The Art of Therapeutic Communication
The Collected Works of Kay F. Thompson

Edited by Saralee Kane MSW and Karen Olness MD
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applicable. The last section, "Balance and Control", contains an interesting clinical vignette with a difficult client and one of Thompson's favorite multilevel metaphors.

Healing Through Language

Roxanna Erickson Klein

Kay Thompson loved telling the tale of her first meeting with my father, Milton Erickson. She was a young dentist, attending a lecture with the hope of learning trance skills to help her dental patients relax. Listening intently and fascinated by the material, she embarked on what would become a lifelong path. Erickson addressed the group of professionals with a deep intensity, engaging various audience members with his well-known, captivating hypnotic gaze.

Kay let her shy habits prevail and concealed herself near the back of the room behind a large fat man. Intrigued by her evasive maneuvers, Erickson actively sought to bring her out of hiding. In telling her tale, Kay would mimic Erickson gradually easing his way about the lecture room to reposition himself in a place where her cover was lost. Each time, she would scoot her chair away, avoiding his penetrating glance.

At last, late in the day, Erickson walked directly to her. He greeted her like a long lost friend whom he was both surprised and delighted to see. Thus began a long relationship that involved a harmony of professional respect and loving friendship that endured for both their lifetimes.

The anecdote of the initial meeting contains glimpses of the unfolding of the many ways Erickson influenced Kay Thompson's professional development. Part of that story is of a painfully shy young professional with the guts and determination to combat gender bias in going to dental school. It is also the story of a lady who lost her own father and mentor, just at the time in her professional development when she depended on his unceasing encouragement to tutor and guide her into the tightly knit dental professional circles.
I learned about her father’s powerful presence and understood a little about the friendship she shared with my own father. My dad had similar attributes of strong presence, enthusiasm for a challenge, and omnipresent encouragement. The relationship provided a continuum of many of the factors that had shaped and enriched her life, both as a person and as a professional. Her friendship with Erickson integrated respect, admiration and love with professional prodding, encouragement, demands, interests and mutual regard.

Lony Thompson had encouraged his daughter to break gender barriers and strive for accomplishment in the male-dominated field of dentistry. Erickson supported her in her reach beyond dentistry. One of Kay’s favorite comments about dentistry, “There you are with your hands in a person’s mouth—and in their head,” reflected her view that in order to do good dentistry, one must work with the psychological orientation of the whole patient. Working with Erickson, Kay learned to develop techniques that moved her into realms that encompass facets of deep healing.

**Therapeutic Language**

Kay’s methodology for eliciting healing from within was clearly enhanced by her appreciation for the value of collecting words. Kay delighted in language play and continually worked to enhance the communication skills that she credited Erickson for teaching her. She collected pairs of words that sounded similar and could be substituted, if appropriate, in the message: wait/wade, look/luck, near/here, mere/mare, read/reed, think/thing, classes/glasses, going/showing and bud/mud. Discrete substitutions were one element of more complex techniques of multilevel hypnotic induction and suggestion that intrigued her.

Undertaking her explorations with the revelry of a favorite game, she polished her abilities to a fine art, achieving a level of mastery and brilliance in her use of language. She jotted down lists of words that had multiple meanings, then practiced integrating them into sentences that would supply metaphorical, therapeutic messages to the unconscious. She entertained herself by creating phrases, sentences and paragraphs that utilized the flexible words which she
practiced for fun: fan, well, fall, present, right, left, tear, rent, carry, store, might, wait, welcome, charge, bear, lean, pat, coupling, green, rail, hare, nun, pane, blew, weather and change. All these were a wee share of her repertoire. Kay carefully selected words, then precisely adjusted their punctuation, enunciation and emphasis. These techniques, especially when combined with trance phenomena, delivered indirect messages to the unconscious. For example, a benign account of "... a friend who went out on a day of pleasant weather, made a small purchase, and waited to get some change which resulted in being a tiny bit late for an engagement", is a little story replete with therapeutic messages, if given in the right circumstances and with the right inflections and intonations of voice.

