The Beginner’s Mind
The Collected Works of Milton H. Erickson
Volume 12 – Experiencing Hypnosis

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This volume is the third in a trilogy (volumes 10, 11, and 12), where Erickson and Rossi lay out the nature, processes, and development of Erickson’s approach and practice of hypnosis. Erickson is known for his indirect and naturalistic approach, but this developed over time. The first section is a transcript of what is known as The Ocean Monarch Lectures, whereby we “…witness his transition from the older authoritarian approach to hypnosis, to the new permissive approaches, which he pioneered.” (p. ix) The original book included two audio cassettes. These recordings are still available as Mp3s through the Erickson Foundation and a special code is given for download at no cost.

In addition to Ernest Rossi’s original introduction from 1981, there is a fresh, updated introduction from 2014. This brings us into the 21st century developments of our understanding of therapeutic hypnosis through psychobiology and psychosocial genomics.

Section I explores The Indirect Approaches to Hypnosis; Section II – Catalepsy in Hypnotic Induction and Therapy; Section III – Ideomotor Signaling in Hypnotic Induction and Therapy; and Section IV – The Experiential Learning of trance by the Skeptical Mind. These four original sections of the book are augmented by a special fifth section, Electrometric Correlates of the Hypnotic State, which explores the work of Leonard Ravitz and electrodynamic field measurements taken of numerous subjects, including Erickson himself.

Currently, there is a shift in our understanding of what creates effective therapy. Research shows, quite clearly, that the most important element of any therapy is the relationship between therapist and client. Another important element missing is the sensitivity to feedback from the client. Erickson describes in the Ocean Monarch Lecture his indirect approach where the client can “…feel free to respond to whatever degree they wish…” (p. 4) and the importance to “…establish a good conscious rapport…[to] let him know that you are definitely interested in him and his problems…” (p. 5) These comments may seem unremarkable today, but would have been controversial in 1957. The section still has a strong focus on the connection and the therapist’s skill, but Erickson gives the client control of what they want to reveal, when and how. It took decades to incorporate this client-centered approach into normal practice.

Following the various hypnotherapeutic methods in Section I, the second section focuses on catalepsy, which is “…recognized as one of the most characteristic phenomena of trance and hypnosis.” (p. 33) But, the authors make a point of the fact that there are “…spontaneous forms of catalepsy we can observe in everyday life,” (p. 33) providing a foundation for looking at trance as part of our natural qualities, rather than something unique to the actions of the hypnotist. We are reminded that the therapist is a facilitator of processes that can naturally emerge from the client. Catalepsy is a means of “…gauging a patient’s state of mental receptivity for appropriate stimuli.” (p. 41) It is so interesting to read where Erickson’s use of hand levitation and subsequent catalepsy was not successful and “training” for therapeutic trance could take some time. This was part of the motivation for Ernest Rossi as he developed his mirroring hands technique, which seems free of this resistance. Another important, but not consistent biomarker of trance, was the ideomotor response: physical movements that were not consciously directed, and therefore showing some degree of connection to implicit processes.

Section III turns the microscope on the concept of an ideomotor response. Historically, there is much evidence of “…the so-called automatism – apparently purposeful behavior that is carried out without normal awareness.” Since ancient times “…somnambulism (sleepwalking)…spirit writing (automatic writing), possession (multiple personality)…have been regarded with fascination.” (p. 112) There are several fascinating methods and expressions of ideomotor responses and we are introduced to another colleague of Erickson, Dr David Cheek, who later wrote a seminal volume on ideomotor and ideodynamic processes with Ernest Rossi: Mind-Body Therapy: Methods of Ideodynamic Healing in Hypnosis. (Norton, 1988)

Section IV is intriguing because it describes the learning of trance by the “sceptical mind.” Erickson believed that “…the best way to learn trance is by experiencing it.” (p. 181) The implication that the “trance” is something that the client possesses and learns, rather than something the therapist possesses and imposes on the client, is the message I received from this section. I expect that others may find their own message as we are taken into the trance experiences of Dr. Q. It is a journey well worth joining.

The editors introduce Section V, which explores the “electrometric correlates of the hypnotic state” (p. 259), by reproducing Leonard Ravitz’s paper published in Science in 1950. Ernest Rossi acknowledges in the Introduction that “…there has never been adequate confirmation of his work…” (p. xi) There has been some development of the equipment used to measure the electrometric changes over the progress of a therapeutic session and I participated in several experiments in the preparation of my book with Ernest Rossi, The Practitioner’s Guide to Mirroring Hands, where we publish our results. However, it is still a field awaiting more research. The results that are presented in Section V will certainly stimulate your curiosity. If you are looking for a PhD question, this is certainly an unresolved intrigue.

This volume addresses hypnosis as an experience that can be observed through biomarkers, behaviors, emotions, and machines. As usual, I had a “felt experience” as I read the volume. The direct transcriptions and their commentaries gave me a tingle of time travel. I felt transported into a room with Erickson and Rossi, and other fascinating characters like David Cheek, Leonard Ravitz, and Dr. Q. Even now, at Volume 12, this takes me by surprise. That is why I look forward to Volume 13 in just a few months. Wonderful!