

John Seymour: One of NLP's First Professionals

For over 30 years, *John Seymour* has been at the forefront of NLP in the UK. Until recently he ran JSNLP, one of the UK's leading NLP training companies, and is well known as an author. His best-selling *Introducing NLP* (co-written with Joseph O'Connor) is still amongst the leading NLP books in the UK. Last year John started the process of retiring and is interviewed by fellow Master Trainer and former apprentice *Neil Almond* for *Rapport*.



By Neil Almond

Neil Almond:

John, you were recently a finalist in the NLP Awards Lifetime Contribution category, what did that mean to you?

John Seymour:

Well, it was quite a surprise, and a nice one because it hadn't crossed my tiny mind that I'd be on the awards list, especially given my personal style – hide away and do good work.

NA: Hide away and do good work? Is that really your style?

JS: I don't know, I'm certainly on the introverted side, and can be obsessive about delivering really effective training. I found it immensely satisfying. As a population we needed to understand much more about ourselves; most people's challenges are internally generated. People stumble around in their realities, suffering needlessly. So, NLP to me was part of creating a better future, a more integrated way of addressing the problems of subjective experience.

The opportunity to do good work attracted me, and the precision of NLP skills fascinated the nerdy part of me; I relished gradually getting better and better at doing this impossible thing. The chance to enable people and facilitate profound and rapid change was magical and highly motivating.

But I had, I realise now, a rather utopian ethical code. And it was a shock to me when I saw versions of NLP with very different codes. Which just got me clearer on my particular niche – highly ethical, clean and effective skills training. I was fascinated by how much people could get when it was delivered well, and how it could be made enjoyable, especially given how mind-mangling NLP can be. This was all fascinating and fed my learning.

NA: You were one of the first, if not the first person, to start up an English practitioner course. If you were doing it again now, what would you do differently?

JS: Great question. Graham Dawes and Eileen Watkins-Seymour started the first practitioner in the UK bringing over American trainers in 1981 or 1982, I think. There weren't really any British trainers, or mechanisms for producing trainers at the time. And NLP training needed translating from US to UK culture. I started teaching NLP professionally



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in 1983, and by summer 1985 I'd gone full time. That was probably just months before others got going: people like John McWhirter, Julian Russell and Ian McDermott.

All were based around the standard business model, because there was no other model and no state support. I haven't thought about how I might have structured it differently, but I really like the co-operative profit-share model on which we base the JSNLP Trainer's Training. I think an awful lot could be done with that model so that NLP could punch out further and wider. For me, co-operation is more code congruent with NLP than competition. Nobody has really tried a co-operative model of NLP. To me now, that looks like a wasted opportunity.

NA: How would that be different?

JS: The success of an NLP training school depends primarily on the quality of the marketing, not the training – not an ideal way to spread good training. Once you abolish profit as the primary motive, then the question becomes: what are the intrinsic motivations of what you're doing? And in NLP these often come from the development stuff; people's interest in their own personal development, and making a difference in the world. But many are also seeking a cultural home base, they want to find people like them. I think a more co-operative model could improve the quality of training as well as dropping the costs.

NA: So back to the award, you were a finalist with some of the biggest names in NLP, how did that feel?

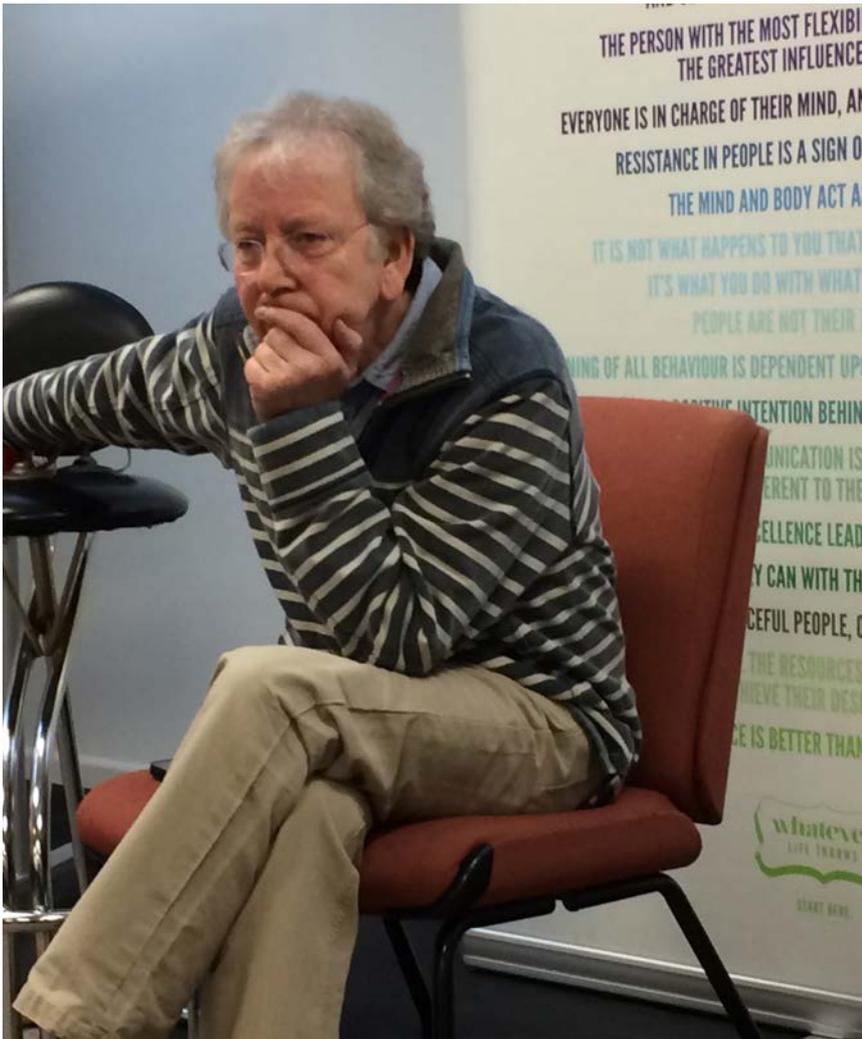
JS: I think there were eight of us, and they were all big names. When I saw who, I thought fine, I won't be getting this one.

