

Conversations  
with  
Milton H. Erickson, MD  
Volume III  
Changing Children and Families

Edited By  
Jay Haley



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## CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	vii
CHAPTER 1 <i>Family Interview Techniques and the Trauma That Cures</i>	1
CHAPTER 2 <i>Disengaging Family Members</i>	22
CHAPTER 3 <i>Dealing with the Difficult Family</i>	52
CHAPTER 4 <i>On Disturbing and Instrumentalizing</i>	79
CHAPTER 5 <i>Ordeals of Children and Parents</i>	94
CHAPTER 6 <i>Directives and Joining Children</i>	122
APPENDIX <i>A Biographical Conversation</i>	141
<i>Index</i>	169

## CHAPTER 1

# *Family Interview Technique and the Trauma That Cures*

1958. Present were Milton H. Erickson, Gregory Bateson, Jay Haley, and John Weakland.

*Bateson:* We want to talk to you about your experiences in working with husbands and wives, husbands and wives and children. How one deals with multiple patient situations. How *you* deal with multiple patient situations. And about the dynamics of families that have schizophrenics in them.

*Erickson:* You want a discussion from me, unformulated, as to how I would approach the situation with a given family.

*B:* There are various ways this can be done. We can run you (audio)tapes of families, or John and Jay have specific questions. I have some myself.

*E:* Why don't you conduct it the way you think it should be conducted.

*B:* Well, let's start the way John thought it should be conducted, by asking you questions rather than throwing data at you. It is your data in the back of your head that we are after.

*Weakland*: My idea of the way to conduct things is that it would be profitable to start more or less the way Jay and I have worked at getting information from you before in the course of our several visits to Phoenix. We have certain questions about families and dealing with them, and we ought to try and bring some of those up first.

*E*: Well, there is something I think that I ought to say first. If I'm going to interview a father and mother and son, or a father, mother and daughter, or two children, to begin that interview, to preface it, to lay the foundation, I happen to mention that father is sitting in *that* chair. Of course mother is sitting in that other chair, and sister is sitting over here, and brother is sitting over here. I make mention of that in several ways so that I define them geographically. That way I give each one of them a position, a spatial position in the interview. By giving them this spatial position in the interview, when I talk to them, I talk to that particular space, and the others listen in. When that person talks to me, the others listen in. So I get that spatial compartmentalization. That considerably prevents the others from barging in, and forces the others unwittingly to take an objective view, at least in part. It's a rather simple procedure. That's all I have to say on that.

*W*: Well, I take it that when you deal with families, at times you see them all together, and at times you will separate out one or two members and talk to them separately. So that you work both ways.

*E*: I work both ways. I may interview the family jointly, and then I'll put one member out. But after I send the other members out, I again redefine the position in which those members were. I usually give the wife a certain chair, and then the husband this chair over here, and the children, or the child, the chairs in be-

tween. Then if I send mother and child out of the room, I'll carefully move father from his chair into mother's chair. Quite often I'll have mother, when she comes back, sit in child's chair, or in husband's chair, at least temporarily.

*W:* So that you define the position, but you indicate that they can sit in somebody else's seat, so to speak, for a while.

*E:* That's right. "As you sit where your son sat, maybe you can think more clearly about him through that association." "If you sit where your husband sat, maybe it will give you somewhat of his view of me as I sit here." Thus I force them into an objective role about their organization. I tell the child, "Well, suppose you sit in mother's seat." "Suppose you sit in father's seat." Also, from time to time when I repeat the interviews with the entire family, I shuffle them about so that while mother had this chair originally, for the next two or three interviews, all of a sudden, the family grouping is rearranged. Yet it's a family grouping, but mother's chair has now become the one that used to be father's chair. I can think of the family that I saw just recently: father's chair, mother's chair, big sister's chair, younger sister's chair. I maneuvered that around because not one of them would talk and tell me the situation. So I maneuvered their positions. When younger sister got into big sister's chair, younger sister gave me an awful lot of information. Father couldn't talk to me in *his* chair. His statement was, "My mind just goes blank." But in mother's chair he gave a lot of information. I carefully defined their positions because I wanted to start to handle that situation. I knew it was going to be critical.

*Haley:* Do you have general rules on when you send the family out and talk to one member alone, or why you don't consistently deal with them all at the same time?

- E:* I watch the interplay between inhibitions, hesitation, antagonism, resentment – something of that sort. Anything that indicates that they could think about it differently but not as long as the other person is there. Or if I see any evidence of a separate set of ideas that they are withholding. Then I know that I've got to deal with them separately.
- W:* Then you'd have to do something later about bringing that separate set of ideas in.
- E:* After I've gotten the information, then I interview the group, and I can point out that necessarily mother, being a woman, really has different views about what's going on in the family. Because father's working during the day, and he sees the family only when he's tired at night. And one gets more "iffy" with fatigue. In that way I justify . . .
- W:* You sort of legitimize differences in view when they come back in.
- E:* So that they can come back in and they hear me legitimize their differences.
- W:* I know that the family I work with tends to swing back and forth, at least on the parental part. The son is the sick one, ostensibly; the boy is in the hospital. The parents swing back and forth between insisting that they don't have any differences and insisting that they have practically nothing but differences, with a clear implication that they have different views and things are impossible. So I find myself grappling repeatedly with this in trying to get across the idea that differences in view do exist, but they don't mean that life is impossible.
- E:* Jay Haley has spoken about my tendency to use analogies. When people start disagreeing in that fashion I like to offer an analogy. When they try to tell me that they are in disagreement and they must think in common, I point out to them, "Yes, father likes meat rare,

and mother likes it well done, and sister likes it medium. And they all eat the same meal." Any kind of an analogy that allows them to agree with you that there is a common thread. I don't care how good that analogy is, but I mention it.

