

PROUDLY STOLEN FROM AMERICAN BUDDHA

THE BANDLER METHOD

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In the morning Corine Christensen last snorted cocaine, she found herself, straw in hand, looking down the barrel of a .357 Magnum revolver. When the gun exploded, momentarily piercing the autumn stillness, it sent a single bullet on a diagonal path through her left nostril and into her brain.

Christensen slumped over her round oak dining table, bleeding onto its glass top, a loose-leaf notebook, and a slip of yellow memo paper on which she had scrawled, in red ink, DON'T KILL US ALL. Choking, she spit blood onto a wine goblet, a tequila bottle, and the shirt of the man who would be accused of her murder, then slid sideways off the chair and fell on her back. Within minutes she lay still.

As Christensen lay dying, two men left her rented town house in a working-class section of Santa Cruz, California. One was her former boyfriend, James Marino, an admitted cocaine dealer and convicted burglar. The other, Richard Bandler, was known internationally as the cofounder of Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP), a controversial approach to psychology and communication. About 12 hours later, on the evening of November 3, 1986, Richard Bandler was arrested and charged with the murder.

To many who knew him, the accusation seemed absurd. For more than a decade Bandler, then 36, had traveled the world teaching NLP to psychologists, salespeople, lawyers, executives, and teachers. His 11 books had sold more than half a million copies, and he had worked as a consultant for major corporations and trained personnel for the army and the CIA. Science Digest had described NLP as potentially "the most important synthesis of knowledge about human communication to emerge since the explosion of humanistic psychology in the '60s."

By November 1986, NLP had grown far beyond Richard Bandler and its California roots. Tens of thousands of people, many of them therapists, had studied its blend of hypnosis, linguistics, and positive thinking at colleges and NLP training centers in the United States, Europe, and Australia. Psychology Today, Time, the Wall Street Journal, and many other publications had written about it. A man named Tony Robbins had made himself famous using NLP to teach people to walk barefoot across hot coals; his book, Unlimited Power, had become a best-seller. Yet Bandler had remained a prominent member of the NLP community, revered as its founder, hailed as a great teacher, acclaimed as a genius.

His legal defense seemed disarmingly simple: he said James Marino had killed Corine Christensen. Dozens of colleagues and friends rallied behind Bandler, establishing the Richard Bandler Defense Fund, a newsletter, and a telephone hot line. More than 50 supporters -- businesspeople, psychologists, even a deputy sheriff -- wrote to the court in a successful campaign to reduce his bail. A former Louisiana State University professor suggested Bandler had "possibly improved the lives of more people today than any other living therapist."

But Christensen's death and the ensuing investigation would illuminate a different Bandler -- a man who used large amounts of cocaine and alcohol, a man obsessed with violence. So too would they indirectly shed light on Neuro-Linguistic Programming. For by 1986 NLP had become for Bandler a near-perfect

expression of his own troubled life, an extended intellectual justification for his failure to confront the demons that surely tormented him.

Bandler's story is, in a sense, a parable of the New Age. Having rejected many of the boundaries that govern relations among people, he was like a sailor without anchor or sails, adrift in a peculiarly New Age sea. Here the individual was sovereign; problems were solved easily and self-examination was denigrated; the past could be reimagined at will, and morality was relative. Here Bandler could deny not only guilt, but all responsibility for the death of Corine Christensen.

Although Bandler was never a guru in any traditional sense, his supporters showed him a profound trust vastly out of proportion to his character. In the topsy-turvy world he helped create, it was not wrong for a therapist to pull a gun on a student -- if the therapist was Richard Bandler. And in the wake of Christensen's murder, his followers clung to an idea not unlike his own -- that, as one put it, he was simply "in the wrong place at the wrong time."

Richard Bandler's youth held neither clues to his future success nor hints that he might someday be accused of murder. Born in New Jersey in 1950, he spent his high school years in Sunnyvale, California, in what is now Silicon Valley. Plagued by a language disorder, Bandler was an indifferent student, a withdrawn teenager who dreamed of playing drums like Buddy Rich; although he practiced diligently, a modest talent betrayed his ambition. He was, one friend remembers, ill at ease in the world, and never quite fit in. He seldom spoke of his childhood.

