Chapter 29

How Milton H. Erickson
Encouraged Individuality
in His Children

Panel: Lance Erickson, Ph.D., Robert Erickson, M.A., and Betty Alice Erickson Elliott, Ed.D. Cand. Betty Alice serves as moderator; Mrs. Milton Erickson, Kristina Erickson, M.D., and Roxanna Erickson Klein, M.S., were in the audience and contributed during the question and answer period.

Betty Alice: I am Betty Alice, the fourth of Milton Erickson’s eight children. All of us eight children have many of the same values. Honesty to self and to others, and the desire to live a fulfilled and productive life in a way that is considerate of, and productive to, the world at large.

Now, we don’t believe that those values are unique to us, nor was our general family life unique. However, each of us does feel that Dad and Mom did have some unique ways in which our developing individuality was fostered. Each of us has selected views and concepts which were important to us. We will begin with Lance, who is the second oldest.

Lance: I am Lance Erickson, the second of Milton Erickson’s children. We Erickson children are as much in the dark about our development as anyone else might be. We don’t always know what we were supposed to learn and we sometimes don’t know how we learned it, but we learned it. I think it was to a large extent through the very carefully thought-out interventions that occurred in our lives relative to our individuality. I attended a workshop at this Congress
that David Gordon gave on metaphors. He was talking about analogies in a way that I appreciated.

The mind is like the soil of the earth; it receives everything that comes into it. Sensations of all kinds are transmitted in different ways. The earth receives dirt, chemicals, whatever, and the earth provides, through some means, some organization of appropriate chemicals or elements, like water or fertilizer, whatever is necessary to bring forth really creative things like plants, blades of grass, or flowers. A mind is similar because it, too, brings forth ideas and behaviors of an individual and his personality, each of which is different and all of which are the result of the individual and peculiar elements that went into that particular mind. Dad certainly believed that and practiced it always. It would be completely incongruous for him to treat us the same because he knew how different we were, certainly from his observations of our day-to-day activities, but also because of his concept of people in general.

The following are a few of the incidents that occurred in my developmental years and some of the reactions that we got from Dad.

One of the things that he attempted to do was to find a physical aspect of each of us that was different from the other children. He felt it was important for each of us to have a good self-concept, both physically and psychologically. I have rather prominent bumps, if you will, on my forehead and I worried some about this. Would they go away? Would they get bigger? If they got bigger, I thought I would surely be a monstrosity, and nobody would care to deal with me. He knew that I was concerned about my appearance. He set up a number of occasions, appropriate occasions, to let me know what a wonderful thing it was that I had these bumps, these knowledge bumps that nobody else in the family had developed so well. They would not only stand me in good stead, but someday I would meet a girl who thought those were just delightful, a wonderful physical asset, and they would endear me to her. I am sure that this is what actually occurred, but his remarks helped me to accept a part of me that I might have rejected.

Along these same lines, I was tall and gangly. He called me a “stringbean” or “high pockets,” in a teasing way, but I was concerned. When was I going to stop growing up and start growing out? I was all skin and bones during my early adolescence, and in typical adolescent thinking I was concerned with that. At first Dad teased
me about how I was growing, how tall I was compared to everybody else, and how thin I was until he realized I was really concerned. Then he changed.

He brought it to my attention that everybody in the family, all the males, were relatively short. Dad was about 5’6” and his brother was about 5’8”, so it was clear to him that I was going to be the tallest male in the whole family, on either side. I would have an advantage that nobody else had. He said that when I did become so tall, I would also widen out and have an appearance that would be fully acceptable to me. Again, that was a successful intervention that relieved how I felt about myself. I could concentrate on other things.