*B:* Tweedle dum and tweedle dee agreed to have a battle.

*E:* Yes. Why shouldn't they agree to battle? Why shouldn't they agree to disagree? I bring that out when dealing with father and mother. When she says, "I disagree with you," I ask father, "Do you really understand your wife? Your wife says that she disagrees with you. That means that she has a totally different opinion. And you agree that she has a totally different opinion. (Laughter) Because I'd like to have that clearly understood, that she does have a different opinion. That means you are in agreement with her, and you can agree with her being different from you, and she can agree with you that your feeling is different from hers." Then I've got an agreement.

*H:* Milton, how do you deal with a couple or a family busy proving to you that he or she is the one in the right? They tend to pull the therapist in and prove to the therapist they're right, and they get into competition proving who's innocent.

*E:* They prove that they are right, and the other person is wrong. They want to pull you in on their side, and I keep out of that situation by saying to father, "You and I are going to listen. Your wife is going to point out to *you*, and to *me*, the matter in which she is right and justified, and *we* are going to listen." You see, I shift from *you* and *I* to *we*, but I am allying *him* with *me*.

*H:* At the moment the mother is trying to ally you with her.

*E:* At the very moment the mother is trying to ally me with her, I deliberately ally myself with father and *we* are



going to listen sympathetically and intelligently to mother. Then mother has to present her case to father and to me because we are listening intelligently. Now mother knows that father can't listen intelligently, but she knows *I* can. That's why she's talking to me, but father and I are listening; *we* are listening intelligently. She has to credit father with listening intelligently. So I've got her over there talking to *we*, and then I can turn to mother and say, "Now you have explained this, and *we* have been trying to understand the best way we can. Now suppose you and I listen to father's understanding of what you said, and as we listen we can recognize how well he understands it. And we ought to know every one of his good understandings. We really ought to." So my alliance has suddenly switched to mother. She and I are allied while father is explaining.

*W:* This also sort of keeps a balance, rather than letting one person get hold of everything in a situation. That is, if mother has the floor to present her views, father has the alliance, and then the other way around, so that no person gets the whole advantage at one time.

*E:* I am the hub.

*W:* Around which it all revolves.

*E:* Yes. In that way I can play almost a passive part, and yet each has to rely upon me. They can't rely on me without giving credit to the other person. You do the same thing for the child in the total situation. Johnny and father and I will listen, and as *we* listen, mother presents.

*W:* What about the matter of the child speaking up? I wonder if this presents any differences.

*E:* Oh yes.

*W:* It's sort of presented as having differences, and there are some real differences.

*E:* It's a very real difference, and therefore, with father and mother present, I ally myself openly with the child.

“Now you and I are going to listen. First to your mother, and next to your father. And we can think about what they’re saying, and we can know what’s *wrong* in what they say.” With father and mother the emphasis is on recognizing what is *right*. With the child the emphasis is on knowing what is wrong in what father and mother are saying.

*H*: Why that difference?

*E*: Because you see the child knows his parents are wrong. The child belongs to another generation. The child has a different background of understanding. And you convey to the parents that the child thinks they are wrong. You’re merely using what they already know. It is an error to try to tell the child that his parents are right, when he knows they are wrong. That’s the child’s orientation. The parents *are* in error, and the parents know that the child *thinks* they are wrong. But a couple of adults think that they ought to be right; that’s a general assumption. “You’re a full-grown person, you really ought to think right, you ought to understand right.” “No, you’re a child, you don’t understand, you’re wrong, you’re mistaken.” The child thinks, “Yes, just because you’re a grownup, you aren’t right.” You see it’s a totally different point of view.

*W*: I understand that, in part, you’re picking up the fact that the parents are drawing such a big line between themselves as adults, and the child as a child, that you go along with that and turn it around.

*E*: I turn it around.

*H*: And you continue this even though the child is reasonably adult, say in the teens?

*E*: In the teens. Why certainly.

*B*: Especially in the teens.

*E*: Because the teenager so thoroughly knows his parents are wrong.

*W*: What about the matter of the child speaking out as well as listening to what is wrong in what his parents are

# Conversations with Milton H. Erickson, MD

This series of three volumes presents transcripts of the lively discussions that took place over a period of 17 years between Milton Erickson, Jay Haley, John Weakland, and occasionally Gregory Bateson. Some of the conversations took place as part of Gregory Bateson's research project on communication. Included in these conversations were Jay Haley and John Weakland who were studying Dr. Erickson's ways of challenging and changing individuals' behavior. Other conversations took place when Jay Haley consulted with Dr. Erickson about therapy. The conversations were eventually edited by Jay Haley, and they are quite animated and informal, containing many facets of Erickson's personality and his sense of humor.

Many of the transcriptions in the three volumes of *Conversations* are also available in the three-volume CD set, *Milton H. Erickson, MD: In His Own Voice*, edited by Jay Haley and Madeleine Richeport-Haley also available through Crown House Publishing.

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**JAY HALEY** is widely acclaimed as a pioneering therapist and master teacher. One of the founders of family therapy, his prolific work influenced generations of therapists. He has degrees from the University of California Los Angeles, Berkeley, and Stanford University and served as professor at the University of Maryland, Howard University, the University of Pennsylvania, and Alliant International University. Jay Haley passed away in 2007. He was director of Family Therapy Research at the Philadelphia Child Guidance Clinic and co-founder of the Family Therapy Institute of Washington, D.C.

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