While in high school, Bandler met the first of several older men who would shape his life. At 16, he was hired to teach drums to the son of Robert Spitzer, a generous, soft-spoken psychiatrist who quickly became a father figure. Bandler hinted to him of a painful childhood. Spitzer recognized the boy's dormant intelligence and loaned him psychology books, which he devoured. Spitzer also introduced him to pioneer family therapist Virginia Satir, whose message of self-love and acceptance struck a chord in the youth.

She was drawn to the thin teenager with a terrible case of acne. "He looked undernourished," Satir recalled in March 1988, shortly before her death. "He got my sympathies because he was so bright and at the same time I felt that he felt so little about himself.

After graduating from high school in 1968, Bandler enrolled at a nearby junior college, where he studied philosophy. Intellectually, he flourished in the liberal environment, where he was free to express himself verbally as he had never been able to do on paper. Like many who overcome learning disabilities, Bandler developed tremendous powers of concentration. He had, one former professor remembers, "a mind like a searchlight."

For much of this time Bandler lived in the hills above Santa Cruz. He discussed philosophy for hours -- in the tiny trailer he shared with a girlfriend, on walks in the woods, at a friend's house -- and experimented with pot and acid. He kept his few friends at a distance. "There was clearly a level which nobody was getting at, nobody was reaching," one remembers. "He was not comfortable in the world, at all."

Working for Spitzer's publishing company, Bandler tried to assimilate the knowledge of great therapists, studying them as he had studied Buddy Rich -- by imitation. With uncanny accuracy, he mimicked the voice and mannerisms first of Satir, then of Fritz Perls, the founder of Gestalt.

In 1970, Bandler began studying psychology at the University of California, Santa Cruz, then a new and popular experimental campus nestled in the redwoods. Despite his interest in psychology, Bandler was not concerned with self-discovery or sharing his feelings. Rather, he used his knowledge of Satir and Perls to lead Gestalt groups and counsel fellow students.

It was at UCSC that Bandler met John Grinder, a radical young professor of linguistics. In the laid-back university community, Grinder cultivated an iconoclastic mystique, boasting that he had been a Green Beret. He collected a small, devoted group of followers, the most prominent of whom was Richard Bandler. Together they began using linguistics to study psychology. Even before it had a name, their work was controversial: some students referred to Grinder's class, in which Bandler taught, as Mindfucking 101. In March 1973, Bandler earned his bachelor's degree, and two years later a master's in theoretical psychology from Lone Mountain College in San Francisco.

First Bandler, then Grinder, had moved to a commune in the Santa Cruz Mountains owned by Robert Spitzer, who envisioned it as a self-sustained artistic and intellectual community. Among those who lived at the former nudist colony were Raven Lang, whose Birth Book had helped spawn a home birth movement; and Gregory Bateson, the British anthropologist who conceived the double-bind theory of schizophrenia.

A lean, wiry man with a goatee and piercing brown eyes, Bandler did not get along with many residents of the Alba Road community. He was intense and temperamental, one remembers, and did not participate in communal life. Within a few weeks of his arrival, members of the commune asked Spitzer to evict him. Spitzer refused.

While living on Alba Road, Bandler bragged about using large amounts of cocaine.

For Grinder and Bandler it was a fertile time. They sat for hours in the sun room of Bateson's house, listening to Bateson discuss his innovative ideas, which became the intellectual foundation of NLP. (As described by one student, Bateson taught that "[Human beings] create the world that we perceive ... because we select and edit the reality we see to conform to our beliefs about what sort of world we live in.") Working with films and tape recordings, Bandler and Grinder dissected the work of Satir and Perls, hoping to understand the techniques -- linguistic and nonverbal -- that caused seemingly magical changes in their clients. Through Bateson, they met and studied with Milton Erickson, the famed psychiatrist-hypnotist, and began using hypnosis to treat clients.

Bandler was only 25 when his first book, *The Structure of Magic*, was published in 1975. Written with Grinder, it attempted to codify and describe their analysis of Satir's and Perls's therapies. In separate introduction, Satir and Bateson expressed excitement about this research, for it seemed to hold potential for developing better therapists: if effective therapy, like all "magic," had discernible structure, then anyone could learn to perform it.

