That's Right, Is It Not?

A play about the life of MILTON H. ERICKSON, MD

by Rubin Battino
That's right, is it not? A play about the life of Milton H. Erickson, M.D. / Rubin Battino — 1st ed.

Includes bibliographic references.
I. Battino, Rubin. II. Title.

Library of Congress Control Number: 2007933392
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Published by
The Milton H. Erickson Foundation Press
3606 North 24th street
Phoenix, AZ 85016

Manufactured in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2
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Foreword

Rubin Battino is a treasured friend, a keen clinician, an extraordinary teacher and a respected pillar of knowledge in the clinical approaches of our late father, Milton H. Erickson, M.D. Battino again demonstrates his enormous talents with this play about Erickson. He intertwines a biography with clinical work which, in itself, is a metaphor for how Erickson lived and worked.

Major interest in Erickson’s work began in the 1950’s and 60’s. He was presenting teaching workshops, and other professionals began to write and speak about his work. This interest has continued to intensify and grow. After his death in 1980, attention continued with a sustained and steady growth of study and awareness around the world. Many of those who studied under our father said they had learned a depth, a way of understanding and a methodology from Erickson that was unique and effective. These many students, from a variety of cultures, countries and backgrounds, sought to preserve and explain this exceptional work so that others could also learn from Erickson’s innovative approaches, perspectives and techniques. Over time, many of the students who had learned directly from Erickson established their own approaches and devised their own combination of his work with approaches and information from other inspirational sources. Some re-named these blends, which are now used extensively in modern psychotherapy. Most acknowledge Erickson for his major influence on their thinking and philosophy as well as on the face of modern psychotherapy, and offer due credit to their mentor. A significant number of practitioners refer to their work as “Ericksonian.” The Erickson Foundation and the worldwide network of 120 affiliated Milton H. Erickson Institutes where psychotherapy and teaching is done in a form congruent with Erickson’s philosophy bear witness to the enormity of his contribution.

Now we are entering a different period. There are many more professionals who have learned under students of Erickson than there are who studied under Erickson directly. These second and even third and fourth generations of Ericksonians have continued to build, to adapt, and to contribute to the flexible and constructive concepts pioneered by Erickson. While that growth has occurred, some, like Battino, have
stood “in the wings,” watching, appreciating, and recognizing where further educational work should be offered. Battino has dedicated himself to collecting, organizing, and synthesizing many of the ideas associated with Erickson. With a colleague, Thomas L. South, he authored a comprehensive manual, *Ericksonian Approaches*, to bring continuity and clarity to the nebulous mass of materials being taught to therapists new to these approaches. We, and a multitude of other professionals, were deeply gratified by this. It brought much needed consistency to the teaching of Erickson’s methodology.

Battino has been active every step of the way as Ericksonian Hypnosis and Psychotherapy has progressed. He is a Professor Emeritus of Chemistry as well as president of the Milton H. Erickson Society of Dayton, Ohio. A respected therapist, as well as a teacher of hypnosis, he has responded to calls from local and international venues, with teaching, workshops, and publishing. His play, *Meaning*, gives an elegant portrayal of Viktor Frankl though minimalism. This play, *That’s Right, Is It Not?* is more extensive, yet it brings the same elegance to the same complex intertwining of a man’s life and philosophy.

Much of the work about Erickson has come together like a flock of wild snow geese. Amidst the clamor, the flurry, and the noisy conglomerate of individuals beckoning from afar to outliers and distant friends, there is an eventual gathering. A fluctuating throng settles down into resting grounds. The air is rich with the music of communicative murmuring; there is a hum punctuated by expressive announcements of individuality.

At dawn, it all changes. Anyone who has witnessed the remarkable take-off of snow geese in the morning will give testimony to the abrupt transformation of crowded chaos into an incredible orchestra of winged harmony. Within minutes, leadership is recognized and all are aligned in V-formation, en-route to destinations that glimmer in the imagination.

Congratulations, Rubin, on this play.

Betty Alice Erickson
Roxanna Erickson Klein
Dallas, Texas
August 2007
Betty Alice: I was told that the previous semester he had approached the teacher and said, "Miss Johnson, what would you do if I slammed you?" Apparently she gave him the wrong answer because he slammed her across the room and put her in the hospital. I thought to myself, "I wonder when that poor kid will tangle with me." I am five-feet-two inches and weigh 102 pounds. Well, I didn't have long to wait.