With regard to our behavior, Dad left us a wide range of latitude. We knew what was right and wrong in his sense and what our limits were. But we lived on the grounds of state hospitals, and there were all kinds of wonderful things to do, like learning mental patients’ vocabularies. We didn’t realize that some of the things we did would be beneficial to us in the long run. I remember one incident. Dad and Mom had gone to Detroit to celebrate their anniversary. It was a pleasant June night. Dad had been encouraging Bert’s interest in trapping. Dad had done trapping when he was a boy. While Bert thought it was wonderful to trap muskrats and skin them for the pelts, he thought skunk pelts looked better than muskrat. He had trapped a skunk that night, and he and I went out to get it. The skunk wasn’t quite dead when we retrieved it. Then came the major error in judgment. We took it home. We lived in Eloise at that time on the grounds of a very large county mental hospital in one of the buildings that also served patient needs. It never occurred to us that there was anything wrong with taking the skunk to the washtub down in the patients’ area of the basement. It was there that Bert skinned it, and this was the error in judgment. On their way back (about 5 miles away) Mom and Dad smelled the skunk odor and said, very lightly, “I hope that isn’t something Bert’s been involved in.” The closer they got, the more they worried. When they got home, the building stunk awfully. Dad had to go see the superintendent of the hospital the next day. He returned with orders to curb some of our instincts.

Dad did it in a very nice way but was firm with both of us. My lesson was indirect. I ended up very angry with Bert, because my best flashlight was buried along with a lot of other things, clothes
and so forth, because of the skunk smell. Bert's portion of blame was more direct . . . several days of work such as groundskeeping for the involved building. Although it was a very constructive kind of punishment, Bert didn't really feel it was right at the time because he couldn't quite see that he had done anything wrong. If anything, it was the skunk's problem. But we both learned the necessary lesson.

We had an enjoyable life growing up. The kinds of interventions that we had from our parents were constructive and individualized. The longer I live, the more I appreciate what we had.

Robert: I am the sixth of Milton Erickson's children. In our household, we all had responsibilities that were rather carefully structured for each of us. But within that structure each child was allowed and encouraged to do family chores in his own fashion and thereby express his individuality in completing them.

What follows is a picture of my growing up and how I now perceive that my individuality was influenced by my parents. Our parents, especially my father, treated my brothers and sisters and me as individuals throughout our lives. He usually used a simple, straightforward approach which was very effective. We were treated differently—as individuals, and for the most part we never really felt that we were being treated unfairly. We grew up in an environment in which we each had an assortment of jobs or tasks which we were responsible for completing. The number of jobs, the complexity or difficulty, and the types of jobs were fairly and reasonably apportioned; at various ages we would either be reassigned a job or we would just gradually accept a new responsibility and take over a new job. I remember how I did my chores in our home in Phoenix, on Cypress Street, where for the most part we children all grew up. We lived in a three bedroom, one bathroom house. During our growing up years, there would usually be seven or eight people living there. By today's standards, it was a rather small house, but it was warm and comfortable. I sometimes wonder, in retrospect, how we as a family managed to cooperate as well as we did. As children, we had been taught from the very beginning that we all had the responsibility of working, sharing, and planning together as a family. We all had numerous tasks to perform and we each developed our own personal schedules and plans.

I was the early riser in the family, along with my father. At a very early age I might be found up and about playing, reading, or
doing some chores an hour or two before my brothers and sisters would be up and active. During the summer when I turned 14 years, I had a newspaper route in my neighborhood which included early Sunday morning deliveries. Thus, I would be up and out of the house long before it was even light outside. Upon the completion of my route, I would then do chores—tend to the yard, edge the lawn, trim bushes, take the dog for a walk, clean up after the dog, then take care of some of the other pets. I would serve myself some breakfast. Then I would bike to my older brother’s house to tend to his plants and do a few minor chores. (My brother, his wife and family were out of state for much of that summer, and I was more or less house-sitting for them.) After biking home, which was a rather lengthy ride, I would complete any of my jobs that I had not been able to complete. I mention all these things—my accomplishments for the day—not to brag but to demonstrate my thesis, which is, with our responsibilities came a certain freedom of choice—choice of method, choice of time, and choice of order.

After completing Sunday’s jobs I would then be ready for what I considered to be my favorite pastime—going to the movies. This was a very important form of entertainment for me at that time in my life, because we grew up in a house that did not have a television set in it until I was 18 years old. This is not to suggest, however, that we children didn’t watch TV, nor were we ever forbidden to watch TV. Each of us had friends with whom we would see some programs, and on some occasions my parents would make special arrangements so that we could see a particular program. We grew up with the understanding that we did not need television since we all had so many diverse interests, both those assigned and those we chose to take part in. Only recently, in a discussion with my mother, did I learn that the reason my parents decided not to have television in our house during our growing up years was because they wanted to encourage us to read as a relaxed activity. And we did read endlessly. And now I understand why my brothers and sisters and I are all such avid readers on so many different subjects.

