

This month, we introduce a new column titled, "In the Spirit of Therapy."

It is a response to what many therapists have asked for: more recognition of the spiritual dimension in what we do as therapists. Some have wanted to feel more affirmed in what they thought by hearing how others deal with spirituality questions. Some have hoped for more recognition of how much spirituality is an aspect of psychotherapy. Not only do they see their work with clients as an expression of their faith, they recognize the almost sacred nature of rapport.

Hearing others discuss how relational work can be spiritual in nature is affirming to many. For some therapists, this awareness has been intuitive and evolving. For others, it has been a foundational part of their work for many years. It is as if psychotherapy now can claim and acknowledge that the intimacy and respect required to form a therapeutic relationship induces what many refer to as a spiritual experience. We hope to invite thought and recognition of this dimension in our life and clinical work.

We're excited about this new forum, too, because it will focus on the spiritual dimension of some of the top therapists in the world. Using an interview format, we'll present internationally important therapists discussing their perspective on spirituality.

We will explore several areas with Newsletter's guests, asking such things as how they see spirituality impacting, informing, and sustaining them as therapists, and individuals. We will ask such things as how spirituality affects their practice of psychotherapy, and how it affects their clients' issues, life processes and progress.

By emphasizing spirituality and sidestepping the whole question of religion, we hope to offer something for most people, without getting stuck with religious "correctness." We will explore experiences that many of us can identify with at a deep, human level.

In some ways, the spirituality question also addresses how we personally let in the positive recognition and wonder of nature to nurture our work and ourselves.

Although we will not be seeking to identify the faith groups of the master therapists, potentially the different perspectives that will emerge from a wide variety of backgrounds, faith groups, and beliefs will provide more tools for identifying with each other and for dealing with the spiritual dimension of our varied clients.

One goal of the column is to present the experiences, thoughts and observations of the masters in ways that help all of us understand them better.

As this is the Milton H. Erickson Foundation Newsletter, it seemed most appropriate to address the spirituality of Dr. Erickson in the first column. Betty Alice Erickson and Roxanna Erickson Klein were both generous in being willing to share their experiences and observations of their father's spiritual side. The differences each daughter saw and experienced points to the multifaceted nature of his spirituality.

Ernest Rossi has agreed to give his views on spirituality for the next issue.

John Lentz

IN THE SPIRIT OF THERAPY

Milton H. Erickson

Betty Alice Erickson and Roxanna Erickson Klein

interviewed by John Lentz

John Lentz (JL): *I have a few questions I would like to ask about the ways in which Dr. Erickson's spiritual orientation interfaced with his professional work.*

Roxanna Erickson Klein (REK): Our parents did not approach spiritual education in a traditional manner. They encouraged each of us to seek our own perceptions and understandings of the divine.

Betty Alice Erickson (BAE): I knew reverence and spirituality were

ingrained in all of us. I don't think people realize how hard Dad worked to instill that, certainly in me. He showed it rather than just talking about it.

JL: *What did he teach you about God?*

BAE: Dad focused on the marvels of the world rather than the definition of God, on "who" or "what." When I was young, he liked to show me geese flying overhead in that wonderful V formation. We had many discussions about marvels of the world.

REK: As children we were encouraged to do a comparative investigation of as many religious groups that interested us. We were urged to read the writings of different religions, and to find our own internal balance. Dad constantly taught us to seek the truth from within. The wonder of life defies explanation, yet the expanse of the universe resonates within each cell.

JL: *Clearly your father treated each of you as individuals and nurtured your spirituality by focusing your attention on what he believed would impact you.*

BAE: In Phoenix especially our home was filled with items from other cultures. Mom and Dad had an excellent collection of native artifacts. Dad always enjoyed asking visitors to find the deliberate errors in the Navajo rugs – put there by the weavers to show the gods the weavers know they are not perfect.

REK: I was quite interested in Native American religions— Phoenix is both surrounded by, and permeated with, the influence of its rich heritage. Dad encouraged my interest and always expressed a profound respect for the beliefs that are part of different cultural groups.

BAE: Dad showed respect for the world in so many ways. In Michigan, our older brothers brought turtles from the creek who would stay for a while on the porch among his cherished cactus plants. Snapping turtles have no teeth, he explained, showing me the inside of their little yellow mouths. But their gums were awfully sharp and we watched their jaws cut right through a stick holding their dinner fly. He showed me how to see with awe the common turtle, unchanged since before the dinosaurs; he taught respect and caution without the usual parental lectures.

As I look back, he was creating wonderful circular interactions. I got to learn; his reward was watching me absorb reverence.

JL: *How did religion interface with his views on learning?*

REK: He encouraged healthy affiliations that strengthened us in our own individual ways. Different people respond differently to the surroundings of religious groups, the support of friends and even the love of family. He really emphasized learning about the self and understanding one's individual potential to respond and grow in a positive direction. He was firmly committed to the scientific framework as the foundation of knowledge. He strongly believed that knowledge is advanced through systematic and diligent investigation.

BAE: Mankind has always had some sort of religion, some sort of higher power. And there is much that we don't understand. Those two statements do not conflict with Dad's scientific beliefs—they show the intertwining.

JL: *Was there a difference in the way that he addressed spirituality issues with his patients than he did with his children?*

REK: Of course, patients often would come with specific problems in mind -- but when they worked with him, he responded with ideas that involved a global outlook on life, a way of living and being. I doubt that many differences exist in the ways that he addressed spirituality issues between patients and family members. He wanted us all to live *giving lives* -- as fully, as righteously, and as productively as humanly possible.

BAE: Patients felt and understood Dad's innate respect for other people's perspective on a very deep level. They also knew that they were responsible to live wholesome productive lives and Dad would, and could, help them.

JL: *So how did he respond when his children asked him questions about religious ideas?*

REK: He would usually begin to talk about plants, and the next thing I knew I would be deciding whether to plant a morning glory or a rose. The conversation would go on for months, or years, as we watched and reflected on the life cycles of the plants around us.

BAE: Dad showed me that there is much more than we can possibly under-

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stand intellectually. I remember discussions about the stars—he even showed me how to find the North Star. He told how prehistoric people used the stars to navigate over land and water. Decades later my own family camped in East Africa where there was no contaminating light. The sky was jammed full of stars, unbelievably beautiful and bright. Daddy and I talked again about the marvels of the universe.

After his death I was teaching in Brazil. All the lights were turned off at night. The moon was just a sliver, the stars so bright I could read by their radiance. I took my blankets to my room's balcony so the stars were the last thing I saw as I fell asleep. That night, I dreamed about Daddy in the heavens with the stars.

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