

MILTON H. ERICKSON, M.D. AN AMERICAN HEALER

Edited by Betty Alice Erickson, M.S.
and Bradford Keeney, Ph.D.



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PREFACE

MRS. ELIZABETH MOORE ERICKSON

I AM SO PLEASED to write the preface for the first book written by a member of the family about Milton Erickson. This book is done from a different perspective than the many others about my late husband—it talks about him, the man, rather than his psychotherapeutic techniques.

Milton had so many facets. Besides being a wonderful husband and father, he was a physician, a scientifically-based researcher, the most influential hypnotist of the twentieth century, a world famous psychiatrist and psychotherapist, and a man always deeply interested in anthropology and in trance states in cultures around the world.

He revolutionized psychotherapy with so many new and different perspectives that have since become fundamental concepts in the professional world as well as for people who are not in mental health or medical fields. His idea that the unconscious was a benign and helpful part of the person was revolutionary when he began his career. Now, most people acknowledge that concept without question and without even knowing that Milton was virtually the first to believe and teach it.

Milton was unafraid to challenge habitual perceptions—his own as well as those of others. He strongly believed that no psychological theory could possibly encompass the enormous diversities that human beings present. Therefore methods of dealing with people and their problems have to be individually tailored. Theories about people's thinking and behaviors are limiting and can lock a person into perceptions and responses that aren't accurate.

He used any aspect of patients' lives and of the systems around them to help them reach their productive goals. He was incredibly creative. Some of his interventions in psychological work have become legendary.





I think one of his most important contributions was his idea that people have resources within them, the ability to heal their own pain and solve their own problems in ways they do not have to understand cognitively. It wasn't important to Milton that anyone, even the person, "understand" how productive changes and growth occur—it was only important that it happened.

There is much we don't know about people. Physical processes are easily studied. We can see, touch, examine, measure, and photograph a great many aspects of ourselves, but we still don't know how to study

the human mind in those definitive ways. Even less is known about the brain's processes. How Milton would have enjoyed participating in the next level of research, the scientific explorations of the complexities of the human mind.

Milton is one of the most studied people in the field of hypnosis and psychotherapy. Despite the hundreds of thousands of words that have been written analyzing his therapeutic methods and words, and the miles and miles of film and audio and video tapes of him, I've never heard anyone say that they completely understand how he did exactly what he did.

Everyone does agree that Milton communicated in ways that were heard deeply and on levels very different than ordinary communication. Almost three decades after his death, people are still approaching family members and saying, "Dr. Erickson changed my life!" Then they quote the exact words they remember Milton saying. Even people who never have met him often say just studying his work has changed their lives in ways they couldn't have imagined. They have felt as if his words—even words printed or recorded on tape—were speaking directly to them.

Milton was adamant that he not be regarded as a guru, a mystic, or a person who did magical things. He insisted that everything he did was a result of observing the other person carefully and responding to that person's own communications. He believed there were explanations that would eventually be supported by research and science, and that eventually, we would be able to describe the inner workings of the mind much more fully than we can today.

I think Milton's work will continue to be studied by more and more people. I also think that as the ability to do research on the mind and the processes of the brain progresses, more of what he did with hypnosis and with psychotherapy will become clearer.

I first met Milton when I attended a scientific meeting as a university undergraduate. I then worked for him as a research assistant the summer before my senior year. We eloped the day I graduated and

I became his wife and an instant mother to his three small children. Every young bride dreams about her future, and I knew Milton was a remarkable man. But I could never have imagined the life we made together! From the beginning, I helped him with his research. This was a very special connection between us separate from our day-to-day life. We wrote scientific articles together and after we moved to Arizona, I helped manage his practice. We always met fascinating people—colleagues, students, and just people along the way. We worked, we traveled, and we had a wonderful life! Most importantly, we raised our family of eight children together.

Milton and I knew lives are made of small actions. We decided deliberately to remember and use many of those events that exemplified the kind of life we wanted to have to teach our children. They didn't have to be big, just meaningful—the kind of thing that can occur anywhere and with anybody.

For the first several years of our marriage, the family vacationed in a small cottage on the shore of Lake Huron. The children learned to swim there and Milton spent countless hours teaching even the younger ones how to skip stones across the water when the lake was smooth and quiet. Close by, there was a small general store owned by a husband and wife. Their adult son who was mentally handicapped worked with them.

Every time Milton and I went to the little store, the young man would chat with us. Every conversation ended the same. “Isn't the lake beautiful?” he would say as he walked us to the door. We would step outside and he would continue talking about how he never tired of looking at the lake. It was always different, he would tell us as he gazed admiringly at a sight we knew he'd seen every day of his life. Sometimes one of his parents would join us and we would all admire the magnificent scene.

Milton and I talked about how that family had learned such an important lesson so well. Neither the young man's handicap nor the daily and commonplace sight of the lake, literally at their front door,

prevented them from finding true enjoyment in the moments of their lives. They never tired of the beauty or of sharing that beauty with others.