Bandler and Grinder's work rapidly generated interest within the humanistic psychology community, and they took NLP on the road. They were stimulating, irreverent, funny, and out-spokenly critical of traditional therapy, which they claimed was ineffective. They delighted in confusing audiences, in flouting convention. "Everything we're going to tell you here is a lie," they said. "All generalizations are lies." Therapists, Bandler insisted, are rewarded for failure; the longer a problem lasts, the more money a therapist makes. Although neither was a licensed therapist, they treated and discussed clients, with occasional disclaimers, much like experienced clinicians.

Grinder was more formal and polished; Bandler rapidly became known for his confusing, confrontational, sometimes frightening style of teaching and therapy, which alternated unpredictably with gentleness and caring. One therapist remembers thinking as she took notes: "Please, dear God, don't let him see that I'm here." But when a student was hit by a truck, Bandler, who barely knew the man, spent hours by his hospital bed. "His care ... made a lasting impression on me," the student later wrote. "He is a warm, considerate man."

Bandler said that he "came to the world of personal change from the world of mathematics and information science," and that he brought the analytical skills of those disciplines to psychology. He dazzled audiences with his agile mind and quick wit, his skill as a hypnotist and healer, his ability to guess people's thoughts from subtle physical signs -- muscle tension, eye movement, the dilation of pupils. To some, it seemed like magic. But to many therapists, NLP's simple, direct techniques seemed useful in their practices.

Although therapists, NLP practitioners were not interested in why; they asked how. It was not necessary, Bandler and Grinder said, to spend years "understanding the roots of the problem." Bandler and Grinder told the story of a woman who sought help for a fear of heights. Rather than probe for the origins of that fear, they asked her to approach the window of their third-floor office. Immediately she felt ill. What happened inside her head, they asked, to make her sick? When she was in high places, she responded, she imagined herself falling, and felt nauseated. They asked her to sing "The Star-spangled Banner" as she walked to the window. Thus distracted, she was no longer afraid, they claimed.

But NLP was never pure psychology so much as it was the study of communication, and by the late 1970s, Grinder and Bandler were marketing it as a business tool. They taught salespeople to establish rapport by subtly "mirroring" a customer's body language, by "pacing" his or her breathing and speech. They claimed that everyone has a dominant way of perceiving the world -- through seeing, hearing, or feeling -- that is reflected in language. If a customer said, "Do you see what I mean?" an NLP-trained salesperson might respond, "I get the picture" (rather than "That rings a bell," or "That feels good to me"). It was a corporate dream, a system for selling anything to anybody.

Bandler and Grinder also sought to map the creative processes of other disciplines. "We claim that if any human being can do anything, so can you," they said. Grinder told one writer he could teach the man to play chess like Karpov. It was Horatio Alger, with a New Age twist: Anyone could succeed, not with pluck and luck, but with NLP. Their modern-day chautauqua was profitable. In February 1979, 150 students paid \$1,000 apiece for a ten-day workshop at a beach-front condominium complex south of Santa Cruz. Bandler and Grinder gave up serious writing and allowed others to produce popular books from seminar transcripts, one of which, *Frogs Into Princes*, has sold more than 270,000 copies. According to court documents, Bandler's NLP business, Not, Ltd., made more than \$800,000 in 1980.

Despite its popularity, NLP had critics. Some questioned its long-term effectiveness, while others charged that it was a cynical and perhaps dangerous system of manipulation. Bandler and Grinder typically dismissed ethical questions with a disturbing sameness: a person can't avoid manipulating others, they insisted; with NLP training, at least he or she will be aware of -- and control -- the manipulation. To those who demanded scientific evidence, they offered another standard response: We are not scientists, and what we do is not science, so we do not have to offer proof. And besides, they added, it works.

Brains were his toys, Bandler liked to say. He compared human beings to cars and computers, spoke of "programming" them and "installing" beliefs. Bandler, who smokes, said he cured a client's smoking habit in less than 11 minutes, then instilled his own prejudice: "I told her to see an image of herself politely enjoying other people smoking. I wasn't willing to create another evangelist convert."