Rosen: What happened?

Betty Alice: In the classroom I told him to sit down, and he said, "No." Here was this great big giant with a nasty smile on his face. So, I put a wondering look on my face and opened my big blue eyes widely.

Student: Do you know I put Miss Johnson in the hospital last semester?

Erickson: She took two quick steps toward him and snarled ...

Betty Alice: I'm telling you to sit down. Touch me, and so help me God, I'll kill you.

Erickson: [Laughing] He had never heard such a loud snarl from such a little kitten.

Betty Alice: You know, Daddy, as he was sitting down, there was this wondering look on his face. I had put him down and he knew he wouldn't dare let any other kid harass me. He ended up being my constant protector.

Erickson: That was so beautiful. She was very beautiful. The unexpected always helps. You never do what's expected.

Roxie and Back Door Thinking

Narrator: Erickson is writing at his desk when ten-year-old Roxie walks in. Rosen is observing.

12 Roxanna Erickson-Klein ("Roxie")
Erickson: Yes?

Roxie: I failed the reading test at school today.

Erickson: What was the last book you read?

Roxie: It was *Lost Horizon*. I also read about ten of Ray Bradbury’s science fiction books.

Erickson: That’s quite a few. Why are you so tearful?

Roxie: Well, I really didn’t fail.

Erickson: Okay.

Roxie: I just didn’t get a score high enough to take the Spanish classes that they are going to start teaching.

Erickson: What are you doing to help you learn Spanish?

Roxie: I listen to the Spanish radio a lot. And, I visit with Willy’s mom—she doesn’t speak English.

Erickson: What about Mexicans at school?

Roxie: Most of them live too far away to go over to their houses. They hang around in a group. And, at lunch-time they all work in the cafeteria for the free lunch program. I try to be friendly, but there is not much opportunity.

Erickson: Get a job in the cafeteria.

Roxie: Hmm—that’s a good idea. I wonder if they’ll take me. [She leaves]

Rosen: I don’t understand what you just did. She was crying about the reading score, and you never talked to her about that.

Erickson: That wasn’t the problem. You see, she had fallen short of her own goal, which was to learn to speak Spanish.
Rosen: What about getting permission for her to take the class if she is so motivated? Or even take the reading test over again?

Erickson: She’ll learn more if she struggles to find opportunities to learn; to put herself in settings where she can hear the spoken language; and to make herself fit in.

Narrator: Rosen and Roxie are talking ten years later.

Roxie: Dr. Rosen, that was me ten years ago.

Rosen: Tell me what happened next.

Roxie: It worked out just great. The front door was closed by that test, so I just went in the back door.

Rosen: You went in the back door?

Roxie: Yes. They gave me a job in the cafeteria. The Mexicans all ate lunch together, and spoke Spanish the whole time. I couldn’t understand them, but they got used to me—even joked around with me. When I got to high school I took four years of high school Spanish. And, later, I traveled a lot in Mexico.

Rosen: Do you still speak Spanish?

Roxie: Oh, yes. I look for jobs that let me speak it.

Rosen: I guess you can learn a lot when the front door is closed.

Roxie: Our house had lots of doors.
Zeig: Conscious—he was designing what he was doing.

Battino: I recall an interview with Isaac Bashevis Singer, the famous author, bemoaning modern novelists who would devote a tremendous amount of time in their novels to being inside people’s minds and telling you what they were thinking, etc., and he said, “Well, you know, I’m a storyteller. I tell a story and then let the story be the vehicle, rather than giving the answers via some analytical thing going on in someone’s mind. People have stories, let the story do it.”

Zeig: Yes.

Battino: We’re coming down to the end here, do you have any last ideas, thoughts, comments, you’d like to make?

Zeig: No, I think this is a great project that you are doing. You know, it is a really daunting project to encapsulate someone that big. It is great that you are doing it. I look forward to seeing what you come up with.

Battino: Thank you.

End of Scene 37

Scene 38: Betty Alice and Roxanna Remember Their Father — 2003

Title Board: Betty Alice and Roxanna Remember Their Father - 2003 (7 min)
Betty Alice Erickson, Roxanna Erickson Klein, Rubin Battino

Visuals: Family Photos

Rubin: I was hoping that the two of you could tell me a little of what it was like growing up with Erickson as a father—how it has influenced you and your siblings.
**Roxanna:** Both Mom and Dad played a really significant role in directing us to be future-oriented while still attending to and enjoying everyday life.

