows creative engagement with difficult experiences; or a “second skin” that opens around the

## Generative Trance

physical body; or an interpersonal relational field within which generative trance work can occur.

Chapter 7 identifies the *creative acceptance* of experiences and behaviors as a major way to develop trance and transformation. Chapter 8 explores the principle of *complementarity*, showing how holding opposites is one of the most succinct methods for popping the binds of the conscious mind and opening the gateways to the creative unconscious. Chapter 9 describes the principle of *infinite possibilities*, which holds that every experience and behavior can be experienced and expressed in many ways, as another major means for activating the creative unconscious.

Underlying the entire work is a *two-level theory of experiential construction*, which posits that (1) at the primary (quantum) level, experience has infinite possible forms and meanings, until (2) at the secondary (classical) level, an observing consciousness creates one actual form and meaning from all the potential possibilities. Integrating these two worlds of action and potential is at the heart of creative consciousness. Unfortunately, it is easy to get trapped within the fixed realities of the conscious mind, walled off from creative consciousness. This self-contained world is maintained by a *state dependency effect* that constructs reality to affirm its own position. Generative trance loosens these binds so consciousness can drop back into a generative field, then invites the conscious mind to move within this field with aesthetic intelligence. As we will see, musicality and resonance are primary languages of this creative consciousness, allowing the systemic parts to fluidly create ever changing mandalas of creative wholeness.

This great journey of uniting the two worlds was beautifully described by T. S. Eliot:

The point of intersection of the timeless  
With time, is an occupation for the saint –  
No occupation either, but something given  
And taken, in a lifetime's death in love,

... you are the music  
While the music lasts.

“The Dry Salvages” from *Four Quartets*

May the words on these pages help us to hear this music and find this intersection point.

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 the 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.

*"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**

*"This latest book by Steve Gilligan puts into practice the Ericksonian principles he has taught brilliantly for decades. If you want to learn deeply from a true hypnotic artist, do not miss this book!"*

**Maggie Phillips, PhD,**  
**co-author of *Healing the Divided Self* and *Finding Freedom From Pain***

*"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***



**Stephen Gilligan, PhD,** is a psychologist who received his doctorate from Stanford University. Over the past thirty-five years he has been a leading teacher in Ericksonian hypnotherapy while also developing his own approaches of Self-Relations and Generative Self. The author of many publications, he teaches internationally and has a private practice in Encinitas, California. His website is [www.stephengilligan.com](http://www.stephengilligan.com)