To continue, upon returning home I would clean up, eat a snack, and then set out to a movie theatre, walking or biking with a friend or by myself. Such a Sunday morning as I have just described would begin at 4:30 or 5:00 AM. Delivering the newspapers, tending to the yard, trimming, edging, various chores, the bike ride to and from my brother’s house, and any other jobs would easily take up as
much as seven hours. So then it would be as late as 11:30 or noon; and, I was ready to go to the movies and I would do so.

Except for my parents, I would usually be the only one in the household who was up and active until about 10:00 or 10:30 in the morning. Sunday at our house was the day my brothers and sisters liked to sleep late and they were allowed to do so. As I mentioned earlier, my brothers and sisters had their own tasks to perform, and each would carry out his or her responsibilities. They would simply operate on a later schedule—their own schedule. They had their own way of doing things.

For me the early morning was the ideal time to do my chores. Not only did I enjoy doing my work at that time because of the freshness of the day, but I could get things done the way I wanted to without having any brother or sister telling me how to do it, when to do it, in what way to do it, and then to later criticize that I was doing it the wrong way. By the time my brothers and sisters had risen, I had already completed my chores by myself. I had escaped their interference—I had escaped their influence—and I had escaped their criticism. I had done my work—my way.

In conclusion, I realize now that our parents had encouraged us to find satisfaction in our control over our own lives. That satisfaction and control were important aspects which helped to shape our respective individuality.

Roxanna Erickson Klein: I’m Roxanna, the seventh of Milton Erickson’s children. Our parents communicated clear values to us: consideration for others, appreciation of differences, the idea that every life experience presents opportunities. They also encouraged the sharing of assets.

As a parent myself, I communicate these values to my children. I don’t think they are unique values. I’m not even convinced that raising eight children to be very different individuals is unique. But if anything is unique, I think it was the creative problem-solving that our parents encouraged.

I don’t think that any of us let problems hang around for long. If we are unhappy with the status quo of anything, we usually initiate a positive change. If we can’t think up one, we seek advice. We don’t always follow the advice, but we do explore the alternatives and make an active decision as to what we will or will not do. We may even decide that status quo isn’t so bad after all.
When we sought advice from Daddy, he would indirectly direct us toward actions that would resolve the problem. He rarely would address the problem outright.

I will illustrate this indirect approach with two examples. One is from my own childhood, and the second is an occasion where I have used a similar approach with my own children.

When I was 12 years old, in the sixth grade, the grammar school I attended merged with another and the population shifted from 100% white to 30% Hispanic. The sixth graders coming in had already dealt with most of the problems associated with coming from a Spanish-speaking home into an English-speaking school. The only concession the school made, that I was aware of, was the introduction of an elective “Spanish as a Second Language” which was available only to those students in the highest reading groups. Although I was very interested in taking the class, my reading scores were not high enough for me to be admitted.

My first approach to solving this problem was to speak with the instructor. I tried hard to convince her that I was so highly motivated that the minimum requirements should be waived. This approach was unsuccessful.

Next, I went to Daddy and described the problem. At first, he seemed very interested and asked all sorts of pertinent questions. Why was I so interested in taking the class? Had I considered waiting till next year and working on reading this year? What did I expect to gain from the class? The answers were clear to me. I was satisfied with my reading abilities, even if I wasn’t in the accelerated group. I liked the sound of Spanish and I was fascinated with the idea of being able to talk in a foreign language.

Then his questions became less relevant. “Where do the Spanish-speaking children live?” “What did they do after school and during the lunch hour?” Both of these questions were dead ends from my perspective. They lived too far away for after-school activities, and at lunchtime, they all participated in the free lunch program. They ate separately at tables reserved for the cafeteria workers.

Suddenly Daddy lost all interest in my problem. Instead, he launched a money-saving campaign. He proposed that I join the lunch work program, but he would continue to provide me with lunch money (25¢ per day) on those days. That would amount to $1.25 a week, and if I was a real good saver and put it in the bank, he would match it! At $2.50 a week, my savings would grow fast. And he
went on to speculate what I might like to buy after I had saved my money for several months.

