A Personal Look at the Work of Milton H. Erickson, M.D.
By Roxanna Erickson Klein

More than thirty years have passed since the death of Milton Erickson yet interest in his work continues to expand. His articles, originally published between 1920s and 1970s have been repeatedly reprinted. Collaborations with colleagues, surges of translations, compilations, and writings about his techniques began in the 1950s and extend to the current day. With each emergent publication, waves of interest ripple thorough the professional community and new circles of interest develop. At the center of the swell is Erickson who died in 1980, but whose work still stimulates a paradoxical sense of a new beginning.

Textbooks rarely identify Ericksonian approaches as a main school of therapy, rather name Erickson as a contributor to other approaches influenced or founded on his work. He is identified with students of his work - Haley, Rossi, Zeig, Gilligan, Dilts, Yampko, Madanes, de Schazer, and others. Scholars have attempted to clarify his strategies and have even tried to mimic his work; however most followers have reached a level of understanding that facilitates their own personal growth and individual styles. Despite over half a century of efforts to bring forth clarity about how to practice effective Ericksonian psychotherapy, many unanswered questions remain.

That Erickson’s work continues be explored as if it were a new idea, suggests a quality of universality. What seemed current and novel in the 1950s still seems current and novel today. Erickson’s work not only remains on the forefront of therapeutic understanding but also satisfies demands for
cross-cultural relevance. Psychological perspectives are culturally and socially defined; Erickson’s work has attracted the serious attention internationally. Study of his work reveals a convergence that includes differing countries, cultures, social climates, and languages.

This vast diversity of interest is perhaps related to what is not said. When something or someone generates a sense of belonging among very different individuals, the probability is that some open-ended vagueness invites the learner to fill gaps of information with their own stories. Could it be that Erickson’s professional writing is so open-ended that even sophisticated readers are drawn to connect the intermittent bits of story-line with their own perceptions?

This article provides insight into Erickson’s work from another direction, a personal one. I will examine the integration of the man and the way he practiced professionally. Values that guided him daily in his role as a father, husband and member of the community reflect his work and manner of addressing the concerns of patients. In this regard, he lived his life with absolute congruence.

The seventh of eight children of Milton and Elizabeth Erickson, inspired by my father’s passion, I have become a health care professional with over 35 years of participation in the field. It is with my own background of education and personal life experiences that I address the underlying philosophy of the Ericksonian perspective. Two salient elements of his philosophy, wisdom and the use of unconscious resources, provide the framework for discussion. My goal is not to answer the multitude of questions remaining about Erickson’s work, rather to illuminate a silhouette
that allows one to more readily connect countless dots that lie within the profile of my remarkable father.

**Wisdom**

Often used to describe Erickson, wisdom is the ability to respond congruently with principles, reason and judgment. Human behavior is revealed in a multiplicity of ways by intrinsic responses to information, emotions, reactions - all as concrete as words that are verbalized. Keen attention to the manner that an individual responds offers extensive information about the person observed. The combination of Erickson’s fascination with accurate observation coupled with his dedication to encourage progression towards a healthy balance in life developed his wisdom.

As Erickson spoke to others, he carefully studied responses. No matter how small or discrete the gesture, facial expression or change in posture, he fully observed it. To Erickson, non-verbal responses were just as significant as word choice. Universal principles - such as protection of one’s body, parenting of children, family commitment, respect for the rights of others, community responsibilities and other social imperatives - have evolved from the civilization of mankind. These principles have provided a framework of logic and congruency for Erickson’s judgments. With a strong commitment to what constitutes ethical and healthy behavior, he learned to assess an individual’s limitations and capabilities and then to respond in a manner that encouraged progress towards mental health.

Dad’s own diverse interests formed a role model for family members. He further encouraged us by tapping into our own interests. Because my younger sister Kristi and I were interested in health care, he taught us to take
advantage of opportunities in crowds to note characteristic gait disturbances and unobtrusively evaluate differences associated with various etiologies. A syphilitic shuffle, bilateral weakness associated with spina-bifida, unilateral cerebral vascular accident weakness and the irregular muscle loss associated with poliomyelitis all have distinctly different gait patterns. Dad taught us that we could better serve our patients if we learn to note the distinctions. When given the opportunity to observe a gait disturbance, we would delight in sharing observations to support our impressions. Kristi, now a physician, once properly diagnosed a serious genetic neuropathy after a chance encounter in which she walked behind a woman at the airport. Kristi noticed a minimal feet-drop, and while conversing with the woman, advised her to be evaluated for Charcot-Marie-Tooth Syndrome; follow up communication initiated by the woman later verified that the condition was present. The woman expressed great appreciation that Kristi had been able to direct her towards treatment for a condition that had escaped detection for years.

