

Conversations  
with  
Milton H. Erickson, MD  
Volume II  
Changing Couples

Edited By  
Jay Haley



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CHAPTER 2

*Confidentiality, Domination,  
and the Absurd*

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

*H:* When you deal with families, and you see one person separately, and another separately, and all of them together, how do you deal with the problem of private communication, of secrets between you and a family member?

*E:* I get sanctimonious about that. (Laughter) I explain very carefully to the patient that my interview is strictly confidential. I always keep interviews confidential. Certainly I am not going to discuss what we say to your father or your mother, your husband, your wife. *I* keep interviews confidential. I don't know what *you* will do. But whatever you do will be all right. You can handle it any way you want to. And you know, that's exactly what I'm going to tell your husband, that's exactly what I'm going to tell your wife, that's exactly what I'm going to tell your child. I've cleared myself with all of them. Now if they start discussing their interviews with each other, they've got to live up to *my* statement that would be *all right*. But they didn't hear me put that in.

*B:* Put which in?

*E:* That it will be all right. So they've got to justify their communications with each other, breaking the confidences, by making it all right. "I'm sure that whatever you do will be *all right*." They're under a tremendous burden there.

*B:* You mean they will, in fact, talk about the interview; they will keep those pieces quiet.

*E:* Quiet and peaceful in order to make it "all right." "I'm sure that whatever you do will be 'all right.' *I'll* keep it confidential." That gives them full permission. I told them I'll tell that to all the others. So they each know that the other's under the same obligation, and all that rivalry between them stimulates them to make things "all right."

*H:* That's a complicated one, Milton.

*W:* Yes.

*H:* You take the competition and concern about what each other is talking about and shift it to making things all right.

*E:* You know, I had a husband and wife say, "We've had our first decent talk with each other. We violated this confidential relation, but we've had our first decent talk." They made it "all right."

*H:* You accept it, I gather, if one family member says, "I want to see you." If they come to you out of the blue, so to speak, with a telephone call, and the wife says, "I want to see you alone, before you see my husband." You go along with that?

*E:* Oh, certainly.

*H:* Then how do you handle the husband feeling resentful because you and the wife must have gotten together against him before he even gets in there?

*E:* Oh I beat the husband to the punch. Because she usually hasn't told him that she wants to see me alone first. I tell her over the phone, "Yes, I'll see you alone first,

but let me handle it and don't say anything at all about it." And so I go out and meet them where they're waiting. I say, "I can see one or the other of you first alone. That's the way I usually do things. I suppose I can do it this way. Ladies first." "If it's the husband who has asked, I say, "Well I suppose we can do it this way; we'll let your wife have the last word." (Laughter)

*H:* You're just full of these clichés for resolving these situations.

*E:* Those clichés are part of the language. So the husband, who has asked to see me first alone, doesn't want his wife to know. I've done his wife a favor of letting her have the last word. She's rather smug about it. The wife who has asked – I've just followed Emily Post; ladies first. "At least that's one psychiatrist that knows his Emily Post." Instead of it being a fixed-up, prearranged set-up.

*H:* Well, how do you handle it when you're seeing a family and the wife calls and talks to you on the phone about her husband, and she says she doesn't want her husband to know that she called?

*E:* That she has called? I tell her, "Well *I'm* not going to tell him, but if you get your husband here, you'll have to tell him something. If you want to come in and see me without your husband's knowledge, that's perfectly all right with me. It'll pose some problems, but I expect you can handle them."

*H:* That's on an initial contract. How about when you see them regularly and the wife calls you secretly, or the husband calls you secretly?

*E:* I've had them try to make me betray my hand by giving me information – to have me spill it to the other. I'm very careful about that. Because I don't know what they want when they do that. I keep my interviews confidential.

*H:* It's just that there's an emphasis among some people

who are interviewing families on “no private communication.” Everything has to be open and aboveboard.

*E:* Well that’s a dictatorial, autocratic, dogmatic statement. Of course, my description of it as such is not a dogmatic statement. (Laughter) But you have an open agreement with the family, “You know, sooner or later there’s the possibility that some of our communications with each other should be confidential. Sooner or later it will be confidential. I know if the occasion arises with you, Mr. X, that you want that respected. In fact, I know if it arises with your wife, you want it respected.”

*W:* In other words, Milton will handle this the same way as other things. He will put it under *his* hand from the outset.

*E:* Only because they want that thing respected.

*W:* I’ve got a question I’d like to ask. In treating a family, now say you have a couple when the man has come to you for therapy. But the wife says, “There’s nothing wrong with me; I don’t need therapy.” She has that attitude. Now the therapist can bring her in by saying, “Well look, I think I need to talk to you about the trouble in your home,” and so on. So then she always asks, “Are you treating *me*, doing therapy with me?”