NA: It's a great company to keep.

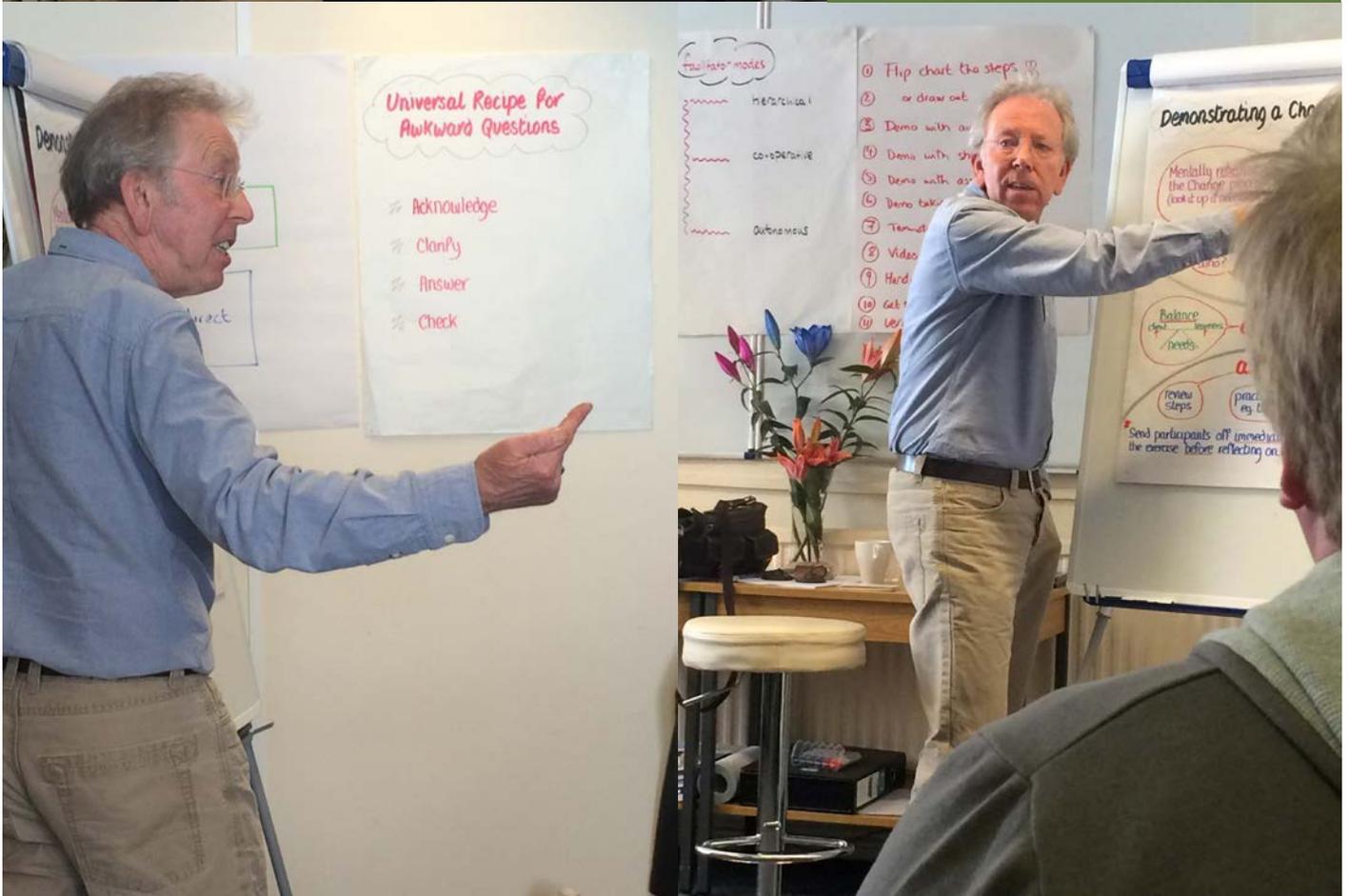
JS: Well, yes, you're right.

