The Essence of Milton H. Erickson's Contribution to Therapy of Today
One daughter's personal perspective
By Roxanna Erickson Klein
Translated by Gérard Fitoussi

Milton H. Erickson is a name well-recognized around the world, honored in the titles of over more than 140 Institutes in 27 countries. The profundity of his contributions to the integration of clinical hypnosis with healing arts is acknowledged and appreciated. Paradoxically, while a great deal of his teachings make common sense, understanding specifics has never been easy even for the most studious. Erickson's work, both clinical and teaching, involves insensible strata that defy cognitive description. Often patients and students are left with recognition of deep work without the accompanying vocabulary to describe the manner in which needed changes arose. Such gaps of verbal communication have led to different interpretations, even differences in fundamental views of his work. This paper is an attempt to narrow down Erickson's key contribution to a central concept. While a singular concept cannot contain the whole, it can provide a framework for holistic reflection and evaluation.

Erickson's death in 1980 left a legacy of limited audio and visual records, many written works, and a cadre of colleagues who aligned themselves with core elements of his teachings. The colleagues, many of whom were well-educated professionals and serious students of his methodology, continued to explore Erickson's ideas. In the last two decades of his life, followers established a movement that is recognized today as Ericksonian Approaches. As his students became leaders, the dynamic impact of his work continues to ripple in domestic and foreign forums. While his approaches are recognized as effective, the identification of a theoretical framework was, and remains, elusive. Even while there is general agreement as to Erickson's fundamental concepts, gaps continue to affect interpretations of his strategies.

How did Erickson impact the changing face of psychotherapy as it is practiced today? It is important to distinguish between Erickson's work, referring back to primary records and Ericksonian, referring to secondary views expressed by his followers. Also
key is the context of time -- in an era hostile to his ideas, Erickson brought forth strategies considered revolutionary.

My educated colleagues typically come to the forum well-versed in prevalent psychodynamic and cognitive behavioral underpinnings. From that stance, Erickson is viewed as a maverick, a challenger; someone who brought great changes. My own viewpoint is different. I come from a stance that these ideas are normal, everyday, even unremarkable. My psychotherapeutic education has gone in a reverse direction, starting with Ericksonian approaches and looking back to the ideas that frame formal education today. My position of acceptance may be more representative of the world's intellectual climate today than the historic opposition, though decades of psycho-dynamic foundations have left a deep imprint in professions worldwide.

Erickson's ability to elicit rapid, pivotal change within a short time interval is what brought his work to the attention of scholars. Surprised by the effectivity of his therapy, students' observations of Erickson's unique methodology raised questions that are not yet answered. His powerful intellect, strength of presence, and exceptional ability to incorporate feedback into his interactions clearly exceed many, yet he steadfastly attested that his work was not magic. Though committed to science, his concepts defied containment in the methodology of research. He taught that his approaches were based on scientific principles not yet understood. Neuroscience now shows that the scientific basis for his work is plausible and demonstrates that his experiential ideology is congruent with neuroplasticity. In today's climate, Erickson's thinking and ideas are becoming more widely accepted, even mainstream.

A good proportion of Ericksonians cite the concept of Utilization as the singularly most significant contribution made by Milton Erickson to psychotherapy of today. Utilization clearly contributed to his effectiveness. Unquestionably, he developed and integrated utilization into all aspects of his work. That singular concept and the multitude of ways it was expressed is a hallmark of his thinking, his style. Despite that, from my perspective, it was his profound capacity to elicit Hope from within that defines the essence of Erickson's work.

Utilization
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Over the decades of Erickson's professional writing, his ideas developed and changed. The concepts of utilization as well as naturalistic and conversational trance are among the ideas that reflect an evolution of thinking. The earliest article I located in which Erickson talked specifically about utilization was first published in the American Journal of Clinical Hypnosis in 1959. In the article, he describes utilization as an acceptance of presenting behaviors including a ready cooperation by the operator to accept the subject's behaviors, even in the cases where such behaviors may be seemingly adverse to therapeutic direction. Erickson went on to provide 16 case examples in which the behavior of the subject was fully accepted and became a platform from which to generate healthy change. He describes the utilization technique as based on working with the subject’s attitudes, thinking, feeling and behaviors to facilitate the induction of a therapeutic hypnotic state. In his conclusion, he remarks on utilization's particular effectiveness in coping with stressful stimuli.