*E:* Oh, I’ve beaten her to the punch.

*W:* Okay.

*E:* The woman says, “My husband is a bastard. I’ve lived with him 15 years and I know he is, and he needs therapy, and he needs a great deal of it. I don’t need one particle of therapy. He needs it all.” I can tell her, “I’ll agree with you, your husband does need therapy. You know it and I know it. Now my job is to get him to understand that fact. But actually, of course, I’d like to do this as expeditiously as possible, so I’ll have to have some interviews with you. Because I don’t want to spend all the time that otherwise would be neces-

sary getting, bit by bit, the information from him. So I'll need interviews with you." All of a sudden she comes out, "Are you treating me?" I say, "If you look over our interviews in which you gave me information about your husband, from time to time didn't you point out to me how hard it was for you to get along with your husband's misconduct and misbehavior? Do you think that you could maintain your equilibrium with a husband who is that ornery? Don't you think you need some advice on how to adjust to some of that behavior of your husband? Do you really think anybody could live with that bastard for 15 years and not show something wrong? Tell me honestly. Would anybody in her right mind live with him 15 years?" (Laughter) Do you see the type of question? She can tell me, "I think you're right. He's enough to drive anybody bats, and I've felt half bats many a time." It's a rather easy thing. You see when they attack me, I do not get defensive. Unless I can see a way of using it.

*W:* Well, what about the opposite?

*E:* What's that?

*W:* Becoming aggressive. Do you find a way to use that at times?

*E:* Oh yes. I have told a husband and a wife in interviews, "Now you've been battling for all these years. Fundamentally, I think you're two awfully nice people. Actually, you've been horribly misguided in your behavior. You're awfully emphatic in your statements, and that means you respect people who are emphatic in their statements."

*B:* That's a good line.

*E:* "You have shouted at your wife to shut up, and she's shouted at you to shut up. I don't see why I should be the only polite one in this office. I don't see why I can't follow your example and tell you to shut up



when there's good reason for you to shut up." He is going to agree with me. But he is thereby committing himself that when I do tell him to shut up, there's a good reason.

*H:* Do you ever, with a family, push the family into an alliance against you to bring about some incident?

*E:* Oh yes.

*H:* We can use an example of that. (Laughter)

*E:* I've done that recently. I angered the husband and wife against me. I can't think of what it was. Oh yes. I angered the husband and I angered the wife. I just got a letter from the husband. I got a verbal relay through a friend of the wife. I antagonized both of them against me. They'd come out to Phoenix to see me, and they spent the agreed-upon time there. I angered them very, very much. Because otherwise they wouldn't take therapy. The wife insisted on having her mother visit. The husband couldn't stand the old lady, and I don't blame him one bit. The only reason his wife endured her mother was because her husband could tolerate her mother even less. The husband was getting even with his wife by having one big car for him, one big car for her, and he had three of these foreign-made cars, small, foreign-made cars. He couldn't possibly afford five cars for the two of them to drive. They had so much indebtedness. I got both of them mad at me, and they went back home furious at me. They left without saying goodbye, and all the way home on the plane confided in each other how mad they were at me. The husband very carefully sold his big car and two of the foreign-made cars, because he only needed one small foreign-made car. His wife didn't like to drive the foreign cars. He used that money to clean up some of the indebtedness. His wife was so relieved; and she didn't want me to be right,

because I had antagonized her by accusing her of just slapping her husband across the face with that damn mother of hers. I accused the husband of slapping his wife across the face with those damn cars of his. They proceeded to prove me wrong. Now the husband has written to me telling me all about disposing of the cars, and saying that I was right. His wife sent, through a friend of hers who knows me, the verbal statement that I was right. It's such a relief not to have her mother visiting every day. She and her husband are getting along very nicely. He used to burn up every time he came home from the office, seeing his mother-in-law's car there. He's a doctor. His wife would burn up every time she'd go out in the yard and see those three foreign-made cars, or two of them and the big car, sitting there useless. So now I've got two friends. The only one that is problematic is the mother-in-law. But you know, even if you do make the people angry at you, after a while they will begin to recognize that they have been benefited very greatly. Whenever I use anger to benefit a patient, I tell them, very simply, "You know the thing I'm really interested in is helping you. I really don't care whether you like me or dislike me, so long as I can help you. Because you didn't come here just to make a friend out of me. You've got a lot of friends who've tried to help you, and they haven't succeeded. I'm not just going to be another friend, I want to help you. Of course, if I can be your friend and still help you, that's all right too. It's even better."

*H:* I think what we're concerned about is the way you can sometimes antagonize a family so that they turn against you and gloss over the really basic differences between them, and they stick together when they shouldn't really.

# 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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