I wasn’t entirely satisfied with what I thought was the “distraction” technique, but nevertheless the new project might take my mind off the problem. So I decided to do it.

It wasn’t until years later that I recognized his suggestion as an intervention dealing directly with the problem described. Eating lunch every day at a table where only Spanish was spoken provided me with a perfect opportunity to learn Spanish. The outcome of that intervention was successful. I did learn Spanish and perhaps more fluently than did my classmates in the advanced reading group.

As a child, I promised myself that when I grew up and had children of my own, I would always answer their questions directly. But as we grow, our perspectives change. Now, as a parent, I find that sometimes the indirect approach is far more effective.

My second example is how Ethan used his imagination.

My son, Ethan, is five years old now. He was only a baby when it became apparent that he was one of those unfortunate children to have ear canals shaped in such a way that earaches and ear infections become a fact of life. As parents, we learned to be alert to the earliest symptoms, to keep antibiotics in the refrigerator, and to hope that the child would grow in such a way that the problem resolves itself.

The hardest part is those long hours between the time the infection is recognized and when the antibiotics gain sufficient foothold to diminish the swelling and the pain. It was during one of those endless spans of time when Ethan, then three years old, sat on the sofa with tears running down his little face. Somehow my comforting embrace seemed insufficient. “What if I’m not around when this happens?” “What if he outgrows his faith in me, faster than he outgrows his earaches?” I wanted him to learn to accept pain and to gain control over it; that skill would be with him throughout his life.

I snuggled close to him and slowly removed my shielding arm while we talked. “It’s really sad to have an earache, Ethan.” I affirmed his unfortunate status. “I hope that none of your pals in the bedroom has an earache.” Ethan giggled thinking whether any of his stuffed toys might have a problem similar to his own. At three, it’s hard to figure these things out.

There on the sofa, we let our imaginations carry us around the
bedroom, examining each stuffed animal and speculating on the possibilities. "The giraffe has little-bitty ears, and if one did hurt, would the pain make it all the way down that long neck?"

"And poor Fred! If he had an earache, it would really be something!" Ethan agreed that the toy bassett with the long ears and the sad face would have the biggest problem of all.

The game seemed to capture Ethan and enfold him in the possibilities. Pain is experienced differently by each individual.

Then we came to Milton, a very special teddy bear. Ethan named Milton after his own middle name. The remarkable thing about Milton is that he can unzip his fur coat and underneath he has a pair of bright red longjohns!

"I wonder if Milton ever has any ow's?" It seemed a reasonable possibility. "I wonder what Milton does when he has an ow?"

I wondered, but Ethan knew. "He unzips his coat and puts it on the chair. Then he goes to bed." We both sat there several minutes marveling over what a wonderful bear Milton is.

"Ethan, I wonder what it would be like if you had a zipper that ran all around your face, down to your tummy, that unzipped your skin?" I ran my finger along the path of the imaginary zipper. At first, he collapsed in laughter, but as I slowly, intently, continued, he became quiet. We pretended to slowly remove Ethan's skin, back from around his face, over his head. Then we pulled his arms and legs out like one would remove a snowsuit. I carefully took the imaginary garment and placed it on the far end of the sofa. Ethan was blissfully relaxed.

Whereas I helped Ethan and guided him through his first lesson, he picked it up from there. Ethan and Milton have shared a lot. Ethan continues to use Milton and the lesson that Milton taught him whenever he has an earache or any of the other "ows" that are an inevitable part of childhood.

Can parents encourage their children to be individuals, or does it just turn out that way?

THE ENCOURAGEMENT OF INDIVIDUALITY

Betty Alice: How did Milton Erickson encourage individuality in his children? It may sound like an easy question for one of his children to answer. In fact, when several of us were discussing ideas for this panel, I thought up this topic and was pleased when everyone agreed
on it. This will be a breeze, I thought. But the more I thought about it, the more specific I tried to be, the more I tried to narrow it down, the harder and more complex the question became.

Please realize I include our mother, Elizabeth Erickson, in all that I say. She was equally involved in our raising. So, how did they teach us to become happily individualistic?