Subsequent to that early paper, the construct of Erickson’s utilization has been extended. The ideas of conversational and naturalistic trance have become incorporated into broader concepts. Yapko (2003, p 307) cites conversations between Ernest Rossi and Erickson that explain the perspective that hypnosis is a naturally occurring state and utilization is capitalization of a subject's readiness to enter trance.

Today, within the course of therapeutic interaction, Erickson's contribution of utilization is used to refer inclusively to the following:

a. Meaningful acceptance and incorporation of a subject's unique worldview  
b. Recognition of hypnotic responses in natural conversations  
c. Spontaneous making use of information or circumstantial occurrences

Utilization, in all of these forms, is peppered throughout Erickson's work. Indeed, utilization is peppered throughout his approach to daily life personally and professionally, philosophically and pragmatically. No doubt, it is a stanchion of his ideology.

My own viewpoint is that, while central to Erickson’s overall approaches, utilization is a mere tactic. Underlying that key support of his work is a philosophical and psychological grounding that exceeds any tactical approach--- that of *Hope*.

**Hope**
As I, personally, examine Erickson’s work and contrast it with other approaches, what I discover is that Milton Erickson had a phenomenal capacity to stimulate therapeutic redirection of behavior and thinking. I reflect on my life with my famous father; I watched many of his patients grow past troublesome intervals into productive and gratifying lifetimes. I read case reports, ponder the cases I witnessed and remember the stories he told. A theme emerges --- that of Hope.

Erickson had a unique ability to awaken hope for change within others. He role-modeled expectations that daily life can be lived meaningfully and filled with joy despite whatever compromises are required. He emitted radiant expectations of change intertwined with salient anticipation of movement in healing directions. He spoke as an authority who had endured losses, passed through arduous hardships and emerged to discover joy in the territory that lay ahead. Hope, at once vague and yet specific, kindles a spark of energy expanding potential for change. Conceptually, hope fosters possibilities within the dreamer, which can be transformed into generative energy, harvested for movement. The elixir of hope makes life worthwhile.

Just how did Erickson stimulate and capture the hope I speak of? That message was unequivocal in his primary works. Unconditional acceptance of today, fortified by intent of healing, opens opportunity for change. Utilize every resource within reach. Nurture your curiosity, communicate, notice, observe, tap into unconscious resources, connect with ourselves, trust our unconscious minds, believe in our own capacity to become, notice where we are, NOW.

The experiential elements of his approaches unite hope with utilization, and call attention to the idea that neuroplasticity is in itself a hopeful human condition. Erickson utilized every possible resource within the individual, within the environment and within reach to amplify the probability of initiating or reinforcing momentum. Incremental noticing evidence of movement, re-orienting ones attention to moments of success, building recognition and anticipation of beauty within life creates a bridge. A trestle can reach across, stretching from empty depletion extending to brighter more productive presents, even futures. Once seated within, hope instills an ongoing, on-growing capacity for healthy enhancement. By the time the recipient recognizes that change is imminent it has already begun and illuminates a pathway to a better tomorrow.
Hope generates appreciation that builds and expands, reaching beyond initial concerns into a lifestyle of daily re-evaluation and adjustments. Sustainable and self-perpetuating, it belongs to the recipient while it nourishes everyone within reach. Hope extends far beyond any tactical approach. Hope is the catalyst that ignites movement.

**A Tale of Erickson's Style of Work**

My father did more than take his work home with him -- he merged his work with every day life. Now I reflect on our family lifestyle as an example of the integration of utilization and hope into everyday actions.

