Elizabeth Moore Erickson
April 22, 1915 – December 26, 2008
Roxanna Erickson Klein

Elizabeth Erickson died on December 26 at her home in Phoenix, Arizona attended by three generations of family members. Her death was due to unexpected complications associated with a broken hip from which she was recovering.

Widow of Milton H. Erickson, Elizabeth Erickson had an extensive, supportive role in the applications of hypnosis to medicine. Her involvement with the study of hypnotic potentials dated to the 1930s, when as an undergraduate in psychology she attended a scientific meeting at Wayne State University. At that meeting, Milton Erickson noticed her exceptional intellectual capabilities. Some weeks later, he offered her a position in his research laboratory normally reserved for graduate students. The studies she was initially involved in included hypnotic manipulation of sensory capabilities, specifically sight and hearing.

Elizabeth and Milton married in 1936 while he was a staff psychiatrist at Eloise State Hospital in Detroit, Michigan. They were devoted to one another as personal and professional partners, raising eight children, and never faltering in their mutual dedication to the scientific advancement of hypnosis. In 1948, the family moved to Phoenix, Arizona to alleviate Milton’s health concerns (recognized many years later as post-polio sequelae). The following year, still not strong enough to fulfill a staff position at Arizona State Hospital, Milton opened a private office in a bedroom of the family home. Although intended as a temporary arrangement, the home office proved to be so beneficial, that the family decided to keep the arrangement for the remainder of his life.

From the first encounter, Milton regarded Elizabeth as having an exceptional insight into hypnotic processes, and encouraged her involvement in his explorations. As occasion permitted, he involved her in discussions with other luminaries. She developed lasting friendships with Margaret Mead, Aldous and Maria Huxley, Jay Haley, as well as many others. The extent of her understanding, coupled with her phenomenal ability to recall information made her an invaluable asset. These friendships stimulated cooperative exploration and integration of information across disciplines (Zeig, J. & Geary, B., 2000). She fondly recalled viewing films of Balinese trance rituals made by Bateson and Mead, and by allowing herself to drift into a hypnotic state, she was able to explain details of trance depth to Mead.

The professional support Elizabeth provided Milton allowed him to see a full load of patients, while also engaging in a broader range of activities that made a lasting impact on psychotherapy. The constellation of these actions fostered Elizabeth and Milton’s mutual goal of recognition of hypnosis as a legitimate medical
tool. When Milton became the founding President of the American Society of Clinical Hypnosis (ASCH), Elizabeth tirelessly attended to the logistic details of the fledgling organization. For a decade, as Milton served as the founding editor of the American Journal of Clinical Hypnosis, Elizabeth designated the family dining room as office space from which the publication could be born. She contributed to all phases of the work—facilitating professional correspondence; editing; proofreading; arranging for printing; managing the mailing list; and paying the children a penny a piece to prepare mailing envelopes. Even when the Journal moved to Chicago, she continued to manage the foreign correspondence responsibilities for quite some time.

Elizabeth accompanied Milton on many of his teaching seminars, often serving as his preferred demonstration subject. Her capabilities, including five childbirths under hypnosis, added experiential depth to his work (Elliott-Erickson, B.A. & Erickson Klein, R., 1991). Her capacity for connection with others enhanced his professional recognition, and nurtured the ever-growing quantity of colleagues and students who came to the home-office for teaching seminars.

She was most comfortable with a “behind the scenes” role in professional writing, but authored a section the book *Time Distortion in Hypnosis*. In actuality, her contributions are inextricably integrated into the hundreds of articles authored by Milton Erickson. Numerous dedications in the professional literature attest to her active role in encouraging ongoing investigation of hypnotic phenomena, her efforts to foster hypnosis as a therapeutic art, and most importantly, helping professionals develop their psychotherapeutic perspectives (Rossi, E., Erickson-Klein, R. & Rossi, K, 2008).

In 1962, the ASCH gave her an Award of Merit and made her an Honorary Lifetime Member. In 1989, The Milton H. Erickson Foundation gave her the Lifetime Achievement Award for her monumental contributions (Erickson-foundation.org). She only recently retired from her role on the Board of Directors of the Foundation. She has been awarded numerous honorary memberships to foreign hypnosis societies and psychotherapeutic organizations. In 2004, *A Tribute to Elizabeth Moore Erickson* by Marilia Baker was published in English. It has been translated into Spanish, Portuguese, and French, and additional translations are in progress. Her efforts have continued to stimulate and inspire students of hypnosis around the world.

She never missed a chance to extend her own knowledge about the capacity of the human mind. Her avid enthusiasm for reading, her precision as a proofreader, and her unquenchable thirst for understanding continued throughout her lifetime. Those who had the privilege of contact with her best remember her for her incomparable positive outlook on life.

References


Naturalistic Techniques of Hypnosis

Milton H. Erickson, M.D.

The naturalistic approach to the problem of the induction of hypnotic trances, as opposed to formalized ritualistic procedures of trance induction, merits much more investigation, experimentation and study than have been accorded it to date.

By naturalistic approach is meant the acceptance of the situation encountered and the utilization of it, without endeavoring to restructure it psychologically. In so doing, the presenting behavior of the patient becomes a definite aid and an actual part in inducing a trance, rather than a possible hindrance. For lack of a more definite terminology, the method may be termed a naturalistic approach, in which an aspect of the principle of synergism is utilized.

Basic to this naturalistic approach are the interrelationships and the interdependencies reported by this writer in 1943 and repeatedly confirmed in experience since then. In these studies emphasis was placed upon the desirability of utilizing one modality of response as an integral part in the eliciting of responses in another modality and upon the dependency upon each other of differing modalities of behavior, somewhat analogous to the increasing of the knee jerk by a tensing of the arm muscles. To illustrate and clarify these points, a number of reports will be cited.

Report No. 1

A man in his thirties became interested in hypnosis and volunteered to act as a subject for some experimental studies at a university. In the first hypnotic session he discovered that he was an excellent hypnotic subject, but lost his interest in any further experimental studies.

Several years later he decided to have hypnosis employed by his dentist, since he needed extensive dental work and feared greatly the possibility of pain. He entered a trance state for his dentist readily, developed an excellent anesthesia of the hand upon suggestion, but failed to be able to transfer this anesthesia or even an analgesia to his mouth in any degree. Instead, he seemed to become even more sensitive orally. Efforts to develop oral anesthesia or analgesia directly also failed.

Further, but unsuccessful efforts, were painstakingly made by the dentist and a colleague to teach this patient by various techniques either anesthesia or