

Simply NLP: When What Used To Work Stops Working

Staying Able To Remap, Not Staying Positive

THE IDEA

There's an old idea from the early days of cybernetics, discovered almost by accident. A machine built in 1948 — the Homeostat — was designed to stay balanced. Gently disturb it, and it settled back down using its existing rules, the way you might steady yourself after a small stumble. But push it hard enough, past what those rules could handle, and it did something unexpected: instead of straining harder against the disturbance, it let its own internal wiring come apart and rebuild itself, until it found a new way to be steady.

The scientist who built it, W. Ross Ashby, gave this a name: ultrastability. Not staying the same no matter what — staying alive by being willing to change, at the root, when the old way genuinely stops working. That's a very different thing from simply holding on.

Source: W. Ross Ashby, 1948 — on systems that survive a changed climate

OPEN WITH

“Sanity isn't staying positive. It's staying able to remap.”

WHY THIS MATTERS

So much of what gets called strength is really just holding a position — gripping an old rule about yourself a little tighter, hoping it still applies. That works, for a while, for ordinary difficulty. It stops working the moment the actual ground has shifted — a

relationship, a season of life, a version of you that no longer fits the situation you're in.

The invitation here isn't to try harder at being okay. It's to notice when an old rule has quietly stopped serving you, and to let it come apart on purpose, rather than white-knuckling it until it breaks on its own.

A SMALL PRACTICE

Take a few unhurried minutes with this. There's nothing to get right.

1. NOTICE ONE RULE YOU'RE GRIPPING

- ☐ Something you keep telling yourself you should be able to do, feel, or handle — the way you always have.

2. ASK IF IT'S STILL TRUE

- ☐ Is this rule still serving the life you're actually in, or is it a leftover from a version of things that's already changed?

3. GIVE YOURSELF PERMISSION TO LET IT SOFTEN

- ☐ You don't need a replacement ready yet. You only need to stop gripping the old one so tightly.

4. LET THE NEXT STEP BE SMALL AND PROVISIONAL

- ☐ Whatever comes next doesn't need to be the new permanent answer. It just needs to be truer than the old rule, for now.

SIT WITH

- Where are you white-knuckling an old strategy through a situation it was never built for?
- What would it feel like to let an old rule about yourself actually break, instead of coping around it?
- If your nervous system had permission to rewire, what's the first rule it would drop?

LINEAGE



This idea comes from the same cybernetics research (the Macy Conferences, 1946–1953) that shaped much of modern NLP's thinking about change — read here in plain language, without the machinery.