She might begin a hypnotic trance induction about a walk through the woods, mention noticing the beech trees; then by substituting the word sand for and facilitate the building of an underlying deep layer of trance with imagery of a seashore. This duality could be reinforced and enhanced by further suggestions of "feeling the waving of the leaves, the blue of the wind, and a splash of color". The mismatch of tenses or sensory processes is a technique she often used to elicit curiosity to engage the unconscious.

Kay practiced the technique of interjecting unexpected words into everyday conversations with friends, salesclerks, and waiters. Watching responses, she was able to refine her techniques until her "choice" words were hardly detectable in casual conversation. Once she asked me the strange question, "How did you rent your dress?" and looked at me with her fixed innocent stare. I processed the question, and replied, "No, too unusual. The dog teared it." (using the pronunciation of tears from crying instead of "tore the fabric"). We both laughed at the awkwardness of the interchange. I noticed, with great admiration, that she later used the word rent in a context that capitalized on its unfamiliarity and facilitated the trance induction she was invoking at that time.

Instead of asking the usual question during a follow-up dental exam—"Well, I thought I’d ask about the toothache you had yesterday?"—Kay might ask, "Well, I think I see how that old toothache you had yesterday has gone?" The questioning inflection and emphasis bring a subtle but significant variation to the anticipated
question. The awkwardness of saying "I see" where "I'll see" rightfully belongs, calls unconscious awareness to the question as a whole.

The question itself carries several imbedded suggestions, "I'm a professional doing an objective observation—I anticipate improvement—The toothache is a thing of the past—and—It went away." In the spoken delivery, she would emphasize "Well," while lowering her voice at the end of the question, giving additional suggestions to the unconscious. The credit for improvement was given to the patient, supported by smiles and praise for a job well done, again reinforced because she was the dentist who loved to see progress like this.

Erickson had a favorite induction technique in which he brought about confusion by giving direct suggestions pertaining to the "right hand" and the "left hand". Then he built intense confusion using "the right hand" to indicate the correct hand, and "the left hand" to indicate the hand not moving. It was hard to listen to the induction even as an audience member without developing trance.

Kay mastered that induction, and gave it her own special touch of lovely lilting melodies of alliterative phrases. Sometimes, when we shared breakfast on the morning of a presentation, Kay would jot on a napkin, all the words beginning with "m" we could both think of. Then during the demonstration, well after the subject was deeply in trance, she would reach into her pocket for the napkin and review whether she had omitted any choice words from the induction. Those moments, invariably coupled with a knowing look in my direction, affirmed that the little game we had enjoyed over breakfast had come in handy after all.

Kay was a unique and intriguing woman who presented a balance of frailty and fortitude, strength and gentleness, tenderness and endurance, courage and vulnerability, patience and productivity. The friendships, professional relationships, and interests that she nurtured illustrated some of the wonderful parts of Kay, but it was the harmony of her endeavors that most distinctly defined her. She was a professional who found fun in her work and brought hypnotic "language" to a higher level of understanding and practice. She was a dentist who reached so far into the scope of therapeutic
communication that the gap between therapy and dentistry was finally bridged.

She was unwavering in her dedication to furthering the advancement of professional hypnosis. She was loyal in her friendships, in her affiliations, in her dedication to community, and in her spirit.

I dearly miss her.
Kay lectured throughout Europe for several decades. A Dutch colleague shared that Kay had the amusing habit of screaming loudly when people in her presence talked in another language. Years later, he and his wife still laugh about Kay’s emphatic message.

It would be impossible to share all the wonderful stories and vignettes we have heard about Kay. These brief personal vignettes illustrate aspects of the complexity of her therapeutic communications and share some of the profound effects she had on so many of her students and colleagues.

**True Friendship**

*Roxanna Erickson Klein*

A true friend is one whom you can depend upon to guide you into being a better person. Kay took on the role of friendship seriously, giving selflessly. I would like to think that ours was a two-way street, that I was as true a friend to her as she to me.

We first came to know each other well, after my husband Alan, my dog Earnest and I moved in for a prolonged visit, the result of a job relocation. What struck me initially, and what has remained with me, was the genteel largesse and the gracious hospitality that permeated the home. In the weeks that we were there, and in the two years that followed, my husband and I were “adopted” by Ralph and Kay.

