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that appeared in volume 4 of*

NLP world

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Richard Bolstad

William James: Father of Psychology, Grandfather of NLP

William who?

One hundred years ago, an American professor distinguished three types of imagination (visual, auditory, and motor) and noted that people often have an unconscious preference for one of them. He pointed out that visualizing involves eye movements upward and outward, and amassed a large collection of relevant questions about what a person visualizes—questions about what are now called “sub-modalities” in NLP. He studied hypnosis and the art of suggestion, and described how people store their memories in a “time line”. He wrote a volume called *A Pluralist Universe* advocating the notion that no one model of the world is “real”, and another called *The Varieties of Religious Experience* in which he attempted to describe and evaluate inner spiritual experiences that had previously been considered beyond human assessment (cf the article by Lucas Derks and Jaap Hollander on the spiritual panorama, in *NLPW* 3:ii, which was dedicated to William James).

William James (1842–1910) was a philosopher and psychologist, and a professor at Harvard University. His book *The Principles of Psychology*, a two-volume text written in 1890, has earned him the title “The Father of Psychology”. In NLP terms, William James is a man worth modelling. In this article I want to consider how much this precursor of NLP discovered, and perhaps more important, how he did it and to ask what else is there in his work for us to discover. It’s my belief that James’s most important discovery has never been recognized by the psychological community.

The “adorable genius”

William James was born in a well-to-do New York household, where in his youth he met with such literary notables as Thoreau, Emerson,