

The Mystery of the Chance Discovery Was It An Awakening Experience?

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*“Individual stories matter, even to research.
Find a way to get your story out there.”*

Francine Shapiro

Francine Shapiro, the developer of Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR) therapy, is a figure whose life and work blend science with a hint of the mystical.

Her groundbreaking discovery of EMDR, famously referred to as the "walk in the park," is often described as a chance observation. But could it also have been a spiritual awakening?

Shapiro's journey, marked by personal trauma, deep introspection, and a quest for understanding the mind-body connection, raises intriguing questions about the nature of her discovery and its deeper implications. When she was 17, Francine's life was deeply affected by the death of her 9 years old sister, Debra. This early encounter with loss had a profound impact on her, fostering a sensitivity to grief and trauma that would later become central to her professional work (Warren, 2019).

Francine's journey took another turn in 1979 when, having completed all but her dissertation in English literature, she was diagnosed with breast cancer. This was a turning point in Francine's personal life as well as the seed from which, 10 years later, EMDR would be born.

In an interview with Joany Spierings from the Dutch EMDR Association, when asked, "How did you discover EMDR?" Francine answered:

“It started 10 years before the actual discovery, when I got cancer. And that changed my concentration from the work I was doing for a Ph.D. in English literature and put the concentration on mind and body. Because the whole area of psycho-immuno-neurology was just beginning to arise. And we were beginning to be aware of the interaction between stress and different disease processes. It seemed very intriguing to me that we were able as a society to be so technologically advanced that we could put a man on the moon, but we still weren't aware of how to deal with mind and body issues. So it attracted my attention. So I started to use my mind and my body as a laboratory to explore these different interventions and different techniques.” (Spierings, 2009).

Following her cancer diagnosis, Shapiro took these words to heart. She recalled the impact of her doctor's blunt words when he announced that she was cancer-free:

“Your cancer is gone, but x percent get it back. We don't know who and we don't know how. So, good luck!” (Warren, 2019).

Deciding to leave her life in New York behind, she sold her possessions, bought a Volkswagen camper, and embarked on a journey of self-discovery across the United States. This quest led Shapiro to a period of deep introspection, much of which took place in the solitude of the desert.

As noted by Jen Savage in the “Notice That” Podcast episode “*Remembering Francine Shapiro*,” this period was marked by profound spiritual reflection. Savage reflects on the image of Shapiro in the desert, describing it as a spiritual moment filled with personal growth: “*What a spiritual moment and a spiritual growth—studying and introspecting in the desert and across the world*” (Savage & Benintendi, 2019). This time of solitude and self-reflection allowed Shapiro to

connect deeply with her inner self and the world around her, setting the stage for her transformative discovery.

Based on the work and research conducted by psychologist Steve Taylor from Leeds Beckett University, on the phenomena of spiritual awakenings, in his book, *"Extraordinary Awakenings: When Trauma Leads to Transformation,"* Taylor states that an awakening experience is typically characterized by profound psychological and spiritual shifts that occur following intense trauma or adversity. These experiences often lead to significant lifestyle changes, such as new interests, new relationships and a new career. Speaking of the peak experience, Abraham Maslow wrote that 'My feeling is that if it were never to happen again, the power of the experience would permanently affect the attitude toward life' (Maslow, 1994, p.75). And this certainly applies to awakening experiences too.

One of the core elements Taylor describes is a radical transformation following significant trauma or adversity. For Francine Shapiro, her breast cancer diagnosis in 1979 was a pivotal moment. This life-threatening illness prompted a deep re-evaluation of her life's direction and purpose. Rather than succumbing to despair, Shapiro embarked on a journey of healing and self-discovery, which eventually led to the development of EMDR therapy.

In May 1987, while walking in a park, Shapiro experienced what could be described as a moment of heightened awareness. She noticed that some disturbing thoughts she had were suddenly disappearing. As she later explained in the interview with Joany Spierings, this experience was completely unexpected: "I hadn't done anything deliberately. But suddenly I noticed that the thought shifted from my consciousness and when I brought it back it didn't have the same disturbance." (Spierings, 2009).

What caught Shapiro's attention was not just the disappearance of the thoughts but the realization that her eyes were moving rapidly back and forth in an upward diagonal when the thoughts disappeared. Intrigued by this phenomenon, she began to experiment with deliberately moving her eyes in the same way while concentrating on other disturbing thoughts and memories. To her astonishment, these thoughts also lost their emotional charge.

The experience seemed almost mystical, raising the question: was this merely a scientific discovery, or was it also a moment of spiritual awakening? Shapiro's heightened awareness of her thoughts and her body's responses suggests an intuitive understanding of a natural healing mechanism that had not been previously recognized. Later, this would be named the "adaptive information processing system," which is at the core of EMDR therapy.