Cultivation of our own observational skills in social settings was only one element of our coaching. Dad also encouraged us to attend to cues in more familiar settings. This illustration shows some of the complexities that arise when a parent tries to guide children to use time effectively; in this case the effort backfired. When a schoolmate asked for help in learning to crochet, I struggled unsuccessfully to teach her a few simple stitches. Dad saw us sitting on the sofa and later asked me, “How much time are you going to spend on teaching her something she doesn’t want to learn?” Angry that Dad concluded my friend was uninterested, I sought to use my own patience and tenacity to disprove him. After many hours, I eventually concluded that my friend did not seek to learn to crochet, but instead was
enjoying the dedicated time and attention. The tedious lesson helped me to recognize that actions do speak louder than words. Once Dad had cued me, I could see her body language was not focused on the lesson but rather on the conversation and attention. He saw in a passing glance what took me hours to conclude. He then stepped back to give me the opportunity to learn the lesson in my own way. The disparity between adult awareness and a child's subjective understanding is unavoidable, even when wisdom is present. Though I never apologized to Dad, I'm certain he noticed the abandonment of the crochet project. Subsequently, he restrained from offering further unsolicited observations about my friends.

Erickson believed that there is as much to be gathered from individuals with whom one has chance encounters -- a salesperson, a neighbor, or laborer -- as from a learned scholar or successful businessman. Though different people have unique opportunities in life, all carry a wealth of knowledge gleaned from personal life experiences. The information gained from fellow humans is equally relevant regardless of background.

In elementary school I was disappointed at being passed over for an exclusive Spanish language class; Dad guided me to the best source -- native speakers and everyday opportunities to practice. Following his advice, I changed my lunch schedule to spend time with Spanish speaking children and began to visit elderly non-English speaking neighbors. Dad's advice shifted my disappointment onto a path of empowerment. His guidance not only led me in an effective direction, but also initiated the cultivation of social habits that continue to serve me.

The concept of two-way learning was carefully explained to my siblings and me. Both parents were active role models who drew out
neighbors' descriptions about their own professions and hobbies. Eliciting details of other peoples' interests exposed us to a wealth of information and allowed us to witness the fascination and diverse pleasures that motivated others. We were encouraged to use the neighbors as resources for information and problem solving. When questions arose, we were guided both to the encyclopedia and to other learned sources for our research. For example, homework questions of geology, taken to the avid lapidarian down the street, resulted in a lesson that included seeing beautiful rock specimens that enriched the experience while simultaneously teaching the value of primary research. With a perspective of abundant and ready potential resources, we cultivated not only our conversational skills but also a greater interest in the vast assets that surrounded us.

Though few of our friends were able to put words to the experience of reciprocal learning, we knew it was there. Recently, friends seemed shy when I have asked what they thought Dad learned from them, but occasionally they come up with responses. Answers ranged from simple such as he learned what good tamales taste like, to complex he learned that some people just have to make mistakes, again and again before they are ready to go on. The diverse ways that people acknowledge an awareness of interchange of ideas is fascinating in its own way. When Dad worked with patients, he was truly interested in their stories, their ideas, and their histories. He knew that they had faced situations that he had not, and that by listening and learning from others, his own life would be richer.

Dad’s encouragement for appreciating connections and learning from others is important. Beginning with natural aptitudes, he believed that focused observation is a learned skill that can be refined with practice. The
habituation of awareness becomes a pattern, a lifestyle, and with time a stronger skill.

Driven by his own curiosity, observation of others gave Dad another lens to understand larger aspects of human nature. Commitment to excellence drove him to study, to make note of information, and then to evaluate the conclusions he reached. We were able to see that his own interests fueled the wisdom within him. Indeed curiosity and interest keeps us all engaged and healthy. What we as Erickson's family gained - from patients, neighbors and those with whom we shared chance encounters - was an appreciation for the variance of human expression. To him, beyond any specific insight, observing others led to a deeper understanding about the individual nature of human behavior.

**Unconscious resources**

Erickson's idea of the unconscious mind as a reservoir for internal resources is central to his approach. A natural drive for health is steered by unconscious awareness; navigation takes place using maps of life experiences. By accessing unconscious resources, one can put together pieces of maps, find direction and change perspectives without ever becoming consciously aware of the insight. Two principles in particular, learning to trust one's own internal knowledge and to accept that many understandings will never be realized on a conscious level, are cornerstones of his philosophy.

All people have unique life experiences that span from before they could remember to after they can imagine. Acceptance of what cannot be understood both expands us and extends our network of connection within society. The process of searching for meaning gives meaning to life just as
the search for holiness is a spiritual experience. Fascination with the nature of space and time is a connection with mankind that spans cultures, history and generations. Information pertaining to life experiences stored in memory is part, if not the whole, of what is stored unconsciously. Erickson posited that unconscious learnings are stored bio-chemically or bio-electrically, in a concrete manner that we do not yet have tools to verify scientifically. Though neurobiology is still in its infancy, current neurological and epigenetic explorations support this hypothesis while other studies support the notion that recovered memories are often inaccurate and malleable.