The spirit of adventure runs deep in the Erickson blood, and I have as strong an affinity for exploration and discovery as most members of my family. Years ago as a young adult, I took a recess from my formal education. I impulsively decided to take a hike on the Appalachian Trail, a footpath that leads nearly 2000 miles along the mountain crests through wooded forests of the Eastern USA. I hastily parsed together supplies resulting in a haphazard collection of items that were heavy, poorly thought through, and unlikely to result in a comfortable or successful venture. As I reviewed my decision with my parents, my mother expressed concerns for safety blended with enthusiasm for the journey. My father gave a critical look at my supplies and asked a few key questions including what shelter I anticipated using in the rain. As I hiked the trail I remembered his question many times. Arizona is a warm, dry climate, I never minded being out in the rain. In deference to Dad's question I purchased a cheap plastic tarp, then used it in the heavy rains that came nearly every night. Had I not followed up with the purchase he so indirectly suggested I would have, most likely, given up on the hike weeks earlier than I did.

Reflecting back on that discussion with my parents -- the advice, or rather the lack of it -- now fills me with curiosity. Certainly Dad saw that I was naive, over-packed and ill prepared as I embarked on the trip. While physically fit, my shoes, clothing and supplies were gathered from inexpensive opportunistic sources, none meeting standards I would choose wisely. Preparation for conditions of the journey, which included sleeping on the ground, carrying a heavy pack, and arranging for nutritional needs would have been better accomplished with more time and consideration. On the journey, my sought-
after harmony with nature was dwarfed by the emergence of my awareness of necessities, burdens, and my limitations.

While the advice given by my parents was decidedly less specific than what I offer my own children, it was typical of the guidance they provided to my siblings and myself. I had not sought my parent's advice, but tacitly sought their blessing and approval. The trip was not nearly as easy as I had envisioned, but my internal quest for adventure propelled me up and down the mountain crests for the weeks I remained on the trail. When I returned to Arizona, I knew a great deal more about selecting what was needed and what could be left behind. I knew that lack of a proper vessel for water could hinder progress, and that sleeping on a hillside in wet blankets in a lightning storm is frightening. My Dad already knew those facts, but left me to discover in my own way.

Many times I have wondered whether my parents' decisions to step back and let my siblings and I make mistakes were decisions of wisdom. Our parents projected clear expectations that each of us would find "our own way" to self-support, to a career, to a gratifying family constellation, to a contribution to society and to happiness. The clear expectations came with little pragmatic advice in regard to identifying our own directions, choosing a college, even selecting a life partner. Instead of advice or specifics, emphasis was placed on learning to know one's own self, and becoming engaged with life.

More mature in my thinking now, I reflect about my parents' courage for endorsing the embarkation on a journey that they could surely see was unlikely to develop in the manner I hoped. Yet their decision to step aside and let me learn on my own accelerated my adaptation to the opportunities that have come my way through life. I gained a deep appreciation for having the right tools for a job and for taking the time needed to prepare for whatever is planned. I think of it as footwork, and since that hiking trip, I have never cut short the footwork of proper preparation.

One specific skill I acquired stands out to me, not only for what it represents, but for the longer context of unconsciously acquiring a skill set that supports success. I can start a campfire in the rain with a single match. It cannot be done without careful preparation and patience, but it is a skill that can be learned. While it was never talked about, I knew my father had learned that skill, as had his father and possibly generations prior to my own. As I learned to shelter a match from wind and to stack dry twigs in a
manner that allows oxygen to nourish a tiny spark, memories wafted before me of sitting around the fireplace at home. I discovered unspoken lessons from my father's own healing adventures had been embedded into daily life.