This observation of the mind-body connection, where she became acutely aware of her thoughts and bodily reactions, mirrors Taylor's idea of heightened awareness that often accompanies awakening experiences. This moment of insight was not just about physical movement but an awareness of an underlying mechanism of emotional regulation, which is characteristic of the deeper awareness Taylor discusses. He also mentions that often awakening experience happen when a person is in natural surroundings. "Natural scenery may have a similar effect to meditation, in providing a focus for a person's mind, and a retreat from being busy and bombarded with stimuli. This may lead to a similar build up of mental energy and also the same de-automatisation of perception. The most important factor seems to be quietening of associational mental chatter, which normally expends a great deal of mental energy." Taylor notes.

After her initial observation, Shapiro didn't dismiss the experience as a random occurrence. Instead, she viewed it as a potentially significant discovery, indicative of a broader, natural phenomenon that could help others. As discussed in the "Notice That" Podcast, the spontaneous,

clear move from “I feel better” to “I’m going to research this as a natural phenomenon” seems to be an “intuitive leap almost astronomical and on a spiritual level” (Benintendi, 2019).

This shift in perspective—from simply coping with her own distress to recognizing a new therapeutic technique—reflects Taylor’s notion of a transformative shift in understanding. She moved from a personal struggle to a broader, more inclusive perspective focused on collective healing. Shapiro’s ability to intuitively grasp the significance of her observation—understanding that eye movements could alleviate emotional distress—demonstrates the increased intuition and insight that Taylor describes. This intuitive understanding went beyond conventional scientific thinking at the time and was a leap into a new therapeutic approach, reflecting a deeper spiritual and psychological insight into human consciousness and healing.

Despite the scientific rigor she applied to her work, Shapiro remained open to the spiritual dimensions of her discovery. As she continued to develop EMDR, she added various components and procedures to enhance its effectiveness, relying on both empirical data and intuitive insights. When Joany Spierings asked her how did she discern between what was effective or not in further developing the approach, Francine answered with a rock-solid conviction: “There was an expectation of seeing a change and if it didn’t happen, I would do something that would allow it. The expectation was that it would work with everyone.” Her approach reflects a synthesis of science and spirituality, where rigorous experimentation was guided by a deep awareness of the human mind and spirit.

Francine Shapiro’s life was one of continual exploration, both outward in the world and inward in the mind. Her chance discovery of EMDR, while seemingly a product of scientific inquiry, also carries the hallmarks of a spiritual awakening. Her ability to recognize the potential of a spontaneous event and transform it into a therapeutic technique that has helped millions worldwide suggests a profound level of spiritual insight.

Despite a second cancer diagnosis, Shapiro continued to travel and teach, sharing her discoveries with the world until shortly before her death in 2019 at the age of 71 (Warren, 2019). The first paragraph of Francine Shapiro’s obituary in *The Guardian*, written by Penny Warren, captures this essence: “Francine Shapiro summed up her life’s work with William Blake’s line: ‘*For the eye altering alters all*’” (Warren, 2019).

The development and global dissemination of EMDR therapy have had a lasting impact on the field of mental health, touching millions of lives worldwide. This enduring legacy aligns with Taylor’s observation that awakening experiences often result in profound contributions that extend beyond the individual, influencing broader societal or cultural practices.

In her interview, the Dutch psychologist Joany Spierings asked Francine, “I think you have changed the lives of therapists and also of millions of clients all over the world. How does that make you feel when you realize that?” Francine responded, “*It is the same as it was at the beginning—that it’s wonderful in terms of what it can do. And there is also the pain of how much more there is to do*” (Spierings, 2009).

Francine Shapiro’s life and work embody many of the characteristics of an awakening experience as outlined by Steve Taylor in “Extraordinary Awakenings.” Her transformation following trauma, heightened awareness, shift in perspective, increased compassion, profound professional transformation, intuitive insights, integration of new paradigms, and lasting impact all suggest that her journey could indeed be seen as an awakening experience. This convergence of personal healing and professional innovation reflects the profound potential for growth and transformation that often arises from life’s deepest challenges.

The mystery of Francine Shapiro’s chance discovery of EMDR remains a compelling narrative that blurs the lines between science and spirituality. Was this discovery merely a stroke of scientific luck, or was it a moment of spiritual awakening? Shapiro’s own words, quoting

William Blake, perhaps offer the best insight into her perspective: “For the eye altering alters all.” Her journey reminds us that sometimes, it is through the simplest of observations and the quietest of moments that the most profound transformations occur.

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