

BOOK REVIEW

The Beginner's Mind The Complete Works of Milton H. Erickson Volume 9 – The February Man

Review by Richard Hill MA, MEd, MBMSc, DPC

Each day, we look into the face of time to discover *when* we are. We see it in the mirror, we feel it in our bodies, and we sense it in our minds. Our progress along the timeline of life seems self-evident...perhaps. In 1945, Miss S met with Erickson over four lengthy sessions in a time shifting set of "Februarys" that spanned from her early childhood to the present. In dealing with a troublesome water phobia, Erickson utilized time regression with hypnosis to find the hidden memories of the past "...to facilitate the creation of a new identity and consciousness in patients who had experienced several levels of deprivation in their early life experience." (p. xxvi) For its time, this was, as Rossi describes it, "...a significant step beyond all previous forms of therapy." (p. xxvi)

Miss S was a nurse who agreed to be the subject for an informal demonstration of the technique for a small group of professional colleagues. The sessions were recorded by a stenographer, Miss Cameron, who then typed up a formal document. This remained "...quietly in Erickson's files for about 30 years, until he gave it to me [Rossi] for private study when I began working with him in the early 1970s." (p. xxi) Rossi's meticulous work resulted in 15 hours of recordings of Erickson and Rossi discussing the case. This book is the finely detailed combination of the case transcript and sections of the commentaries, which provides a deep exploration into the techniques and technicalities of the "February Man" experiences. Anyone involved in psychotherapy and therapeutic hypnosis will be richer for reading this volume. In my humble opinion, it is a must read. In fact, of the 16 Erickson volumes, Volume 9 was my first choice to read, and in many ways it provided a foundation for all 16 volumes.

At the beginning of the transcript of the first session we see how Erickson prepares Miss S for therapeutic trance by triggering the "...typical five stages of the microdynamics of trance and suggestion..." (p. 4) These stages are: 1.) Focus of attention; 2.) depotentiation of habitual mental states; 3.) activation of creative inner searches; 4.) activation of unconscious processes; and 5.) readiness for a creative hypnotic response.

Throughout the book, each process is foreshadowed with a clear heading, from the creation of "The Microdynamics of Trance Induction," (p. 3) to "Reframing, Implication, and Therapeutic Analogues," (p. 105) and "Facilitating Human Potential by Inner Rehearsal." (p. 217) Hundreds of these headings foreshadow the technique utilized and also show the reader the intellectual and intuitive depth of Erickson. He never forces or overtly directs Miss S in her process, but is always the facilitator, with the necessary skill and confidence to be client-responsive.

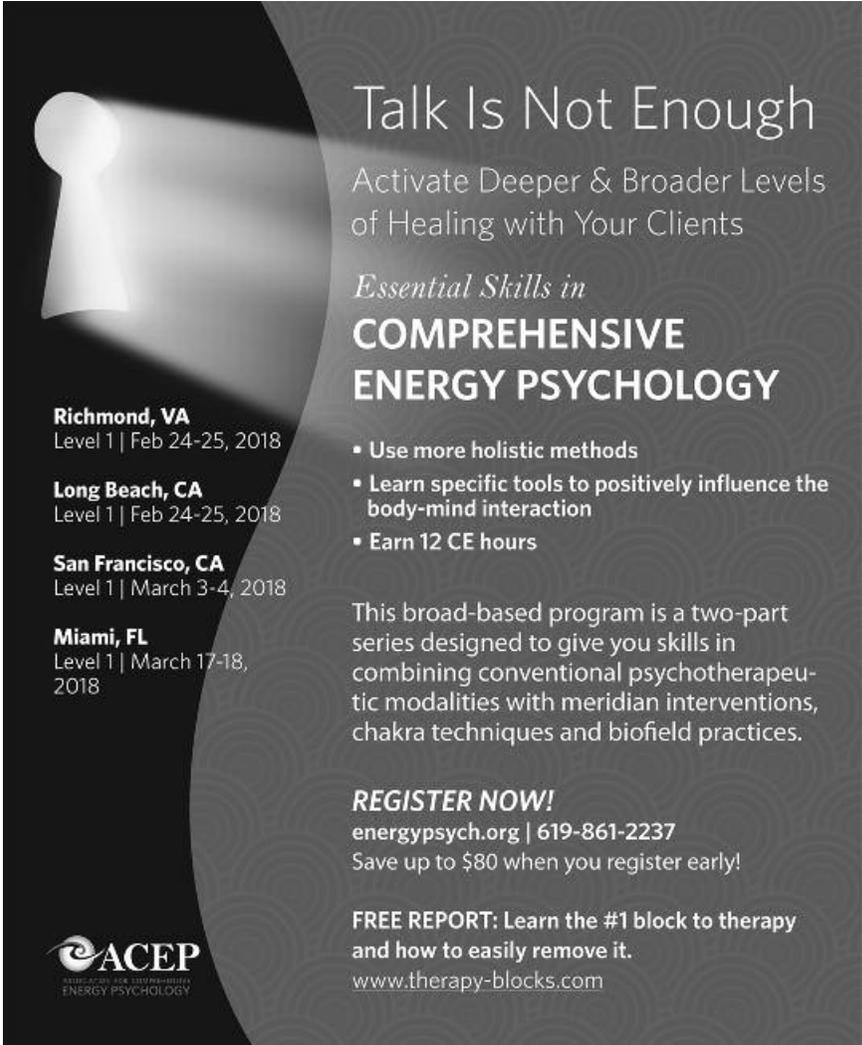
We see Erickson carefully set up the "...identity and creation of the February Man" (pp. 31-50), and are given insight into the process through Rossi's commentary and questions to Erickson. What seems like simple conversations with Miss S are actually highly complex and skillful exchanges. The second visit of the February Man (p. 51) is when the therapeutic journey really gets underway. Rossi reminds us that the February Man was not created from the therapist's direction, but by "...the subject who decided the visits would be in February and thus it was the client who gave Erickson the February man identity." (p.52)

In the first session, Miss S has eight "visits" with the February Man, spanning years and memories in the momentary shift from one visit to the next. In the second session, Miss S returns to the time of her trauma, when she was around 6 years old, and together with Erickson she discovers the events that created her inner disintegration. We then witness Erickson facilitating ways for Miss S to safely bring memories into consciousness to help her repair the trauma that had manifested as a seemingly simple phobia of water.

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Reframing her memory and how she was affected by it was not an easy process, and it continued over several months. How Erickson facilitated this is the most fascinating part of the "story." It almost reads like a novel, as we follow the lead character as she discovers her own healing, and subsequently, her return to well-being. However, in the end, her lack of amazement and positive appreciation toward Erickson is a salutary lesson for all therapists. Erickson explains that the less impressed the client is with the outcome, the more natural and self-resolved they are. The resolution has become "...part of who [they] are." (p.245) The therapist's reward is the client feeling truly engaged and connected to the changes. This is an indication that the therapist has successfully returned to the client the "...burden of responsibility for therapeutic results..." (Vol 3, p.71)

This interesting, wonderful volume follows Miss S as she first creates the February Man, to then being so completely comfortable about the resolution of the phobia that it felt natural, and rather unremarkable. Reading this volume is likely to produce change and growth, which readers also may hardly notice, because it is equally natural and seemingly unremarkable.



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