Bandler had overturned a fundamental notion of therapy -- that the client, not the therapist, chooses whether to change, and how. He believed NLP gave him the power to make others change. And he was not reluctant to use it. "I've never understood how changing someone and making them happier turns them into less of a human being," he said.

For the first time in his life, through NLP, Bandler found himself surrounded by students, friends, and acolytes. They hailed him as brilliant, praised him as a genius. It was at once exhilarating and terrifying.

Enchanted with his newfound wealth, Bandler and Leslie Cameron, whom he married in April 1978, purchased a home in the mountains and built a greenhouse, swimming pool, and tennis court. They also installed a laser lab and recording equipment for NLP experiments. They owned a Mercedes, two BMWs, a Fiat-Spider, and a house on Hawaii's Kona coast. Bandler also owned guns -- a Berretta .380 semi-automatic and a .38 revolver -- which was not unusual in rural Santa Cruz.

Yet, even as he taught NLP's rapid cures across the United States, Bandler was inexorably losing control of his life. In November 1980, his wife filed for divorce. A month later, she claimed in court documents and police interviews, Bandler had choked her, laughing and warning that he could kill her. According to allegations in police reports and court documents, he attacked her male friends and threatened to have several killed. "All I need to do is dial [seven] digits," another of her friends quoted Bandler as saying, "and with my connections with the Mafia, I could have you all wiped out, without even batting an eye."

At about the time Bandler's wife filed for divorce, he and Grinder stopped working together, for reasons neither man has ever discussed publicly. Bandler retreated to Hawaii. When he returned, his NLP business was bankrupt.

Into this emotional vacuum stepped James Mariano, the latest in a series of older men who shaped Bandler's life. They had become friends in 1980, when both frequented a popular Santa Cruz restaurant known for its views of the harbor and, unofficially, for the cocaine dealers who hung out at its bar. In court, Marino, 18 years Bandler's senior, would describe theirs as a father-son relationship, but in truth it was symbiotic: Bandler boasted about his street-smart "Sicilian buddy": Marino basked in the glow of Bandler's accomplishments.

In 1981, amid an acrimonious divorce, Bandler ran into a friend at a restaurant. They had not seen each other in ten years. She was stunned by his appearance: the ponytail and torn jeans of the early '70s had yielded to a stylish haircut, camel hair jacket, and silk tie. When his wife left him, the normally reticent Bandler confided, he was shattered. On the road, he said, he felt like "a trained elephant act." He also led her over to a stairwell, where he invited her to snort cocaine from a baggie. He had learned that coke, like NLP, could help win friends and influence people.

Bandler used prodigious amounts of the drug. Sitting at his computer, he would place a baggie of coke on one side, a glass of gin on the other. He sometimes inhaled the cocaine through his mouth with a drinking straw. He also drank heavily and gained weight. Once a thin man, Bandler, five-foot-nine, would weigh 218 pounds when arrested.

Friends marveled, with sadness and wonder, at Bandler's ability to function despite such extensive drug use. Few, apparently, tried to stop him. "You don't tell Richard that," said one colleague. "Richard is his own person." Although Bandler had long since abandoned the research that earned him prominence, he continued teaching NLP and working as a consultant. He commanded fees as high as \$4,000 a day.

Despite his success, Bandler never trusted the truth to provide the sense of importance he so deeply desired. Parallel to his real life grew a legend, one he cultivated assiduously; his life story became a blur of fact and fiction, obscured by cocaine and gin, distorted by an ideology that provided intellectual justification for reimagining the past. "If you got a bad [personal history] the first time around," he and Grinder wrote, "go back and make yourself a better one. Everybody really ought to have several histories."

Bandler told a vast array of tales about his personal and professional life. Although he has no Ph.D., he sometimes called himself Dr. Bandler, as did promoters. Similarly, he described himself as a computer programmer and as a musician; which he knew something of these disciplines, his only real career seems to have been teaching NLP. He told people that he was once a professional rock musician, that he owned a topless bar at 16 and was a millionaire at 18, that he had a black belt in karate. Having discussed pain control for the CIA and the army, he claimed, improbably, that his ideas were tested by plunging an ice pick through an agent's hand.