**Betty Alice:** The way they lived, the modeling of their life philosophy, the way they enjoyed and took pride in their work while they adhered to their personal standards, and their commitment to enhance their professional field was pervasive in ways that I don’t think we even recognize consciously.

**Roxanna:** Once I asked Mom why we kept our subscription to Scientific American magazine when the articles were so difficult to read that we all skimmed them instead of trying to understand the content. Dad replied that even if it merely sat on the magazine table, we would absorb something just from its presence. If we read it, or looked at the pictures, all the better.

**Betty Alice:** I remember looking at the pictures, even when I didn’t read it.

**Roxanna:** So do I! Now, I totally agree that Scientific American set a standard for quality of work.

**Rubin:** So you feel you were influenced not only by what your parents taught you overtly, but also by the “ambiance,” the atmosphere of the house.

**Betty Alice:** Yes. It was amazing how much was communicated on so many levels. I know most of us read the encyclopedia for fun which is, in retrospect, rather astonishing. We all still read a lot, and we
read a lot of varied material. I think most of the grandchildren also read a lot.

**Roxanna:** In a school survey when I was in fifth grade, I reported that there were a thousand books in my home. The teachers simply didn’t believe me. In fact, I was reprimanded and sent back home to recount the books.

**Betty Alice:** We learned a couple of other things from the ambiance that are very important. We learned curiosity and humor. We learned about Dad’s psychotherapy. And, we learned how to “stop and smell the roses.”

**Roxanna:** One of the things I took from the undercurrents at home was the integration of smelling the roses and keeping my eye on the future. Our brother Bert, who is in his mid-seventies, still has his “retirement projects” set aside for when he gets old! I was thrilled to discover that one of those projects is to place all the cartoons he’s been saving over the years into a scrapbook. That goal is also one of mine! Looking into the future, and enjoying the moments that carry me toward the future I want, are really important in my life.

**Betty Alice:** These very simple qualities—humor, curiosity, enjoying the present while keeping your eye on a prize, so to speak—are foundations for a rich life. Curiosity, for example, was cultivated all the time at home. Dad would toss out questions all the time just to make us think and explore. He asked a lot of riddles. He would ask questions like, “Which side of the street do the flowers bloom on first?” Also, he loved interesting items—artifacts, folk art, and odd things—and knew their history. When he could puzzle someone with what something was, he was always delighted!

**Roxanna:** For example, he had a multitude of really odd and interesting items. There was a piece of molten aluminum from a plane crash mounted in a frame. It looked as though it was a piece of modern art. He had three stones that had been polished by tumbling about in a dinosaur gizzard. He even had a piece of petrified dinosaur bone in the same bowl as a clue. Even so, very few people could
ever figure out what the stones were. His foam rubber piece of
“granite” has been written about in articles and books. He even had
an ugly dried skate fish that had been slightly modified to look like
the devil himself. He used these things with his students, his fam-
ily, and anyone who ventured into his presence.

**Betty Alice:** One of my favorites was how he occasionally began his
teaching sessions in the little house adjacent to the main house that
served as his office and our guest house: “How do you place ten
items in five rows of four each?” Then he would tell the students,
“You saw it when you came in but you didn’t see it.” There was a
cactus garden at the door—ten cacti planted in the shape of a five-
pointed star. This also allowed him to show people that they didn’t
really observe what was around them, and that you can’t enjoy the
moment if you don’t notice it.

**Rubin:** How do you feel Erickson’s
legacy has been carried on by the
family?

**Roxanna:** I think we all learned a
great deal about living productive
lives with joy and responsibility.
So, many of us attempt to better
the world, for example, through
service professions and various
types of volunteering. This posi-
tive energy is obvious not only in
our generation but even in the
next. We are a large family—there
are eight children, and more than
90 grand and great-grandchildren.

**Betty Alice:** I carry on Daddy’s legacy in many ways. However, the
more I work with my clients and the more I teach, the more I un-
derstand that no one person can “carry on his legacy.”