We felt fully accepted despite the failing and foibles of our own youthful behaviors that I can clearly see now. During our month-long stay in their home, Earnest misbehaved constantly, yet there was not a single word or indication of fatigue from either Kay or Ralph. It was as though they loved being gracious hosts long after the usual time for hospitality had passed. Many times I heard Kay take advantage of the opportunity to introduce us, and by carefully explaining that my husband is a physician, I am a nurse and Earnest a blue heeler, she transformed a simple introduction into an artful commentary conveying the thoughts that good friends and good medicine are sometimes troublesome, but healing is always worth the effort.
A long line of wayward comrades were welcomed into that gentle environment. In fact, one of Kay’s “projects” was nurturing a series of needy dogs, most of them short and furry “mops”. Rescued from a variety of circumstances, then nursed or fostered into well-being, Kay managed to modify behavioral problems and to pair many homeless mutts with masters, some of whom did not even know they wanted a dog.

In a visit to the remarkable home where Kay spent her childhood, I learned about her father’s powerful presence and sudden death. Kay’s father, Dr. Lony Thompson, also a dentist, had died unexpectedly of an abdominal aneurysm some years before I had come to know her. Although her father had clearly been supportive, influential, and loved, she rarely mentioned him. My own carefully tutored upbringing guided me to not question her reticence. One day, in the home she had grown up in, she surprised me by sharing what she had previously been unable to. We sat on a bed together as she vividly described what a strong presence her father was, personally, professionally and physically. She emphasized how important he was in the community, in the family, and to her. I realized then why she was so quiet about the father whom she so clearly loved. She said that one day he hadn’t felt well, and lay down to rest, “Right here, where we are sitting.” She pointed to the spot where he had fallen after he got out of bed, his life gone in an instant, a precipitous and totally unanticipated moment.

The deep pain of that event sat heavy in the air, punctuated by the unchanged décor of the room. Antique furniture, dated wallpaper, meticulous positioning of art objects gave the room, gave the whole house the feel of a museum. We held hands, and, at once, I understood her previous silence about a wonderful man.

After our talk we sat in the kitchen, drinking tea from delicate bone china, and reminiscing about the joys of her growing up in that fine, stately old two-story home south of Pittsburgh, where her mother still lived. The original wallpaper was a print of English ivy climbing around the kitchen. I marveled at the 1920s décor, at how unchanged a home could be over a span of more than 50 years. What a unique experience, for me, to be able to drop into the past so fully. Kay’s mother, Bertha, was proud of her own
good taste and her ability to select enduring furnishings that
genuinely still looked good! We laughed together at my surprise
that the home seemed to be suspended in 1920s, and at the contrast-
ing perceptions held by both Kay and her mother, of the normalcy
of it. Bertha had left the home almost entirely as she had originally
decorated it, only adding regularly to her marvelous paperweight
and fan collections. These items, all of superb quality, were
displayed on every flat and vertical surface, each one treasured for
its uniqueness.

A wooded area buffered the home from a roadway, across from
which arose an enormous landscape feature that Kay unceremoni-
ously referred to as the "slag pile". With exquisite clarity, she
described the spectacular night views of glowing red-hot embers
being poured atop the mountainous heap of tailings from the local
mines. Her verbal images of these events were so powerful that
all of us present laughed heartily at the paradox of the splendid
disposal of waste.

Collections

Kay's mother's magnificent collection gave unique character and
definition to the home and the circumstance that Kay was raised in.
Learning the value of collecting, Kay was able to apply that to other
aspects of her life. Starting in childhood, Kay amassed a collection
of elephants of every imaginable art form. Most had been gifts from
friends, relatives and colleagues who knew of her passion for the
strength and beauty of those intriguing animals.

Though she never even encouraged it, I thank Kay with influencing
me to start a collection of my own (eggs). The pleasure she
emanated over her role as custodian of the elephants, and the won-
derful images associated with each treasure, made a lasting impres-
sion. Similarly, though he never acknowledged Kay's influence, my
father developed a passion for collecting Seri Ironwood carvings.
The very first gifts from his collection were made to Kay Thompson
and Bob Pearson. For Kay he selected an elegant carving of a conch
shell.
Kay presented herself with a thoughtful elegance that spoke of a cultivated ability to enjoy the moment. Her home, her wardrobe and her quiet demeanor were all examples of the understatement with which she usually appeared. However, when she wanted to make a statement, she was equally comfortable dressing with a striking and dramatic flair. Physically, she was a rare blend of bold elegance and delicacy. Her statuesque features, combined with lithe and graceful movements, created an intriguing sense of juxtaposition. Her meticulous grooming, exquisite selection of clothes, unfailing attention to details of hair and makeup, brought forth delicacy, which seemed almost out of place when she displayed her unfaltering ability to stare down an opponent or to pursue a professional objective.

