

ERICKSONIAN HYPNOSIS FOR THE NEW MILLENNIUM
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SUBCONSCIOUSLY SPEAKING: MAY/JUNE 2000 VOL 15 NO 3

In every field of human endeavor, there are giants who take quantum leaps, bringing a new synthesis, or a unique understanding, or an inspired vision to science, medicine, philosophy or the arts. Such individuals are sometimes appreciated during their lifetimes; more often, it is only later, posthumously, when their contributions have been translated and understood by larger numbers of the general public that they begin to enjoy real fame. Although Freud, Jung, Adler, Fromm, and a few others in the field of psychology and psychiatry have almost become household names, the world has been a bit slower to notice the incredible genius of Dr. Milton H. Erickson.

In the mid-1980's, when I began to develop a serious interest in hypnotherapy, the one person whose work and personality impressed me more than anyone else was Erickson. Now, after fifteen years of study and practice, I still find Erickson just as brilliant, fascinating, and mysterious. Since Dr. Erickson died in 1980, I was deprived of the opportunity to learn from him directly, so I did the next best thing: I read everything I could by and about him; listened to audio-tapes and watched videos of his lectures and demonstrations; and sought out students of Erickson's to study and learn from.

Erickson was a larger-than-life figure that was the embodiment of the archetype of the "wounded healer." A survivor of a life-threatening illness as a young boy (a family doctor told his mother that young Milton would not live to see another sunrise), and a bout with polio as a teenager that left him paralyzed from the neck down (once again, doctors said he would never regain the use of his body), Erickson used a powerful will and an active imagination to re-educate all the muscles of his body and went on to complete a double doctorate, in medicine and psychology. Besides these experiences, Dr. Erickson was wired differently from the rest of us in other ways ... he was extremely dyslexic, red-green color blind, arrhythmic and tone deaf. An unusual second bout of polio in 1952 eventually led to Erickson being confined to a wheelchair with no real use of his legs, little or no use of his right arm, restricted use of his left arm, and partial paralysis of his diaphragm and mouth.

In spite of, or perhaps, because of, these differences and difficulties, Erickson became an extremely skilled observer of human behavior and communication. As his fame spread, he developed an almost magical aura, and a reputation for being able to make intuitive leaps in diagnosis and treatment-knowing things about his clients that seemed to indicate telepathic or mind reading ability. When asked how he knew aspects of his clients' history or personality that had not been verbally revealed, he replied, "It's simple. I look and I ...en. Others don't."

Although this is an immense oversimplification, at its heart is, I believe, great truth and wisdom, as well as an insight into the foundations of much of Erickson's groundbreaking work. At the time of his death, Erickson was regarded as the dean of medical hypnosis, and had revolutionized the way hypnosis was practiced. Prior to Erickson, it was believed that certain rituals had to be followed to invoke hypnotic trance. These fell into two main categories - eye fixation (staring at a candle or swinging watch) until the eyes became tired and closed, and

relaxation of all the muscles of the body (autogenic training, or progressive relaxation). Erickson, working on the theory that clinical hypnosis consisted of a special communication between therapist and patient, developed numerous ways of inducing trance, many of which had nothing to do with eye fixation or relaxation. He would, for instance, hypnotize subjects while walking around the room and talking to them. He also became adept at hypnotizing people outside of their awareness.

The following quote, taken from a presentation given in May 1964 to the San Diego Society of Clinical Hypnosis, is a good summation of his core philosophy: Ordinarily we look upon hypnosis as something that results from the induction of a hypnotic trance There is a great, great tendency to make use of certain words, and certain phrases, and certain pauses, and certain ideas to induce a trance - and we have all manner of trance inductions. But the thing you ought to consider is that hypnosis is essentially a matter of the communication of ideas and understandings of one person to another, with understandings of the other person's ideas and understandings, so that you have a meeting of two minds for a single purpose: namely, the welfare of that patient.

Although Erickson wrote prolifically and gave numerous seminars and workshops during his long and distinguished career, unfortunately, he never translated his unique body of knowledge and learning into an organized, detailed account of his conceptual framework, and rarely provided more than brief, general glimpses of his underlying system of thought. It would be safe to say that Erickson believed that trance states could be accessed quickly and easily in everyone by using flexible inductions that developed a biofeedback loop between the therapist and patient. That is, Erickson would incorporate observable aspects of the client's experience and feed them back to the client in a variety of ways.

Those who studied with Erickson and his "disciples" have attempted to analyze and codify what was essentially a continuous improvisation on a theme with almost infinite possible variations. Out of this "modeling" of a master, slowly ways have developed to learn to duplicate some of the techniques of his elegant use of language and communication. Some of the hypnotic and therapeutic innovations that Erickson is best known for include "ordeal therapy," the confusion technique, and metaphoric storytelling. Dr. John Grinder, a respected college teacher of linguistic and general semantics, and one of the founders of NLP, identified hypnotic language patterns that Erickson utilized, including the use of implied directives, careful shifting of tenses, embedded suggestions, and nested anecdotal stories.

No matter what our orientation, or through which school we were trained (i.e. many contemporary lay hypnotherapists were influenced by the ideas and approaches of Harry Arons, Gil Boyne, or John Kappas), it behooves us all to familiarize ourselves with Milton Erickson's techniques, and the intelligence and wit that informed them. Apparently, they "broke the mold" after creating Erickson, and it is safe to say that there are few hypnotists who can utilize Erickson's approaches as effectively and creatively as he did. If we can learn to incorporate any small portion of his brilliance, it is bound to enhance our effectiveness as hypnotists, healers, and human beings.