I have thought off and on about this topic ever since I had to make a genogram of my family of origin for a class. For that genogram, I had to think about each of my brothers and sisters—draw comparisons and make distinctions between them. It was then that I was first struck by the differences in each of us even though we’re similar in so many ways. I guess individuality can be defined as following your own course, as knowing that your differences from others are not only okay, but a part of what makes you and life enjoyable. Another part of that definition is, I think, that appreciating your own differences enables you to accept and appreciate and even seek out differences in other people—in all areas of your life.

After I had defined individuality in my own way, I began to think about how that had been encouraged in me as I grew up. First, perhaps foremost, was that we were never compared to each other or to anyone else. I don’t remember it ever happening. Now, that is not to say that I wasn’t given specific instructions on how to behave: Good girls do the dishes without complaining, curfew is at 10 o’clock on school nights, and arguing with brothers and sisters is not the way to act.

It’s not as though I was never praised. I made most of my own clothes and some of my sisters’, I got good grades, and I was a great cook. I was praised for all those things and more.

Each instruction, however, each expectation, each acknowledgement, each piece of appreciation or praise that I received was especially for me. It was given as though I were an only child, the only person in the world, almost. The expectations, the discipline, the praise—none of them had anything to do with anyone else. This was so firm a precept that even now, I can hardly imagine Daddy or Mama comparing me with anyone else. I was, and am, me—good, bad or indifferent.

Added to and part of that was the carefully taught appreciation of the uniqueness of my brothers and sisters. We were encouraged to ask each other for help. Each of us had areas of strength; we were always encouraged to take advantage of the expertise available
to us in our family. We still do that. This is not to say that we always use the expertise or take the advice that is offered. Far from it. I may decide the other person is not so expert after all, and that my way is better. Or I may recognize that the other person’s ideas are better than mine, but I like my way better. The important thing, to me, is that I have them available to me just as they have me, with no obligation implied that I must do as they recommend. I am an individual, they are individuals, and who’s to say who is the wiser.

Another way individuality and the appreciation of individuality were taught to me was through the relationships I had with the variety of people around me as I grew up. When I was a little girl, the family lived on the grounds of mental hospitals. Some of my best friends were patients. I can still remember my brother, Robert, sharing his tricycle with one of his patient friends. When I was a little older, Daddy had his office in our house. His patients sat in our living room. A large number of people passed through our house, and our lives, and some of them, believe me, were unusual. However, their differences and unusualness were accepted outright. They may have been Daddy’s patients, but many of them became our friends.

I think a basic condition for developing individuality in yourself is a belief that differences in people are to be accepted and, more than that, valued. Without that belief, it would be almost impossible to develop your own individuality and be comfortable with your differences from other people. Daddy’s patients helped to teach me to accept and value differences.

Another way in which I believe individuality was fostered in me was the way that Daddy liked an outcome which incorporated all sorts of benefits on the path to that outcome. Usually, those pathways were not straight-line paths; they curved and meandered about as they picked up an advantage here and a good point there. (This is not nearly as complicated as it sounds.)

For example, Daddy enjoyed a fire in the fireplace. To get to that outcome, he traveled the path of benefit to all. There is a lot of waste wood around, even in cities. People prune their trees and trim their shrubs; branches fall from trees in storms. This wood just creates problems for everyone—the street sweeper, the trashmen, and those in charge of the city dump. So we children, certainly the ones who grew up in Arizona, kept sharp eyes out for recent tree trimmings and fallen branches. If you were to look for these, and I still do,
you'd be amazed at how much there is. Whenever we found some wood, we would hurry home and get our wagon, pull it back and load it up. We would have huge piles of wood balanced precariously on the wagon. It would usually take two of us—one to tug the wagon, the other to walk along beside, balancing the load which was always too heavy. We'd drag it home, unload the wagon, saw the wood into neat lengths and then stack it in tidy piles for use in the fireplace. A fireplace can burn a lot of wood, even in Arizona, and Daddy like to have plenty on hand in case lean times came. So these trips were frequent occurrences.

As I got older, I began to hate to go get wood. Once, when I complained that I didn't want to do it, Daddy seemed puzzled: I was getting exercise; I felt pride when I saw the neat rows of stacked firewood; I enjoyed the fire; I was even cleaning up the environment. Best of all, it was all for free. What more could I want out of life? (I never could think of a good enough answer, though I assure you I racked my brain every time I pulled that wagon along.)