In contrast with the stately home of her youth, Kay and Ralph built what looked from the outside to be a modest home. Located on a residential street, with a gravel circle drive in front, the seemingly small home greeted visitors with a flair—next to the bright red entry doors was a prickly pear garden. The cacti unexpectedly thrived in Pennsylvania, finding just the right light and shelter for regrowth after burial in deep winter snows every year, and displaying stunning yellow flowers in the summer.

Inside the house, the large living area was the color of sunshine. The main floor was open and bright, with a long line of windows that revealed a beautiful view across a green valley. It turned out to be a three-story home that was welcoming and comfortable, as well as spacious enough to accommodate vast numbers of people for both business and entertainment. Perhaps in an unwitting metaphor for herself, Kay explained that the key was to find property on a hill, where only the modest entry shows: if one accepts an invitation to come inside unexpected resources and treasures reveal themselves.

During our prolonged stay with Kay and Ralph, Kay and I were able to work at play, and play at work, because of our well-matched energy levels and interests. We shared in-depth conversations about word use, health care trends, and organizational structure while we peeled potatoes and put together an "elegant but easy" meal for dinner (she planned—I helped). Those multitasking undertakings
gave us a platform for companionship that was already well positioned on the firm foundation of family friendship. Amid the hustle and bustle of my finding a job, Kay doing hers, and Ralph and Alan attending to their own professions, we managed to come together for daily life activities that we shared with relish and embellishment. All of Kay’s endeavors were undertaken with an air of relaxed dedication, as if the time involved in a task was irrelevant and only the outcome important.

**A Most Valuable Gift**

Perhaps the most valuable lesson I learned from Kay was the result of her quiet and careful planning at a party. She orchestrated the circumstance so that I was able to experience myself in a way I had long hoped for, but felt was outside the realm of possibilities. On several occasions, we had discussed the value of being “noticed” as opposed to being unnoticed. Kay could present herself in a variety of ways to meet the circumstances: strong, forceful, quiet, demure or shy, but she spoke of an inside desire to just fade into the background, and not to be so central in activities. She acknowledged that her distinctive looks precluded her from being a wallflower—she was going to be noticed and that’s all there was to it. Although she had learned to use that inescapable quality of her life in a positive way, she revealed to me that she had longed to be less conspicuous at times.

We compared these feelings with my own: my growing up always being recognized as Erickson’s daughter and never being able to experience anything vaguely related to hypnotic work in a “normal forum”. I had long wondered about the mundane and typical questions that students ask each other about hypnosis. I complained to Kay that each time I entered a room where individuals studied hypnosis, I was accompanied by an introduction of being Erickson’s daughter. I told Kay about my perception that immediately the atmosphere of the room would shift and I would find myself with a private audience of interested professionals who had “prepared” questions. I never minded the interrogations, and had long ago learned to answer the inquiries, no matter how invasive, in a
manner with which I was comfortable. What I lacked was the basic and ordinary experience that other people have—what it was to be in a “regular crowd” where people are sharing energy in an equal way and where people work together for a sense of discovery.

I told her that I too, longed to be a wallflower, but couldn’t even hope to accomplish that since my educational qualifications (at the time) wouldn’t even permit me entrance to professional hypnosis meetings. The conversation was in passing, nothing I took seriously or expected to be remembered or acted upon. But months later, when Kay hosted a party for the local chapter of ASCH, the extent of her sensitivity and responsiveness revealed itself.

Having arranged for Joe Barber, PhD, to speak at the dental school about pain control, Kay helped me slip unobtrusively into the back of the audience. The lecture was followed by a reception for both dental students and for the local hypnosis society. As it was just before the holiday, Kay and Ralph prepared for the event with a spectacular Christmas tree and an elaborate selection of hors-d’oeuvres.