The most pervasive story Bandler told -- one he used to explain and justify his provocative, confrontational teaching style -- was of growing up on the mean streets of a nameless urban jungle. "If you confront some people, they will kill you -- even over a ham sandwich," he said. "I know that from where I grew up." He told an associate that many old friends had died violently. If so, he must have been very young when he encountered these dangers, since by 16 he was a somewhat reclusive boy in a middle-class suburb.

Bandler's deceptions ran deep. Through NLP he had learned to establish rapport by mirroring posture and imitating language; he took this idea further, matching history and identity to his companion's. With a writer, Bandler said he longed to retreat to Hawaii to write; with a scientist, he said he hated writing books; with a movie director, he claimed to be writing a screenplay. Like Woody Allen's Zelig, he was lost in a swirling vortex of imitation, deception, and manipulation. "I don't know where the man I knew still lives inside Richard Bandler," a college friend lamented. "The past 20 years he's been making himself more and more invisible."

A few of Bandler's closest friends knew about and forgave his storytelling. Others believed him, and passed along stories as illustrations of his character. Bandler once hinted that obscuring the past was somehow vital to his survival. "It is only your personal history," he told students, "by which others can use magic to control you."

The gun had appeared suddenly, magically, in the palm of Richard Bandler's hand. It was about three inches long, the color of tarnished brass. And Bandler was pointing it toward a psychiatrist who had volunteered for a demonstration.

On this Saturday morning in February 1984, Bandler wanted to illustrate a favorite theory -- that anyone can change, with the right stimulus. The psychiatrist was adamant. Nothing could spur him to change a certain aspect of his life. Except, he joked, "perhaps a small-caliber pistol."

For a moment, a smile flickered across Bandler's face. He took the gun out of his pocket. The audience, all advanced NLP students, knew about his confrontational style, and laughed. But, the psychiatrist said, the gun would only work if he knew Bandler was willing to use it.

"I've got news for you," Bandler taunted. "You've got no idea how nuts I am. How many people have one? In their pocket? Waiting for you? And you're going to tell me that I won't do it?" He laughed. "I don't have to kill you, I just have to wound you," he added. "... I've done weirder things to clients."

"I know you have," the psychiatrist responded, his voice soothing, compliant, now terrified. As Bandler toyed with the miniature gun, he boasted that he had once so thoroughly cured a man of acrophobia that the man had jumped off a bridge.

"You didn't know it was going to be real, did you?" Bandler mocked. "Now, somehow or other, you made it real. That's different than me making it real."

Finally the psychiatrist, shaken, surrendered. The change, he said, was possible. "Absolutely," Bandler responded, his excitement ebbing. "Otherwise I would have shot you by now." Again the audience laughed, apparently relieved that the incident was over, and Bandler proceeded to analyze the dynamics of the psychiatrist's terror.

As they strolled later among the redwoods, as they ate dinner, many of the 16 students debated Bandler's actions. A few thought he had finally gone too far. Other associates, however, say Bandler is not a violent man, that he only uses the threat of violence to improve people's lives. One went further, saying that Bandler had committed "the ultimately personal act" of drawing a weapon out of his "love ... for another human being."

In this case, it may have worked. Speaking to officers investigating Christensen's murder, the psychiatrist said that, in retrospect, he thought Bandler had helped him change.

Bandler owns a cigarette lighter that is a replica of a single-shot .22 caliber Derringer. But he has never said publicly what he aimed at the psychiatrist in 1984.

By 1986, Richard Bandler was a man divided, a man at war with his soul. He was living in a house built by James Marino, only a few hundred yards from where Corine Christensen would die. It was fortified like a security compound, with barred windows and skylights, an eight-foot-high fence, and a trained German shepherd. Every room had solid-core doors with deadbolts. Bandler used a voice stress analyzer (similar to a lie detector) on visitors, even friends. He owned a small arsenal. In addition to the .357 Magnum that killed Christensen and a .380 semiautomatic also involved in the murder, police seized seven pistols, two knives, and mace. Yet Bandler was also, by several accounts, a gentle, loving father figure to his girlfriend Paula McFarland's children.

By 1986, Richard Bandler's affections, too, were divided. He lived with Suzanne Cutter, a plump, sullen woman who kept his business affairs in order, and gave McFarland about \$1,300 a month for support. The women tolerated this arrangement, according to Bandler's testimony, although Bandler and Cutter sometimes fought bitterly about McFarland.