Family "campfires" offered a lesson, which, at the time, seemed to focus on teamwork more than anything else. An intense felt sense of belonging was cultivated by the way that our family sat around the living-room fireplace on cold evenings. The woodpile was a dedicated area outside our home that everyone maintained. Each of us children prowled streets and alleys looking for fallen tree limbs. We would report to Mom who would excuse us from other duties and arrange for hauling wood home in a wagon made by my brother Allan. My brother is still good with wood-working, and now builds fine furniture. The oldest brother, Bert was able to identify trees, and educated us about the qualitative differences in species -- rich pine burns so different from sycamore. We all scouted the stacks of wood for hazards that spiders presented and learned to recognize the beautiful symmetry of deadly black widow spider webs -- distinctly different from webs of more harmless species. We wore gloves for specific tasks to protect ourselves from injuries. My sister Kristi and I practiced the rhythm of a two-man saw while cutting larger trunks. My brother Robert was coached into supervising the stacking of wood by size in an orderly manner, then choose supplies of proper proportion for an evenings burn. Lighting the fire was a serious skill involving wisdom passed from older to younger. In the evenings we developed closeness as we sat around the fireplace conserving heating bills by utilizing resources from the environment. Each of us would find a place the right distance for our own preferences as the heat radiated forth on cold evenings. When Dad walked out of the office to join us, whoever occupied the chair popped up offering the comfortable seat to Dad -- invited him into our circle. Even the dog was with us providing a pillow for the child who lay on the hearth. At the end of the evening, an assessment was made about banking the fire for the night, and agreement as to who would take the responsibility to assure it was done properly. On the few occasions of missed judgment, when a smoldering log rolled out of the fireplace after we had all gone to sleep, a tutorial was held the following evening to review the error in a constructive manner.
Through a step-by-step process of building a fire, awareness was acquired over an interval of time. The work fostered camaraderie and appreciation for one another's participation in a shared experience. Evening after evening during the short winters of Arizona, our family worked together and gazed into the fire as we talked about the beauty of the moment. There are many elements to the process, each step filled with details that make it as interesting as it is rewarding. I reflect back to the integration of experiences, resourcefulness, appreciation, and focusing in on special moments — all building blocks of hope.

The lessons embedded in building family fires contain within values of everyday living. They illustrate expectations of cooperation, responsibilities, engagement and participation. It was implicit that these values, among others were unquestioned. As the seventh of eight children I felt lucky to have had older siblings to teach me life lessons, demonstrating resourcefulness, finding joy, and adapting to limitations. My siblings provided role models, gradual stepping-stones of maturity. My parents lived a life that demonstrated appreciation for surroundings and utilization of resources that surround us every day, in unlimited constellations of possibilities.

**The Building Blocks of Hope**

I reflect back to the integration of experiences, resourcefulness, appreciation, and focus on salient moments — utilization of resources and opportunities that surround all of us. My parents lived a lifestyle that demonstrated enjoyment of life, accepting responsibilities and lifelong learning. There was an abundance of hope in our household, and in each of our lives. Some hope was realistic, some frivolous and some poorly thought through, each contributing to the texture of life, each inviting feedback and critique by those around us. I reflect back to the seamless interface of how we lived, and the congruence of our lifestyle with the work that Milton Erickson is now known for. What stands out to me now are the key features of appreciation for the beauty that surrounds us, curiosity, participation, engagement in life, learning from ones experiences, and the expectation of joy — all powerful building blocks of hope.

**Final comments**

Throughout my life, I have been approached by individuals who wish to confide to me their own experiences with Milton Erickson. Since his death, these testimonials are
often preceded by an awkward justification about how they would prefer to discuss the recollections with Erickson himself, but time cheated them of the opportunity. I welcome these fascinating conversations; they fill me with curiosity on many levels. Now, I focus on extracting as much of a verbal report from the storyteller as is available. Often they seem compelled to relate encounters that were life changing. My own fascination, and the fact that I too had powerful experiences with Erickson provides a bond between the storyteller and myself. Most frequently, individuals briefly tell what life was like prior to the encounter with Erickson and how life precipitously changed for the better. The words or moments of therapeutic transformation remain elusive. His subjects were not left with awareness of behaviors that provoked change, but with hope in their hearts. What made Erickson's work special was his ability to identify hope, its absence or its frailty, and to bolster its presence.

I am privileged to have grown up with a solid foundation for hope -- it illuminates my own path through life. As a professional, I am as intrigued by the powerful potential for healing that my father so consistently was able to evoke. I offer here discussion of the concepts of Utilization, and of Hope in the context of Milton H. Erickson's lasting contribution to psychotherapy today. I have expressed my own opinion -- the central contribution Erickson made to psychotherapy was the implicit centrality of hope to life. The challenge to readers, to Ericksonians of today, is to explore our own responses to the question. Is the installation of Hope the core contribution of Milton H. Erickson?

REFERENCES