Now that I'm grown, I've thought about the wood-gathering expeditions in a different way. I think that experience of doing something that was so very different from anything my friends did and doing it in such a natural and matter-of-fact way, with an emphasis on the end result, carried a powerful message to me. I'm not trying to convince anyone, including myself, that Daddy was not interested in getting firewood. To the contrary. The use of waste wood for our fireplace was another important consideration. But Daddy loved to have multiple meanings attached to any act. Nothing pleased him more than having several benefits happen from one piece of behavior, and it was especially pleasing if the end results could hardly be traced directly. Now I am certain he knew then that we would gain a base of security from our wood-gathering trips. I do know that today I can do things very differently from my friends and feel quite comfortable doing so. I can tease them—look at what I've got just because I'm not afraid to do things that others think odd.

Another way in which I was helped to be confident in my individuality was through my parents' reactions to goals I set. When I decided over 20 years ago that I wanted to move to Australia, Daddy was able to look at the move through my eyes and anticipate the adventure with me. He made no judgments and offered no advice. He respected my individuality enough to accept what I had decided to do. He was proud of the fact that I had sold almost everything
I owned in order to get enough money to move to Australia just for fun. He was proud because I was pleased with what I was doing. He would have been just as proud, I'm sure, had I decided to stay and continue to teach school in Michigan. I think his pride in my accomplishments was not so much a pride in the accomplishment itself as it was something else. Pride in a particular accomplishment carries with it a certain burden. I think Daddy was proud of me because I was doing what I wanted, and I was doing it happily and productively. I think the kind of respect, acceptance and pride that he demonstrated is an extraordinarily powerful tool to teach a person acceptance of, respect for, and pride in one's own individuality.

Daddy was never afraid to be different. In fact, he enjoyed it. He conveyed that to me as a value worth having. He would look for opportunities to show all of us the pleasures of trying the different. There are so many ways to teach children that. For instance, I've eaten beaver, elk, squirrel, rattlesnake, thousand-year-old eggs, poi, Rocky Mountain oysters, squid, and countless other unusual foods. Some of them were pretty good; some of them were just awful. But I always enjoyed the new and different experience.

There is a price for everything. What was the cost of individuality for me? Sometimes I feel a little removed—some of the things which are very important to many of the people I'm around are not that important to me. Sometimes I feel as if I'm regarded as different when I don't really want to be seen as the odd one.

But I think the enjoyment of life I have gained from my sense of secure individuality far outweighs any inconveniences it may have brought, and I have tried to instill individuality in my own children. Sometimes when I look at them, adults now, going their own ways, doing what they want to do, I think that I have succeeded. I hope so.

Question: If your Dad was always seeing patients, how much time did he have to spend with the family? If the patients were in your home, how could you have dinner together? Tell us more about quality time you had with your Dad.

Betty Alice: I have wondered about that myself because, as Kristi mentioned at a previous meeting, Daddy did not attend our graduations, and he didn't do some of the things that you might think parents should do. He did spend time with us. We did lawn work with him; we dug in the gardens with him; he admired our "stupid"
firewood. He used to lie down in the time between his patient appointments, and I can remember sitting on the foot of the bed when he was lying there and just talking to him. I think because his office was in our house it gave him the opportunity to spend bits and pieces of time which probably added up. I also think that when he paid attention to us, he really paid attention.

Lance: I remember Dad spending a great deal of time with us, or so it seemed; maybe there is a time distortion factor there. In our early years he would play ball with us, despite the fact that he would have to play ball while using a cane. Bert and I enjoyed this play immensely. He would also come out and review the work we had done in the garden, which we didn’t enjoy. That was one of the ways we learned that when you do a job, you should do it well, because we knew what his expectations were, but not because he would tell us directly. When we worked in the garden, he, having lived on a farm, really didn’t expect to see any weeds when we got through hoeing. Bert and I didn’t think it was that important. However, after his going back two or three times and saying, “Did you notice that little weed in the row of beans there?” we worried that he would think maybe we should do all the beans again because we might have missed other weeds. We got the idea that he wanted us to do the job well, so we were more careful about it.