Bandler had by now discovered a tool more powerful than NLP for influencing others: the handgun. In September, six weeks before the murder, Bandler leveled a gun at a trusted female associate. At the time, he was still using large amounts of cocaine.

It is sadly ironic that, of the three people inside Corine Christensen's townhouse on November 3, 1986, she was the only one at least trying to confront her problems. At 31, she was a strong-willed and beautiful woman, who nevertheless suffered from a vague spiritual malaise and twin addictions -- to cocaine and James Marino. She recorded her spiritual meanderings in the small notebook that police found, stained with blood, on her table. She had sampled meditation and mysticism and studied self-help books. She had asked her neighbor, an NLP trainer, to explain NLP.

Yet, like Richard Bandler, whom she met through Marino, she lived a life of paradoxes -- working as a prostitute, managing an exclusive call-girl service, and helping Marino with his cocaine business even as she remained close to her large family; using up to a gram of cocaine a day but remaining fanatic about her health. To friends, her energy had once seemed limitless; by November, she showed the strain of too much cocaine and too many late nights roller-skating on the streets of Santa Cruz.

Christensen's friends did not understand her obsession with Marino, who was 22 years older and had been married at least three times. Still, he had an undeniable personal appeal that could not entirely be explained by his face-lift and boyish sense of humor, or the large amounts of cocaine he controlled. At 54, he was tall and lanky, a passably handsome man who used black dye on his drooping moustache and graying hair.

By the fall of 1986, Marino had tired of Christensen, and was preparing to move to Florida with another woman. But Christensen was not ready to let him go. On Saturday, October 25, she convinced him to escort her to a Halloween party, an annual event where lawyers and real estate brokers mingled easily with prostitutes and cocaine dealers. Soon after they arrived, Marino was attacked for no apparent reason by a muscular man who knocked out his front teeth, opened a wound beneath his right eye, and fractured his skull. Christensen rushed to help, then called a taxi and brought Marino to the emergency room. For three days, she nursed him in her home, feeding him protein drinks, vitamins, and chicken soup.

Marino's mind swirled with plots in which he was the victim; the beating fanned his deepest fears. He became obsessed with the notion that Christensen had arranged the beating. In his fevered imagination, she had reasons to do so -- she wanted to take over his cocaine business, she was jealous. Still suffering headaches and periods of dizziness, Marino left her townhouse and treated his ailments with codeine and alcohol.

A few days later, on Saturday, November 1, Marino was overcome by dizziness and pain while at a restaurant. He telephoned Bandler for assistance. Bandler knew nothing about the beating and was alarmed by his friend's condition. Marino's speech was slurred, his face badly bruised. Calm and compassionate, Bandler held Marino's hand as they drove into Santa Cruz. Embracing Marino's cause, he then began furiously making phone calls to find out "who beat up my best friend ... my only friend."

Bandler also met Christensen in the office behind his home and grilled her about the beating. "I need to ask you a simple question," he said in a conversation that he recorded. "Why is my friend hurt?" When she evaded his questions, he began to shout and curse, pressing for information. No more than eight hours before her death, he gave an ultimatum: "I'll give you two more questions," he said, "and then I'll blow your brains out."

When James Marino contacted police through an attorney on the afternoon of November 3, 1986, Corine Christensen had been dead for about seven hours. Sheriff's deputies found her lying on the carpeted floor of her dining area, her face caked with blood, one leg draped on a wooden chair. Her home had been ransacked.

His speech slurred, often babbling and scarcely coherent, Marino told investigators a strange tale, which he repeated several times in the ensuing days, then again at a preliminary hearing in April 1987 and at Bandler's trial in December. He had spent the previous night at Bandler's house, Marino said, because of his injuries. At dawn, Bandler had awakened him and played a tape recording of an argument. Although the tape was strangely garbled, Marino recognized Bandler and Christensen arguing. Bandler was agitated. He insisted they drive to her house.