NA: Was there anybody that wasn't on that list that you would nominate to be there? Someone who has made a lifetime contribution to NLP in your opinion?

JS: Well, my first thoughts were of Judy (DeLozier) and other founder figures. Then there's Frank Bourke, Rick Gray. I really ►



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▶ don't know. I think there is great potential for an award for quality of training though.

NA: And how would you assess such an award?

JS: You'd have a number of judges based on peer recognition and they'd vote for the best. They'd need to look at video samples and watch live training to pinpoint the strengths and weaknesses until eventually they decide a winner.

NA: That would be a good one to win.

JS: It would, you could add it to your 'Making a Difference' award, Neil...

NA: [laughs] I'm still in shock from that. Anyway, back to you, you still train on many JSNLP courses, but it's the trainer training that seems to resonate most with you at the moment. What is it about trainer training that keeps you coming back?

JS: I was going to say it's endlessly fascinating, but let's chunk it down a bit. I guess it's the elegance, sophistication and real learning. There's probably more words like that. NLP Training has a technical sophistication that, to any teacher, is pretty mind boggling. It's a privilege to be able to influence people at such a profound level. It's about fundamental learning, fundamental change and evolutionary development. It feels to me like the most significant place you can be with individuals. If an individual has exquisite NLP training skills, then they're able to facilitate profound change. The other thing I guess is that because of the complexity, it forces me to stay fresh and keep learning.

The recognition is nice too, in a way. And that's partly what the NLP Award shortlisting gave me. It was like 'Oh somebody out there has noticed what I'm doing and gives a damn'. That was nice. So, a bit of external recognition counts for a lot. And it's satisfying. I was reading a piece in the paper today about people's satisfaction at work. What interested me was that the people who go for the money seem to end up with less life satisfaction, and the ones that go for intrinsic motivations end up more satisfied. And what I notice, and this might sound very glib sitting out here on a sunny day, but I do feel satisfied with what I've done with the NLP part of my life. It enabled me to stay focused on something meaningful and develop some degree of personal mastery. I wouldn't have missed being an NLP trainer for the world. Without it my life would've been so much poorer.

NA: What else has influenced you?

JS: I suppose one of the main bits for me was when I got my hands on Ken Wilber's take on the transpersonal and the stages of consciousness, all quadrants, all levels. It was a revelation. Things started fitting together. People are not the same, they are differently different, they are at different stages of consciousness development and awareness in different ways. The path became more clearly laid out, and I realised I could go as far as I wanted to on it. And that how far I went was totally up to me. That was major. An orienting map of the inner and outer worlds. A theory of everything.

Also, coming to recognise what we do as change agent skills. My favourite students would take their learning out into areas where it could make a significant difference, not messing around learning how to play golf better or something, which almost seemed like an insult to the power of these skills. For me it was always equipping and building

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the confidence of people who wanted to do something substantial with their NLP skills that seemed the most satisfying. Teaching skills for change agents.

NA: Yes, I share that value.

JS: I suspect we share a lot of it.

NA: Anything else around NLP skills? Are there any particular NLP skills that stand out for you after 30 years. If you had to be limited to just two or three techniques, skills or attitudes from NLP, what would you pick?

JS: I wouldn't. I think it's the integration you get from doing the range that gives you something priceless above and beyond any individual technique. I don't think you can do it otherwise. But I was always struck that people seemed to miss the point, they would learn a little technique and not realise the mind-blowing implications of exploring the structure of their experience.

NA: So, what's next for you, now that you're mostly retired?

JS: Well, beyond the work I still do with you, there's the garden. I'm gradually creating a garden in our place on the Welsh borders. Then there's 'the book'.

Over 30 years I have learned a lot about change and transformation, and I would like to apply this to our shared problems as a species. In principle, it is possible to create a credible and compelling path from where we are to where we'd rather be – a challenge indeed! We shall see...

Right now, I'm looking forward to getting the boat ready. I've got a gaff rigged trailer-sailer that I moor on the Cleddau estuary in Pembrokeshire.

Up at the top it's a beautiful national park with hardly a human in sight – just the natural world. On the estuary, surrounded by woods – it's a beautiful and timeless place to be and I'm like a pig in ... err, I'm a happy bunny! ●