I think the evening meals were examples of family time when we would all be included in what was going on. The conversation might be with one individual or just be general playfulness. We were always expected to be there and, of course, if one didn’t show up on time, one did without dessert—added incentive to be on time. So everybody would be there at mealtimes. Afterwards, Dad would tell White Tummy or other stories. This was very high quality time in our memories and quite sufficient.

He might stay up until midnight or later, working or writing. Sometimes he stayed up because of his allergies or physical pain when he could not sleep anyway. He kept long hours, and the time he spent with us was valued a lot.

Question: I seem to recall in an article I read there was a story where somebody, one of the males of the family, cut his leg severely and had to have stitches in it. Your father used a distraction technique which I have found very helpful with my own son.

Mrs. Erickson: That was the first summer we spent in Arizona. Allan
fell and cut his leg quite badly. We were very new here, of course, but we did know there was a doctor’s office nearby, so we took him over there. It so happened that his older sister sometime previously had had to have quite a few stitches for an injury. Somehow Dad appealed to Allan to make sure he had more stitches than his sister. He was instructed to count them. Allan was seven years old at the time and tended to be a very bossy little boy. So when he got to the doctor’s office, he ordered the doctor to put in stitches and use black thread so they would show. And he was to be sure to put a lot of stitches. This was the distraction. Looking back, I can just see Allan doing all this because that was the kind of little boy he was.

Question: Was this use of distraction a frequent pain intervention that your Dad used?

Betty Alice: All of us, I think, learned how to use hypnosis and self-hypnosis on pain, and all of us have taught it to our children. Roxie gave an example of teaching it very specifically. My children can all do it. I don’t know how they learned, but they can turn off pain. My one son has had root canal work, and he read a comic book as the dentist worked on his mouth. He doesn’t have any pain. So, all of us benefitted by that learning from Daddy.

Kristi: Another distraction in our home regarding injuries with cuts was that we weren’t supposed to bleed on the carpet because bloodstains are hard to get out. So a concern was not only that one had a cut, but also that it was necessary to get this situation under control... keep the cut from dripping until whoever was hurt could get to the sink. I can remember that I had this bad cut from gathering firewood. The log had fallen on my leg. My brother carried me into the house. He laid me on the floor, then they pulled Dad out of the office. (You know, Dad’s a doctor and he would look at it and tell us what to do.) He looked at me on the floor, and he said, “Get her off the rug.” I tell you, it took me aback. So I got up, cut and all. Then he said, “Get that wrapped up and have her go get some stitches.” I walked out to get it taken care of, but it really took me aback. He changed our perspective. Then, we worried about the rug.

Roxie: One more comment on the pain control: All of the females in the family have been taught to use hypnosis during childbirth. We are all very comfortable in that area.

Lance: I probably learned this from Dad, but I don’t know when or how. We used to go to the dentist, and in the old days it wasn’t as
pleasant as it is today. The techniques, the drills, everything; I mean, you felt everything. They didn’t always use a shot to ease the pain. I learned at quite an early age a technique that I have used ever since. It is very effective for me, especially when having dental work. I psych myself up in advance. Just prior to or on the trip over to the dentist’s office, I build up horrible, awful sensations of how much pain there is involved in going to the dentist. I imagine just how much this can possibly hurt me. When I actually get to the dentist and he starts drilling, it’s not that bad. It’s always minimal compared to the expectation.

Regarding vocational directions: People have often asked me how Dad influenced our directions in life. Kristi has answered that she never felt pushed to go into any particular area. I was undecided at one point between law, medicine, psychology, or something in business. One way or another, I narrowed all these down to nothing and didn’t go into any of them for various reasons. But I got the distinct impression from Dad and Mom that whatever I chose would be fine as long as it was something that would give me personal satisfaction. That was the major criterion in determining what we did with our lives: that we gain satisfaction from what we did. We were to be happy with it.

