

TOPIC REVIEW

Video Conversations by Jay Haley and John Weakland

Triangle Productions

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Remembering Milton H. Erickson, M.D.

Remembering Milton H. Erickson, M.D., is a videotape featuring an informal conversation between Jay Haley and John Weakland on the topic of their professional remembrances of Milton Erickson. Each had worked on an on-going basis with Erickson beginning in 1955. "He was young and we were young and everyone was energetic" — the discussants were in a growth phase in their own professional development and clearly enthusiastic with the opportunity to work with him. They continued periodic meetings with Erickson over the years and were the first to try to pinpoint Erickson's methods with trance step by step. Haley continued regular meetings with Erickson through 1971. Haley and Weakland certainly represent exceptional students as Erickson represented an exceptional teacher.

Remembering Erickson is a videotape distributed by Triangle Productions. The video led Weakland and Haley to recognize that they also had invaluable recollections about Gregory Bateson and the work they did with him, and subsequently, a second video, *Remembering Gregory Bateson* was produced. The Bateson tape is a bit more polished; the beginning and conclusion are a bit smoother. The Erickson tape almost begins mid-sentence and the viewer feels as though he or she has popped in on a conversation between two good friends that is already in progress.

They describe their meetings with Erickson which originally came about as an offshoot of the Bateson project. Originally, they reminisced, they regarded him with awe. They remembered viewing Erickson's ability to communicate with his patients almost as though there were some-

thing magical about it. They remember it irritated Erickson, who insisted they observe more carefully to discover exactly what he did and how he did it. They then learned the only "magical" element to Erickson's work was the way he was able to integrate his conceptualizations about the patient and the methods that patient used to communicate and understand the world. Then, Erickson was able to conceal the actual interventions of psychotherapy that were being done into conversation with that patient. Since they worked with Erickson, he has become widely recognized for his contributions to indirect suggestions and the uses of metaphors as therapeutic tools.

The two talk about Erickson's ability to motivate people to move beyond perceptions of their own limits. It is clear that they are talking about themselves as well as the patients Erickson described to them and the patients with whom Erickson worked while they observed. Erickson's way of making each case unique can be seen as metaphorical for the way the patients felt while working with him—that they were unique and able. All of this, they remark, they learned from their own observations and from their conversations with him. They also began to appreciate fully that he worked with extensive deliberation and preparation. His flexibility and willingness to put in long hours of planning also were central pillars that supported his remarkable abilities. They discuss how their understanding and insights about Erickson and his work changed with this greater understanding.

The nature of their conversation is filled with humor as well as with fascinating tidbits of fact. A few may perceive this warm style, which by the definition of a conversation becomes non-linear, as a weakness. True, it does not provide all the specific dates and facts a serious student might want. However, my own reaction is that this informal style is a strength of this video. There were metaphors and stories, and multiple levels of learning within, presented to the viewer, to be grasped immediately or later.

Every concept, indeed, virtually every aspect of Erickson and his work

that they discuss is lavishly illustrated with fascinating case material. The memories that each have are inextricably intertwined with stories and enticing glimpses of Erickson working with patients. In fact, the tape becomes a metaphor for how Erickson worked — the teaching material is so interspersed with the stories that learning and expansion take place without the viewer realizing how much is being learned. This is experiential learning at its finest from the men who worked with the man who pioneered this way of therapy.

To hear what exceptional students regard as being most important from their exceptional teacher provides an unexpected and incomparable source for personal growth. I am left with the hope that Haley's and Weakland's students do for them what they have done for Erickson — that they provide their recollections, some of what they learned and how they learned it—for the benefit of students-yet-to-come.

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papers, the two men, luminaries on their own merits, share commentary on the magnitude of his contributions. They then agree that whatever is said about Bateson's sweeping ideas, there are whole other ideas that are not even addressed. His ability to raise questions, to refocus ideas to fundamental concepts obviously provided a framework for the examination of the nature of mankind. Bateson's framework which stimulates an ongoing quest for knowledge, still provides a valuable tool decades after his initial work.

Bateson had a lengthy and highly productive collaboration with Margaret Mead and the two of them made a comprehensive and still valuable study of the culture of Bali. Weakland pointed out that Bateson thought on two levels — either very abstract or very specific. He was not easily able to fill in the "middle-ground." Mead once remarked that in her and Bateson's collaboration, one of her functions was to fill in that middle ground. Pieces of the original film of these Balinese studies are interspersed in this part of the video. The Mead and Bateson study of trance states in Balinese dancing had led Bateson to Erickson. That friendship and collaboration was instrumental in Haley's work with Erickson and his own study of hypnosis. Bateson's ongoing interest in hypno-

sis and trance later influenced Haley's own work. Bateson once mused, "What is trance?" a question of clarification. As Haley thought about this, he knew he wanted to study and write about the interpersonal side of hypnosis.

Indicative of the interesting conversational style of this video, Weakland and Haley remark how their own interest in studying the use of film and the impact of film on the viewer is one of the common bonds between them and Bateson. Haley had been studying films, analyzing them from a Freudian perspective, still a useful framework. Bateson used films as a vehicle for study in a more social context. Weakland's incisive abilities contributed to making this part of the project even more valuable. The two continued to speak about other areas in which Bateson asked provocative questions, which stimulated their future work. There was considerable freedom in the Communication Project which allowed basic work on the understanding of the importance of hierarchies, influence, manipulation and power, and how these are achieved within a social structure. In this video, even the different dialects used in a power structure, the differences between those who have power and those who do not, in families as well as in society at large are mentioned. Weakland and Haley each made significant contributions in this broad

aspect of family therapy.

Anthropological studies led to Bateson's interest in psychiatry in 1949. In 1951 he co-authored with Jurgen Ruesch *Communication: The Social Matrix of Psychiatry*, which still contains basic principles for understanding psychiatric ideas. Bateson received funding from the Rockefeller Foundation for his seminal project on communication, which then developed into a long-term undertaking lasting from 1952 to 1962. The initial grant was given after Bateson met with Chester Barnard, a maverick in the field of organizational psychology. From Bateson's landmark communication project came a large number of innovative ideas and studies about specific aspects of the human condition, including work on the nature of schizophrenia. The project changed the face, practice and theories of psychotherapy and marked the beginning of family therapy as we know it, as well as giving broad understandings and insights about people overall.

Bateson worked in a style, which was creative and certainly innovative. The standard way of learning about an idea was to examine data and produce a hypothesis, which was then tested. Bateson reversed that. He believed in beginning with a fundamental idea about the world, an idea that had been developed by mankind

over the eons, and then going to the data. He did not think significant ideas could be reached starting with an examination of data. As Haley describes, after evaluating the gathered data, "you produce a new fundamental idea or modify the old one. It is a different process of reasoning." This paradigm shift perhaps remains one of Bateson's most powerful legacies.

A man on the cutting edge of science, Bateson was a visiting professor at respected universities throughout the United States and even a Regent for the University of California systems. However, he was never a tenured professor perhaps because his innovative and creative way of thinking did not fit well in academia. In fact, Bateson was a provocative and influential man, a creative and confusing thinker. Both agree that if he were sitting with them, "you and I would shift to a higher level of discourse. Because that's what he did. He forced you to work at your highest level of thinking. To have a research director who does that, what more could you ask?" Indeed, what more can a student of anthropology, psychiatry, communication, therapy, or thinking ask?

Reviewed by:

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