

**J. Charles Theisen,
MA, MBA, JD,
MA, PhD**

Interviewed by Roxanna Erickson Klein

BACKGROUND: Charles (Chuck) Theisen is a member of the Board of Directors of the Milton H. Erickson Foundation since 1981. With degrees in law, business, history and psychology he provides important behind-the-scenes guidance to the decisions that are made and the ways in which the Foundation is managed. Interested in a variety of community service activities, Theisen also participates in other non-profit organizations, including Childhelp, Homeward Bound, and Yo San University of Chinese Medicine. He is owner and CEO of Phoenix Motor Company in downtown Phoenix and is building a new Mercedes dealership in Peoria, Arizona.

Roxanna Erickson Klein (REK): Hi. I asked for the oppor-



tunity to interview you because you have a really unique view of the Erickson Foundation and I would like readers to have the opportunity to learn more about your ideas.

J. Charles Theisen (CT): Thank you for the honor.

REK: You are a member of the Board of Directors of the Foundation. Can you tell us how you first became interested in the work of the Foundation?

JCT: I had done some work with Dr. Erickson after finishing my Masters degree in clinical psychology

and benefited greatly. I wanted to give back by helping the dissemination of his creative approach to therapy. I was fascinated by his ability to turn off conscious resistance to therapeutic interventions; or heal the patient's problem by intervening in family dynamics; or create a change in some seemingly unrelated lifestyle issue which had the effect of healing the presenting problem.

REK: How did you meet Jeffrey Zeig?

CT: We met briefly at the first Erickson Congress. After referring a number of people to him I offered to help on some legal and business issues. We were both interested in the technical changes in the entertainment industry and our friendship partially evolved into a male bonding pattern of playing Pac Man and Cobra in video game parlors at odd hours of afternoons and evenings while sharing source material on strategies for reaching higher levels of these games at other times.

REK: A lot can be said about enjoying what you do. Are you still

finding so much fun in your work together?

CT: We kid around a lot. We both enjoy seeing and working with variations in human response to unusual/usual stimuli. We often discuss different philosophical/practical approaches to human behavior taken from spiritual/historical/business/legal realms and correlate these with various therapeutic approaches to test their intellectual validity across various disciplines. It's amazing how taking absurd positions can sometimes lead to useful solutions.

REK: What makes the Foundation unique or different from other non-profits?

CT: It is self-funding to a large extent and, unlike most non-profits, doesn't depend on the largess of interested donors for its continued existence. For someone involved with many nonprofits, as I am, it is unique to have one organized in such a way that the nonprofit's own educational programs can fund its mission. Usually, in this and other fields, such

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self-sustaining organizations are for-profit.

That is not to say all our programs support themselves or even that every year our programs develop enough revenue to fund our activities in that particular year, because we have had several years in the red. So, of course, we accept donations when people feel aligned with our mission to want to help. Many people who were healed or advanced significantly in their professional development have made significant contributions, and we are grateful to have them with us in our mission.

REK: What about economic uncertainties—how do they affect the business and the decisions that are made. What about taking risks?

CT: Managed care has led to dramatic changes in the number of therapeutic sessions that can be paid for by insurance. Therapists have been economically impacted, and they have had to look carefully at the money they spend on training and professional development. We are uniquely situated for such an environment because our emphasis always has been oriented toward briefer therapies.

Nonetheless, when the economy is down patients will be more oriented to doing without therapy and this affects therapist income which affects their attendance at our programs. So we need to be aware of the economy in planning where we have events because of travel cost for faculty and how many attendees we will have for hotel and meeting room space. As far as risk is concerned, sometimes we try programs in areas of practice we have not gone into before, utilizing recognized experts in that area who are aligned with us. Sometimes it works and sometimes it doesn't, but you can never be the best unless you are trying new things and failing once in awhile. Stale organizations go out of business as much as ones on the cutting edge, but the cutting edge business can thrive while the stale ones rarely do.

REK: How does your legal / business background shape your perspective as a Board Member?

CT: Within the range of possible projects available to us at any given

time I will favor those that will find the broadest interest among therapists. This lends itself to a continued ability to self-fund and effectively market our programs. In addition, identifying our core strengths and assets like the Erickson archives, then investing in protecting, preserving and making them more accessible helps insure our future. The Foundation also faces many potential legal issues in this litigious society which could distract us from our mission and pointing out the true lack of business/ legal merit to them helps keep us on track.

REK: What do you consider to be the most important elements of the Foundation?

CT: Its archives, its faculty, its students, its heritage and its director.

REK: Where would you like the Foundation to be a decade from now?

CT: Continuing to be self-funding, well respected in the field, at the cutting edge of new developments in therapy and run in an efficient and effective way to present programs and products which enhance psychotherapy in the world.

REK: What about you personally? Where would you like to be a decade from now and how does that fit with the Foundation?

CT: I will continue to develop a broad range of interests and influence in those areas where I feel I can make a contribution towards greater oneness in the world. By this I mean rising above the differences, conflicts and limitations engendered and promoted by various races, religions, genders, and national origins so that world problems such as drugs, terrorism, disease and environmental degradation can be significantly improved. For instance, when someone who gets sick with bird flu in Indonesia can infect someone who gets on a plane for the US resulting in the death of millions of Americans, then we have to care about who gets sick in Indonesia.