Sometimes even more fleeting encounters held the same inspiration. Once in a small trading post in New Mexico, Milton bought a ring for me set with a piece of clear obsidian with milky occlusions. Neither of us had seen that kind of obsidian before and we asked the man behind the counter about it. He was delighted to show us the large rock he'd cut the gem from. He told us all about obsidian, where he'd found the rock, and how rare that particular shade was. We were fascinated. As we were walking out the door, I looked up at Milton and said happily, "Don't we meet the nicest people!" The man hurried from behind the counter to catch up with us and said, "And you always will!" That ring became my favorite object to look at when Milton asked me to demonstrate self-hypnosis.

The only thing Milton and I knew for sure, over the years, was that our lives would always change. We moved to Arizona for his health and our two youngest children were born there. Milton's career also took a different direction. Always interested in teaching, he and a few colleagues began producing Seminars on Hypnosis and presented workshops all over the country. Seminars became the predecessor to the American Society of Clinical Hypnosis which Milton founded because he felt there was a need for a professional hypnosis organization that would welcome clinicians. Much of the income from Seminars was dedicated to the formation of the educational arm of the American Society of Clinical Hypnosis (ASCH). Milton became its founding president and was editor of its journal for 10 years. I felt as though our house was an office for ASCH with our dining room table the publishing center for the journal. We had several children still at home, school activities, Milton's patients sitting in our living room waiting for their appointments and always our family dog who also enjoyed the constant activity. I look back and wonder how we did it! But we not only did do it, we enjoyed it.

Milton loved life so much. He was much more romantic than people tend to think. We were married by a justice of the peace and I didn't have a formal wedding. Milton always thought orchids were very special flowers and he wanted me to have them for my wedding. We searched throughout the little town we'd driven to, but the florists had only gardenias so I wore a corsage of gardenias that I still have in my cedar chest. Milton never forgot, though, and every anniversary, he gave me a beautiful orchid corsage.

He always loved puzzles and riddles and practical jokes and puns. He would present puzzles and riddles and refuse to give the answer until he was convinced the listener really couldn't figure it out. Even then, he would just give bigger and broader hints until the person finally solved it.

He insisted on telling long involved "shaggy dog" stories to anyone he could make listen. For years, he carried a little notebook and if he heard a good joke or pun, he would pull out the notebook and jot it down. He never understood why people were surprised by this habit. After his death, I collected some of his favorite jokes and put them in another little book which I kept.

When his health was good, especially in the early years, we often had small dinner parties. We both liked that—we loved the conversations that would develop and the sometimes lasting friendships we built. Some of our friendships began with a professional relationship and were broken only by death. Gregory Bateson, Margaret Mead, Aldous Huxley and his wife as well as his brother Julian, and so many others all began as colleagues and ended as friends. I still have many people on my Christmas card list whom we met that way.

There were also many people we considered friends even though it wasn't the usual relationship. One of those was a Detroit newspaper writer, H.C.L. Jackson, who authored a regular column. Milton had a long correspondence friendship with Mr. Jackson and contributed little stories to the column for years under the name "Eric the Badger." Every year, the articles were put into book form. We always

got an autographed copy and everybody in the family read each book over and over.

Mr. Jackson became part of our family lore even though we didn't socialize much and our children never met him. I remember he once wrote about his favorite breakfast, an egg, fried in a hole cut from the center of a slice of bread. We decided to try it and liked the combination of fried bread and egg. Our family ate what we called Jacksons for breakfast for many years. Even some of the grandchildren ate Jacksons and knew the story of how that breakfast was "invented."

Mr. Jackson, in that small involvement with our family, became part of our lives in ways he couldn't have ever anticipated. He even was a part of the lives of people born long after his death. That pleased both Milton and me.

Milton was proud of many things in his life. He loved his plants and took great pride in them. He had a large collection of cactus plants before I met him and he continued collecting cacti our entire life together. Of all the plants we had, I think his favorite was the night-blooming cereus—the beautiful blossoms bloomed only one night and then wilted when the first ray of sunshine hit them. When he was older and more confined to the house, we used to bring them in the house for him. He loved showing those huge delicate flowers to visitors.

We had a tall date tree in our backyard when we first moved to Phoenix. When the tree blossomed but no dates appeared, we discovered we only had the female tree. So we had to buy pollen and fertilize the flowers by hand. We covered the maturing dates with bags to protect them from birds, then we picked them and pasteurized or cured them in the oven. Finally we had wonderful sweet homegrown dates. Milton loved those dates. He saw the work that we did to get the dates as just part of the final accomplishment.

He felt that any amount of work was worth a result that was really wanted. He worked very hard to make the residuals of his paralysis from polio an inconvenience rather than a handicap.

Although he used a cane his entire adult life, he could keep up with almost anybody! He rode a bicycle, went camping, and was always pleased when people seemed to forget that he walked with a limp. He was examined by his neurologist after what was originally diagnosed as a second bout with a different strain of infantile paralysis, but what was actually understood later to be post-polio syndrome. The physician was astonished that Milton was able to stand so straight and with such level shoulders. He didn't know the hard work that Milton had put into that achievement.