A tremendous cold front blew in that afternoon and penetrated the air with unusual intensity including a chill factor of minus 10°F. Activities proceeded punctually despite the chill, but gas service to Carnegie [where they lived] was interrupted, leaving the entire community without heat.

Never considering the possibility of cancellation or postponement, Kay, Ralph and the guests followed through with the day’s plans as scheduled. Blankets and quilts were brought out and candles lined up in case of an electrical outage. The idea of holding the meeting “under blankets” was approached with great enthusiasm and adventure, and the only concern expressed was that “if the electricity goes out, we won’t be able to heat the food or enjoy the decorative Christmas lights”.

The house was packed with people, all of whom knew a huge storm was in the making, and that the heat was out, and the electricity might soon also be interrupted. Clearly, the whole group anticipated that this Christmas party and the accompanying opportunities to learn about hypnosis were well worth the inconvenience of the travel conditions.
I remember being engrossed in conversation for a long time before realizing that no one had come up to greet me or to probe, to present the questions they had wondered about for years, or, especially, to ask the inevitable, “What was it like to be the daughter of Milton Erickson?” For at least an hour I huddled under the blankets with the rest of the students and professionals, listening to the ordinary conversation, making my own remarks, being listened to, and even discounted by other’s opinions.

After a while, I noticed that my key maiden name had been omitted on my name tag. My memory hearkened back to the conversation in which I had told Kay about my wish to be anonymous in a crowd of interested students of hypnosis. And there I was—just another person. Without my request Kay had taken me more seriously than I realized. Her sensitivity to my wishes was a real gift.

The impact of the whole situation hit me after someone made an erroneous comment about Erickson, a simple mistake. I corrected the remark and this sparked an inquiry as to how I was so certain my facts were correct. When I divulged the truth, I turned and saw Kay smiling a Cheshire cat look of satisfaction. We kept each other’s gaze as we heard the murmuring and the realignment of energy, then the beginning of the “inquisition”—the to-be-expected questions about my family life. It was very affirming for me to share that experience with Kay.

Her gift, the taste of normalcy, allowed me to explore the unnamed portion of my identity. Kay’s actions gave me a greater sense of comfort and balance of who I am as an individual who has come from an exceptional home. Since that time, I have never felt the need to hide or fade, but now have a real comfort with who I actually am.

Kay had an outstanding ability to nurture students, colleagues, and friends and help them grow past limitations. She had a special skill of making the inept feel adequate, of turning social blunders into moments of comic relief and of inspiring ongoing self-improvement and refinement. Communicating with her easy laugh, knowing smile, a glint in her eye with a perfectly timed glance or a perplexed look, Kay was a friend and a mentor to a multitude.
Kay's friendship helped me to grow into the person I am today. Her enthusiasm and joy of life, coupled with trustworthiness, dignity and elegance gave me a model that I think back on every time I am faced with a tough situation. She still guides me.

**Actively Tuning In**

*Arnold Freedman*

"It's not a matter of actively doing something to change the situation so much as it is listening to ourselves. Because we get signals from the patient all the time. And we need to learn to do what Erickson was so famous for, and that was to go where the patient is and see the situation from the client's point of view. And that is a very different perspective and one that too few are willing to pay attention to. The idea that we can accomplish this through words is a major responsibility." (Kay Thompson, Chapter Six.)

I was hooked during my first phone call with Kay over 30 years ago. I had a negative view of university faculty at the time, but she changed that. She was enthusiastic and encouraging, and connected with me. She seemed genuinely interested in my work and my patients and was always supportive. I would periodically call her about difficult cases and she always had something helpful to offer and encouraged me to continue and persist. I shared the successes I had with hypnosis, since it was not understood in my work environment, and her encouragement was powerfully reinforcing for me.

One of the most noteworthy characteristics about Kay was her ability to tune in to the client. She was really connecting with them and being where they were. Stacie Murrer, a friend of both mine and Kay's, explained this by saying, "Kay is not above you. She is right there side by side with you. She is not trying to impose anything on you."

Kay brought me to Phoenix to meet Erickson. When I walked into his house, Kay introduced me to him. He looked up at me intently from his wheelchair, like my dog looks at me. It was very physical,