The Beginner’s Mind

The Complete Works of Milton H. Erickson

Volume 13 – Healing in Hypnosis

Review by Richard Hill MA, MEd, MBMSc, DPC

This volume includes a reprint of a book first published in 1984, with transcripts and commentaries of lectures and workshops presented in the 1960s. Most interesting is that these transcripts include comments made by Erickson to the audience, which offers a unique glimpse into Erickson’s mind. Comments by Ernest Rossi were added later, so that readers can also get an objective view.

Rossi’s preface from 1984 takes us into Erickson’s world, that came to a close only a few years earlier: “Erickson loved the free play of nature…he gradually came to prefer ‘field experiments’ where he could utilize naturally occurring events to explore the nature of altered states and hypnotherapeutic approaches.” (p. xiv) A more recent introduction by Rossi in 2014 describes a new understanding of nature at the genomic level. In the frame of psychosocial genomics, we are able to look at behavior and affect as outward expressions that are connected to what is happening at microscopic levels, such as gene expression and epigenetic changes, which are biochemical adaptations that occur during the therapeutic process. Rossi ponders what might be possible if we could monitor this activity in real time.

In a pendulum swing of time, the next chapter takes us back to the late 19th century and Erickson’s roots. Readers learn about Erickson’s parents, Albert and Clara, who married in 1891. Erickson had Viking blood from his father and reportedly Native American blood¹ from his mother, which he felt contributed to his “strengths and endurance in the face of adversity.” (p.1) At nearly 60 pages, this biography is more than just a sketch; it is a highlight of the volume.

The transcripts are presented as four parts. Part I is a lecture given in San Francisco in 1961; Part II is a workshop in Los Angeles in 1962; and Parts III and IV are seminars presented at a conference in Seattle in 1965. In Part I, Erickson’s lecture in Part I is titled, “Utilizing Unconscious Processes in Hypnosis,” and he explains the reason for this: “…because I want to impress upon you that the unconscious knows a tremendous amount. You don’t have to explain too much, you don’t have to argue too much; you do have to recognize the personality forces involved, and you do have to recognize the gentleness and effectiveness with which you can give ideas, so that the patients will incorporate them.” (p. 75) The terms, “sensitive observation” and “client-responsiveness,” used by both Ernest Rossi and me, developed from these seeds that Erickson planted nearly 60 years ago.

Rossi describes Erickson’s technique as coming from “…his own blood and suffering; his therapeutic originality evolved out of his life and death efforts to cope with his own congenital deficiencies and crippling physical illnesses.” (p. 58) Rossi goes on to say, “Patients rightly resent it when they feel they are being manipulated by the ‘empty technique’ employed by an operator who has no personal connection and knowledge…Even if a symptom is changed, there still has been no deepening association with the inner sources of illness and creativity that are the true quest of all healing work.” (p. 58)

This passage challenges therapists to carefully consider who they are in the therapeutic process. A therapist might ask him or herself: “Am I able to change the client for the better?”; “Am I able to help the client discover their own capacity for creating change by deepening their connection with their natural problem-solving and self-healing?” These are the questions that Erickson and Rossi press us to contemplate.

As we read these detailed records of the utilization of therapeutic hypnosis, it is important to consider the deeper relevance, and in the process, several questions arise about how therapy is best practiced. What elements from the history should still be in practice today? What fundamentals have remained constant throughout time? What steps can be relegated to the past? And what steps have evolved into simpler and more elegant effective procedures? Also, “What modern techniques ignore the rich history and try to ‘reinvent the wheel,’ only to produce practice that is lacking?”

As we find so often in these volumes, Erickson speaks to the issues that concern us today, addressing the current thought of what constitutes an effective approach. He talks about how therapists should be better prepared, more sensitively observant and responsive, and utilize their own life experience to deepen the experience with the client, and to deepen the client’s experience with themselves.

¹ A genetic test on one of Erickson’s siblings disconfirmed that he had Native American ancestry. Jeff Zeig