Once inside, Marino said, Bandler pulled a pistol and held it to Marino's head. Threatening to kill everyone, Bandler screamed at Christensen, accusing her of blackmail. Soon he focused his anger entirely on Christensen. Using a steak knife, he tried to fashion a crude silencer by sawing the neck off a plastic soap bottle; soap dripped onto the gun barrel when he stuck it inside the bottle. He pulled a second gun, a chrome-plated revolver.

While Bandler yelled at Christensen in the dining area, Marino said, he searched for an escape, but found the second-floor windows and garage door locked. In frustration, Marino smashed a scale, which Christensen used to measure cocaine, on the floor of the garage. Dazed with pain, he slumped to the floor. Bandler found him in the garage and helped him to the couch, where he lay down and closed his eyes.

According to Marino's testimony, when he opened them, he watched Bandler pick up the revolver and aim it at Christensen. Again Marino shut his eyes. Within seconds he heard the gun explode, then looked up to see her falling backward onto the floor.

Bandler became placid, Marino said. After helping Marino to the car, he drove to a wharf at nearby Monterey Bay, where he ordered Marino to throw the revolver in the water. Marino tossed the gun into the bay.

Though initially skeptical, police discovered evidence corroborating some of Marino's story. Investigators found a mutilated bottle of lemon-scented Mr. Clean soft cleanser (the soap-bottle silencer) in Christensen's kitchen and a broken scale in the garage. Searching the home of Paula McFarland, they found a Beretta .380 semi-automatic that, officers testified, smelled of lemon. Bandler's T-shirt was stained with a lemon-scented substance, and his clothes were spattered with the victim's blood. And, three days after the murder, divers recovered a chrome-plated .357 Magnum revolver from the bay. Police also confiscated the cassette that contained Bandler's death threat against Christensen. The tape, recorded on a voice-activated machine, was barely intelligible.

Over the next few months, Marino was obsessed with the murder. He spent hours pacing a friend's law office, telling and retelling the story, its details changing like the wind. He was upstairs when Bandler shot Christensen; he was in the living room. His eyes were closed; they were open. He unburdened his soul, spilling his guts about every criminal he knew, except one -- James Marino. "It was," the attorney remembers, "as though he could get absolution for his own sins by confessing the sins of others."

Bandler's trial, which lasted nearly three months, ultimately hinged on a single question: could the jury believe James Marino beyond a reasonable doubt when he said that Bandler shot Christensen? At times he had changed his story whimsically, capriciously. Although he told people throughout Santa Cruz that he blamed Christensen for his beating, he denied this in court. His only explanation for Bandler's anger -- a supposed lesbian affair between Bandler's girlfriend and Christensen -- was implausible. His story did not explain how Christensen's house had been ransacked. It seemed too convenient that Marino shut his eyes before the shooting. And Marino's credibility was not enhanced by his claim under oath, that he could turn streetlights on and off with his mind.

Throughout Bandler's trial, dozens of his colleagues and friends, many of them fervently convinced of his innocence, traveled to Santa Cruz to watch the proceedings. Charged with murder, Bandler faced a maximum sentence of life in prison. The small courtroom was packed when he took the witness stand on the afternoon of Wednesday, January 13, 1988, a warm, brilliantly clear winter day. As he testified, Bandler sat very still, his shoulders square, both hands nervously cradling the microphone. It was the first time he had spoken publicly about Christensen's death. His story told in a boyish, apologetic tone, was the mirror image of James Marino's.

Marino, Bandler said, asked him to press Christensen for information about the beating. It was Marino who insisted they visit her that morning. It was Marino, Bandler testified, who went on a rampage and accused his former girlfriend of sleeping with his friends, stealing his drugs and money, and attempting to blackmail him. Marino was the one who tried to fashion a silencer from a soap bottle; they struggled over the bottle, Bandler said, and soap spilled on his shirt. Marino, searching for drugs and money, ransacked the house. Finally Bandler testified, James Marino rushed without warning into the dining area, stood between Bandler and Christensen, and fired a single shot into her face.

On the witness stand, Bandler's voice nearly cracked as he described how Christensen slumped forward over the round oak table, and how he supposedly stood and lifted her head. Choking, she spit blood onto his T-shirt and jeans; Bandler, shocked, let go, and she slid dying to the floor. Bandler then drove to Paula McFarland's house, he said, where he concealed his bloody clothes and cowboy boots in a closet. He spent the rest of the day there, snorting coke and drinking gin.