**Roxanna:** I, too, am doing work to promote a broader and better un-
derstanding of Dad’s work. This is both in my direct patient care; my perspectives with the administration of the agency at which I work; and with my dedication to the Erickson Foundation; the various Institutes; and even to particular students.

**Betty Alice:** Although I really enjoy my clients, I also enjoy the teaching that I do. It’s given me a broader understanding of just how important the Institutes and so many dedicated and interested people are to the future of Ericksonian Hypnosis and Psychotherapy. It’s truly astonishing and humbling to realize that in the middle of Siberia, in the Ukraine, in so many far-flung and economically disadvantaged parts of the world, Ericksonian Hypnosis and Psychotherapy is making a mark. My special interest is contributing by reaching out to these impoverished areas and finding a way to bring a workshop to them. Many of these workshops are totally gratis; sometimes I even donate my plane fare. But the experience of bringing knowledge to eager professionals is so gratifying. Seeing the world is an added benefit.

**Roxanna:** We are totally appreciative of all the dedicated people who have helped bring Dad’s words and ideas to others around the world. We often think about Jeffrey Zeig’s many publications and spearheading the Foundation and Institute movement, and of Ernie Rossi who dedicated years of his life to publishing Dad’s collected papers. Also, of course, Jay Haley who really began it all with his book, “Uncommon Therapy (1973),” followed by numerous other works by Jay. They have been the major contributors.

**Betty Alice:** I agree totally. Countless others have made significant contributions through publications, through teaching, or both. We just can’t name them all!

**Roxanna:** Now we are seeing a new generation of therapists and teachers who didn’t study under Dad, directly, but who learned from his followers.

**Betty Alice:** Now we’re into the third generation, really. To me, that is the genius of Dad’s work. So many years later, he and his work are
still relevant.

Roxanna: You know, Rubin, you are one of the people to whom we are indebted. You have done a lot, especially in the area of formulating and publishing a formal, systematic approach to Dad’s work.

Rubin: I thank you. It’s been a pleasure to me to do this.

Betty Alice: No, Rubin. You are the one who has earned the thanks. And those thanks are from us, and from all who have benefitted.

End of Scene 38

Scene 39. Mrs. Elizabeth Moore Erickson’s Story

Title Board: Mrs. Elizabeth Moore Erickson’s Story (6 min)
Mrs. Elizabeth Moore Erickson; Marilia Baker

Visuals: Photos of Mrs. Erickson and Milton H. Erickson, M.D.

Marilia Baker: Good afternoon. It is so kind of you to agree to talk with me about your life, and that of your husband.

Mrs. Elizabeth Moore Erickson: It is my pleasure. And let me thank you for your interest in our story.

Marilia Baker: Most of us know a great deal about your husband—Milton H. Erickson. We don’t know too much about you. Yet, you were together for 16,000 days. This is awesome.

Mrs. Erickson: Those days were full of so much life.

Marilia Baker: And love?

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67 Based on materials in A Tribute to Elizabeth Moore Erickson. Colleague Extraordinaire, Wife, Mother, and Companion by Marilia Baker (2004). This scene is written with special appreciation to interviews with Mrs. Erickson by Marilia Baker.
Betty Alice: We'll give it a try

Roxanna: That's a pretty complicated question. Can we break it down into parts?

Rubin: Let's start with your professional lives.

Betty Alice: I am a licensed psychotherapist; however, I came late to the field because I was a teacher for many years, mostly special education for troubled adolescents. Currently I conduct a lot of workshops, which allows me to fulfill the love of teaching that I still have.

Roxanna: I'm a Registered Nurse and I work part time for a nonprofit hospice organization that provides home visits to terminally ill patients.

Rubin: Are any of your other siblings also in health care?

Roxanna: We have our share of health professionals in the family, both in this generation and the next.

Betty Alice: No one has gone into psychiatry. Kristi, and Juliette who is my brother Allan's daughter, are the only physicians. Interestingly, there are several health professionals among the in-laws.

Roxanna: Neither Mom nor Dad pushed us to enter into health care. Rather they both strongly encouraged us to find a profession that we loved.

Betty Alice: Consequently, there is a lot of diversity in our professional lives. Also, we women were all somehow given the message that stepping in and out of the workplace as our children grew older was optimal.

Rubin: With this diversity, how do you think your father's way of living impacted the lifestyle choices of the children?