I changed careers once, although I was not particularly dissatisfied with my first choice. I liked it, but I found some undesirable aspects related to the business aspect of that vocation. I ended up in education, which gave me more satisfaction. The only thing I remember Dad instilling is the idea that if you get into something, business or a job or whatever, you want to do it as well as you can. I think we all have had the idea instilled in us in various ways—often by the reinforcement we got for what we accomplished. Even when we were very young, we would work like crazy to build or make things for Christmas presents for Mom and Dad. They really appreciated that, and they gave us strong reinforcement. It might have been a god-awful, put-together thing that a kid might make, but it was the best we could do. Because we would spend hours and hours on it, we got a great deal of reinforcement for that. I think that has helped us a great deal in our present lives.

Question: How did Dr. Erickson handle any type of agitation or fighting amongst yourselves?
Lance: Shall we quarrel over who answers this? I will be glad to start.
When we lived at Eloise, Bert and I lived in a room apart. The family had an apartment but it was located on four different floors of the building... the basement, the first floor, the second floor, and the third floor. We had bedrooms apart simply because there wasn't enough room in the building. It was a mental hospital, and we lived in a part of one of the buildings where the patients lived. Mom and Dad would come down when Bert and I had a bedroom on the first floor and say goodnight to us. On occasion, they might come down even later and note evidence of destruction in the room, but kind of ignore it. Because Bert and I had differences of opinion, we got into some very disagreeable fights. He was stronger, but I was taller. We would break things, like furniture. I know they couldn't avoid noticing the damage, but Dad seemed to accept that as a normal part of growing up, as long as we weren't breaking arms or causing wounds. We needed to learn on our own about getting along with each other. So, he would let us do it. And, we never did cause each other any permanent damage. Maybe he was just risking that, or maybe it was due to his trust in a natural kind of holding back. On lots of occasions he would allow us to fight it out and just ignore us.

Roxie: I have four small children under the age of seven. They fight quite a bit. My parents and I did not handle these problems in the way that I see most of my peer group handling their children. That is, we are not interested in who started the fight or even who is really at fault. The children are fighting, they are going to have to settle it on their own in their own way, but not break the basic rules. They are not to disrupt the household, they are not to break objects in the household, they are not to injure each other, but they can just go off and settle the fight in whatever way, between the two of them, they are able to do that. And with those rules, it is very rare that parental intervention is really necessary.

Kristi: I can remember hiding the fights that I had with my sister and brother from my parents. They didn't seem to know that we fought. As for the hurting each other, the basic rules were, you could not be cruel to each other. It is all right to say, "You are tall and skinny," but not to say something cruel. I can remember receiving a severe lecture about that on the one occasion I transgressed.

Question: Was discipline handled exclusively by your father, and if not, did your father and mother agree on your discipline?
Answers from various Ericksons at one time: They always agreed, they always supported one another. No, they did not always agree, they always supported each other.

Lance: Please recognize we are not always in agreement, but I do agree our parents did support each other very well when a decision was made about discipline. But they did not take the same type of actions in disciplining us. In fact, Mom would stick up for us on numerous occasions when she felt that Dad's punishment was too severe. Mom did punish us and did use the same kinds of techniques as Dad, but hers seemed more benign than Dad's.

Question: Then, evidently, Dr. Erickson usually directed the disciplining?
Lance: It was simply a matter of who would discover the situation—whether it was Mom who saw us quarreling or whether it was Dad.
Betty Alice: And I can remember one thing which worked for us, and I did it with my children. We used to like to read the Oz books. I can remember, if I were mean to my brother, or my sister was mean to me, the quarreling pair had to sit down together and the oldest had to read to the youngest. And by the time we got done reading half the story, the fight was over. We liked each other again, and we got to finish the book or the chapter in a nice, warm way. And I thought that was a very good way to handle some of our arguments.
Lance: With respect to punishments, I think our parents were very creative about making them constructive and beneficial. For example, if we had transgressed in some way, one of the things that we often had to do was to crack nuts. We enjoyed gathering walnuts, black walnuts, and hickory nuts, even though we knew what would happen in the long run. When we did something bad, we would have to crack a certain amount of nuts. But we loved what Mom made with those walnuts and hickory nuts, hickory nut bread and things like that. They were great. So, we enjoyed the results but the punishment was tedious. To get a half cup of hickory nut meats is many hours of work. We didn't always appreciate doing it, but I think it was a very positive way to approach punishment. Everything our parents did for and with their children was intended to be creative and constructive. We all appreciate that even more as we grow older.
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