Milton was also very proud of professional accomplishments. He was instrumental in turning hypnosis into a respected medical, dental, and therapeutic tool and lived to see it widely accepted and taught in medical schools all over the United States.

Students who gathered in the office were another source of great satisfaction to him. Milton took such delight in their accomplishments! Many of those who studied with him, especially in his later years, are well known—Jay Haley, Jeffrey Zeig, Ernest Rossi, Stephen Lankton. There were so many more. From the time I first met him until his death, he had students seeking him out to study with him.

I think it took a long time for Milton to realize fully just how influential he had become in both hypnosis and in psychotherapy. I think he finally knew, but I'm pretty sure he would be a bit surprised at just how famous he has become.

Sometimes I wonder what he would have been able to do if his health had been better. He had such creative vision, such energy, such integrity, and such intelligence! He had so much drive and so much curiosity about everything. He studied people and how they acted and learned and behaved his whole life.

Marrying Milton was a very big decision for me. I was young and my parents wanted me to wait until I was older. I didn't want to wait, however. I know I never regretted our decision to marry for a single day. I know Milton never did either.

In 1948, when he became so sick, we decided that his best chance

for his life was to move from Michigan to Arizona. He went on the train where he could rest in a sleeping car. We hired two young medical interns to care for him during the trip and take him to the hospital when the train arrived in Phoenix. I followed with the four youngest children in our car. I didn't know for certain if he would even be alive when I got to Arizona.

I remember thinking then, that I would rather have had the 12 years with him than a lifetime with anyone else. I had over 40 years with Milton and he's been gone for over 25. But I have never lost that thought that I still would rather have had any amount of time with Milton than a lifetime with anyone else—I was just lucky to have had him for so long.

BRADFORD KEENEY

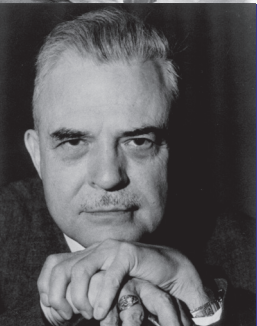
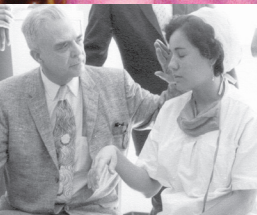
ALTHOUGH MANY PSYCHOTHERAPISTS have made positive contributions to the lives of those seeking their help and to the profession's theoretical hypotheses for understanding human experience, no Western-trained psychiatrist, psychologist, social worker, or therapist has ever been as prodigious a people helper as Milton H. Erickson, M.D. Founder of the renaissance of contemporary therapeutic hypnosis and the inspiration to numerous orientations to psychotherapy, particularly brief strategic therapy and the communications approach to family therapy, Erickson was the pioneer explorer of how learning, growth, and evocation of human potential can be facilitated through naturalistic, communicational means.

He was born on December 5, 1901, in what is now the ghost town of Aurum, Nevada. Then his parents traveled across country in a covered wagon part of the way back to a rural farm in Wisconsin. In his adult years, after he had become a medical doctor, psychiatrist, and psychologist, Erickson moved back west, settling in Phoenix, Arizona, largely for health reasons, where he maintained a clinical and teaching practice in his home.

Severely color blind, he was able to truly enjoy only the color purple. Tone deaf, arrhythmic, dyslexic, and paralyzed with polio at age 17, he overcame his deficiencies—which he called the “roughage” of life—and transformed them into resources. He used himself as a scientific instrument, whose observational skills were less contaminated by theoretical assumptions than those of most social scientists. Thus, he was able to notice and take part in the multiplicity and complexity of communicational process in a way rarely experienced by others. For instance, he learned how to hypnotize people by indirect means—sometimes while talking about raising crops or by not talking at all, using only carefully orchestrated gestures.

As the renowned anthropologist Gregory Bateson put it, Erickson





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“The spirit of Milton Erickson lives in this book by his family and colleagues. Here is a man who cut through all the data and techniques to perceive the individual in front of him. With that simple human skill, he was, by all accounts, a genuine healer. I love the humanity of this book, its subject, and its authors. I learned a great deal and hope to put it into practice. This would be a perfect book for therapists, doctors, teachers, and parents, showing them how to see deeply into another’s situation and find the words, sensible or serendipitous, to calm and heal.”

THOMAS MOORE, author of *Care of the Soul* and *Dark Nights of the Soul: A Guide to Finding Your Way Through Life’s Ordeals*

“An extraordinarily rich book. In this masterful blend of his own words and those of family and colleagues, you experience Milton Erickson like never before. The similarities between Erickson and traditional shamans leave the reader thinking about the powers of connection and what is possible in the world with expanded thinking.”

ANTHONY ROBBINS, author of *Unlimited Power*

“This timely and multifaceted portrait, recalling Erickson’s original voice—swift, improvisational, and utterly adapted to the individual—will be a welcome bulwark against the slide into dogmatism or formula that attends so many approaches to psychotherapy.”

MARY CATHERINE BATESON, author of *Willing to Learn: Passages of Personal Discovery*

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