Bandler's story, like Marino's, left gaping holes. He did not call the police, he said, because Marino was a friend. He claimed he had not seen the .357 Magnum until Marino shot Christensen, but could not explain where his lanky friend had hidden a bulky revolver. Mr. Clean soft cleanser, an extremely viscous fluid, is unlikely to spill from an almost empty bottle in a brief struggle, as Bandler claimed it had. His contention that he lifted Christensen's head after the shooting seemed particularly suspect: although she bled profusely, there was no blood on the sleeves of his long-sleeved T-shirt, and he left no bloody fingerprints in her house or his car.

On the afternoon of January 28, 1988, after five hours of deliberation, a seven-man, five-woman jury voted unanimously to acquit Richard Wayne Bandler of murder in the death of Corine Christensen. Confronted by a paradox -- both stories were suspect, yet one man told the truth about the shooting -- the jurors voted not guilty. The prosecution, they said later, had not proved beyond a reasonable doubt that Bandler shot her. Although the jurors took pride in upholding the law, more than one remained haunted by the decision. At least two cried after leaving the courthouse. Someone, they knew, had gotten away with murder.

The next morning, the Santa Cruz Sentinel published a black-and-white photograph of Bandler beneath a banner headline: BANDLER NOT GUILTY. Bandler, a leather purse over his left shoulder, was shown walking diagonally down the steps of the courthouse. He was alone. For perhaps the first time in months, he was not surrounded in public by attorneys, relatives, friends, and colleagues. Not even his mother, who had watched almost every minute of the trial, was there.

And that of course was appropriate, for it is alone that Bandler must remember -- must remember that he threatened to blow Christensen's brains out hours before she died, must remember that, at the very least, he left her alone to die, then drowned his sorrows in gin and cocaine.

He may already have forgotten. Just as Bandler has often reimagined his past, he might have found it useful to re-create the events of November 3, 1986 -- for the truth has disturbing implications, whether he is innocent or guilty. Here too NLP offers solace: it is the "right and duty" of your unconscious mind, he and John Grinder once wrote, "to keep from your conscious mind anything that is unpleasant."

When Bandler awoke the morning after the acquittal, he found a sea of roses outside his house. Eleven dozen flowers covered the doorway, the lawn, and the two cars in the driveway. They were, said a colleague who had scattered them, the sign of a new beginning. Bandler moved to San Diego and continued his NLP work.

But Bandler, it seemed, had changed little. In February 1988, he was in Dallas for a workshop advertised as a weekend with "Dr. Richard Bandler." He was, as usual, unpredictable and provocative, mixing demonstrations of NLP with a rambling, funny monologue. One of his funniest stories was about a schizophrenic client who thought he was Jesus; Bandler cured the man, he said, by building a cross and threatening to crucify him. Later, in a bar, Bandler drank heavily, and told one story from his imagined career as a professional musician of a brutal 74-day concert tour.

A few weeks later, Bandler consented to talk with us in San Francisco, in his attorney's presence, with the stipulation that he would not discuss the murder. Although the threat of imprisonment is behind him, he still faces a civil lawsuit by Christensen's parents.

Then, in a later telephone interview, he blamed his fictional Ph.D. on promoters, even though he is repeatedly identified as "Dr. Bandler" in a book he published. Although his tale of a would-be Jesus bears a resemblance to one of Milton Erickson's inspired cures, Bandler insisted that he had indeed treated the man: he refused, however, to provide details. His career as a musician, he said, "was so long ago I don't have to tell you about it."

In the year since the trial, Bandler has crisscrossed the United States and traveled to Europe and Australia teaching NLP, commanding fees of \$2,5000 and more per day. Like many of his colleagues, he blames his involvement in Christensen's murder on James Marino. How does an experience like this change a person? he was asked. "Makes you a lot more careful. I'll tell you that," he replied. "You pick your friends a lot better."

One colleague foresaw another change. She thought that in the future Bandler would no longer need guns to help people. "Now he will use something else (to frighten people," she said. "I guarantee, what he'll use is, 'Maybe I did do it.'" And he'll laugh."