With the Internet and other technological developments, the world has shrunk in unexpected ways creating increased dangers from rigid interpretations of the "self" or who we are as individuals. Dissolving many aspects of the individuality so histori-

cally prized by our species for relative survival is paradoxically the only way we as a species can survive in tomorrow's world. Many times, I believe, how we most sharply distinguish ourselves from and thus fight in others derives from inner struggles that once healed leads to dissolution of many outward struggles. For me, this is a broader aspect of my involvement with the Erickson Foundation and its primary mission of spreading the incredibly creative healing work of Milton Erickson and its secondary mission of creating communication and connection between the different fields of psychotherapy.

REK: Looking back over the last 25 years of involvement with the Foundation, are there any specific activities or programs that have made a difference to you on a personal level?

CT: Like most people with a psychology background I am always trying to see if any theory or application I have been exposed to applies to me or a situation I am in or to anyone I know. There are so many ways to slice and dice the world, aren't there? So I have taken all these different approaches to life and used them as sharp tools to operate on many aspects of my broader influence group. For instance, Ellis' REBT model of crazy thoughts and cognitive therapy in general is satisfying intellectually. Yet, I like using Ericksonian experiential methods of delivering or working with those thoughts. Mary Goulding's redecision therapy is profound in finding fundamental childhood decisions, yet, again, I like using indirect Ericksonian hypnosis to get to and change early decisions in a metaphorical manner. I've used the mix-and-match approach on myself and others with salutary effect many times in many contexts over the years.

Nonetheless, I am constantly aware, as I believe Erickson was, that no theory ever matches all reality and that all of them are "doughnut truths" — they have many truths as well as a hole somewhere that you have to be wary of. This is emphasized in many of our programs. So one of my highest values is a holistic approach to all problems, which for me includes a strong spiritual dimension.

REK: Have there been any significant challenges that the Foundation has faced that you have participated in the resolution of?

CT: Many challenges are best

solved in ways where egos are not publically involved and thus, those resolutions have more stick-to-itiveness if they stay subrosa. That being said, the Evolution of Psychotherapy Conference was recently threatened by those leading the attempted takeover and removal of Al Ellis from the Albert Ellis Institute. They were attempting to bring us into their conflict with threats from their lawyers that would have altered his normal participation. In this case, as a lawyer/businessman, I could advise on the credibility of the threats as well as recommend a course of action that respected Al's great contributions to the field and the needs and wants of our attendees.

REK: In general, what are key elements of success in business — and how does that pertain to the Foundation?

CT: You have to first have something your customer wants. Second, you have to distinguish it from other organizations that offer similar things. Third, you have to get it to them in a cost effective manner for both them and you. Fourth, you have to constantly refine what you offer to make sure they are satisfied and want to keep coming back because your best customer is your repeat customer. They will give you stable support and bring you more customers by who they tell about you.

We offer professional development that fits well in the current managed care environment. We are different because of our long experience in conceptualizing successful events and the high level of experts we can bring. They are simply the best there are. Because of our experience and our relationships with different venues we can deliver these events in a manner that supports our programs while being very affordable for our customer's budgets. And we are constantly garnering feedback through written evaluations and verbal communication to evolve our products to better fit our customer's changing needs as they adapt to the changing managed care environment and the evolution of their practices based on other societal and field relevant trends.

REK: How do you choose which conferences to attend?

CT: In the beginning I attended all of the conferences but now I have a busy travel schedule that limits my

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ability to attend all them. Now I concentrate my attendance on where my expertise might be needed or when I have a personal interest in hearing a new speaker or a new approach to a subject area. I particularly like the Evolution conferences since there are so many approaches that I can always find something or someone who I have not experienced before.

REK: Are there any particular speakers or presentations that you would consider to be the most exceptional?

CT: We strive to invite only exceptional speakers to all our events – and at the Evolution we invite the speakers who are most acknowledged in the world at the present, those who we think will become so acknowledged because of the quality of what they offer--those who we think have important messages to deliver. We are mostly right and sometimes

wrong in our judgements on these things.

Jeff Zeig, of course, due to his constant worldwide travels and wide range of connections plays the greatest role in those choices, although the Board of Directors also makes recommendations. He also is consistently one of the highest rated speakers at all of our events and clearly one of the most exceptionally innovative and gifted psychotherapists of our time in the world.

My personal interest at this time is integrating spirituality and therapy since I believe it is ultimately "grace" that determines who is cured and who is not as well as who is successful in achieving happiness in life and who is not. I believe some speakers bring presence and experience to their teaching that is felt but not consciously known and that they have a profound impact on the lives of their

students and thus on their students clients. Not everyone on the Board sees this the same way I do.

REK: The Evolution Conference in 2005 was the largest ever. How else do you see the Foundation growing?

CT: Utilization, utilization, utilization are major watchwords of Ericksonian therapy. As we get our attendees feedback we will adjust to fill their professional development needs in line with the times and consistent with our resources. Additionally, we should see increased publication of books by the Foundation Press and the distribution of videos and CDs derived from our archives. Our archives represent the greatest collection of Erickson's work that cuts across all disciplines and all times. The more we can mine the variety of material and approaches that exist there, along with our

archives of all the presentations that have been made on our behalf over the 25 years of our existence, the more we will fulfill our nonprofit mission in this world.

REK: Which of the Foundation Activities give you the greatest sense of pride for your participation?

CT: The Evolution of Psychotherapy Conferences cause cross-fertilization of ideas in the field of psychotherapy that will ultimately be of great benefit to man and woman kind.

REK: Thank you for giving us some rare insight into the philosophy that has shaped the Milton H. Erickson Foundation.

CT: Thanks to all of our supporters who make The Milton H. Erickson Foundation a reality.