Erickson’s utilization of internal resources, especially his ability to stimulate an unconscious search without attempting to bring information to conscious awareness, is a departure from many mainstream schools of therapy. Erickson discovered that he could focus the subject’s attention on many levels of self-awareness. This new awareness resulted in better recognition and increased acceptance of personal strengths and limitations that help to define each individual. By seeding a strong expectation for change, and by cultivating a subject’s skill of noticing positive progress, Erickson could generate increased momentum towards mental health that continued long after the therapeutic encounter.

Learning what to look for and how to recognize a fleeting sense of well-being are essential steps on the pathway of healthy behaviors. He taught these skills cognitively and experientially by using hypnosis and naturalistic measures. He sometimes used surprise and confusion to upset a balance that would jolt the subject out of equilibrium and would allow for reconfiguration of unconscious resources. Many of his case reports in which he asked for subject participation in the performance of arduous tasks can be
better understood from the concept of using the unexpected to jar unconscious habitual limitations. He then trusted that the re-configuration would align in a healthier manner. Such bold therapeutic interventions are a delicate art, which require tremendous observational skills and an awareness of human nature.

The following examples illustrate in a logical and sequential manner some straightforward aspects of his work. As a small child, I took inventory of my own vocabulary and noticed that my older brother had trouble pronouncing *R*. I thought about my own abilities and proudly announced that I could pronounce any word correctly except for the word *magazine* (I struggled with the sequence of syllables and called it *mazagine*). Dad took great delight in my announcement, never questioning the limits of my vocabulary and asked a number of times over the next few days “What was that word you had trouble with?” Each inquiry was preceded with emphatic praise for my accomplishment of pronouncing so many other words correctly. Of course, each time I reminded him that the word was *mazagine*, my internal awareness questioned what was it about the way I was saying it that sounded wrong. After a few repetitions, I realized that it was equally easy to say the syllables in the correct order. I suspect that Dad strategically used a past verb tense in inquiring about the word I had trouble with. The difficulty rapidly self-resolved.

Another example, also a concern about my own limitations dealt with my desire to use hypnosis for natural childbirth. While my formal hypnosis education had begun in my early teens, I first became pregnant at age 30, and I requested a formal refresher course. I rejected my father’s reassurances that I already knew all I needed to know, and complained that
his advice to read some literature was impersonal and insufficient. Next Dad
gave me his own bathrobe. He then explained to me that each time I felt the
fabric I would remember all I needed to know. He handed the robe to me; I
put it on and sat silently beside him. Without words, I became aware that the
sensation of being wrapped in comfort would go with me whenever I chose
to remember the feeling. Hand sewn for him by a patient, the robe was a
lovely contrast of texture: soft plush outside with a slippery satin lining. The
action of cloaking myself elicited a gently protective comfort, I felt wrapped
in safety and love. Subsequently, the robe comforted me through five births
and hangs in my closet for times when I want to feel Dad’s closeness. Now,
I no longer need to wrap my body in its soft warmth, but merely imagine
myself wrapped in it. The sensation of velvet on my skin evokes the
connection of being listened to, cared for, and capable of handling any
difficulty.

In response to my needs, Dad approached me in a manner that most
accommodated my developmental stages and immediate need -- as a father,
advisor, and ready resource. Neither of these examples involved formal
hypnotic interventions. Both relied on naturalistic states and strategies
focused on internal self-awareness. Perhaps either situation could have been
successfully approached cognitively, but the indirect elicitation of internal
resources is what gave me a sense of ownership and independence.

**Summation**

In describing Erickson’s philosophy, I began by noting that his
approaches seemed to reach through time, space, cultures and geographical
confines. Despite decades of interest and a vast array of students who have
sought to describe techniques, strategies and the underlying philosophy of
his work much remains speculative. I questioned whether his strategies are so open-ended that students of his work are invited to fill gaps with reflections of their own needs, ideas and stories. The question was followed by a hologram of that process.

This discussion has looked at some central precepts of Erickson’s ideology: wisdom, recognition of man’s drive towards mental health, and the value of stimulating an unconscious search. Various basic strategies for which he is known including observation and encouragement towards self-awareness are illustrated with personal examples. I have shared how Dad guided me to wisdom. Appreciation for and use of the replete resources around us will bring us better understanding of the wisdom of Milton H. Erickson. The process of searching will help us better understand our own selves and life journeys. What waits at the end of the day is acceptance that, like the unconscious, there are elements that will never be fully understood.

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