

## THE TAO OF A WOMAN

Michele Ritterman

I was an intern at the Philadelphia Child Guidance Clinic in the early 1970s, studying with Salvador Minuchin, Jay Haley, and Braulio Montalvo. My teachers were great, and I had learned a lot about symptoms and family interactions. We were doing structural family therapy (Minuchin, 1974), of course, intervening from the “outside,” but I was also very interested in the “ecology of mind” (Bateson, 1972), in how the family gets under the skin of the patient. Kind of on the sly, I was reading Haley’s (1967) collection of Erickson’s papers, *Advanced Techniques of Hypnosis and Therapy*. Then one day—which changed my life—Sal fortuitously called me in to see a videotape they had recently received, one of the first available showing Milton Erickson. It was a tape of Erickson working with Mondy, a young African-American woman who had been as a girl repeatedly beaten with a hairbrush by her mother—leaving Mondy with a great sense of anxiety whenever she walked into a room. What I saw on the tape was revelatory to me. Indeed, I recall Sal later saying in his sweet Argentinian-Yiddish accent, “Michele, she was *heepnotized* by the video!”

What I saw was this. TELL MONDY STORY....

I needed to learn more! I approached Harry Aponte, the Director of the Clinic, and asked if I could use my educational travel stipend to visit Erickson in Arizona, rather than spending the money to attend the annual convention of the American Psychological Association. Bless him, he said “Yes.” This began my six-year study with Erickson. After I finished in Philadelphia and moved to Seattle (and then on to Oakland, California), I continued to go to Phoenix a couple of times a year, until Erickson passed away in 1980. Sometimes I stayed at his home. He and his wife, Betty, were godparents to my two children, Miranda and Judah.

One time I told Erickson about my idea that symptoms were the product of a family trance. “*That’s a very interesting idea—you ought to develop it,*” he responded. This launched me into my life’s work. I subsequently pioneered the concept of shared trance states with couples, based on my understanding of collective reveries. I began this understanding in the late 1970s, when I was about 27 years old, and developed it into hypnotic family therapy (see Ritterman, 1983/2005, 1985). I also came to recognize that governments can use collective (social/ cultural) trances to subjugate their population. My political commitments led me to Chile, where I worked with victims of torture and with those who sought to help heal them, experiences I describe in my book *Hope Under Siege: Terror and Family Support in Chile* (Ritterman, 1991). I was honored that Isabel Allende provided the Foreword to the book.

I am also a poet. Back in the United States, at the Erickson Congress of Hypnosis and Psychotherapy, held in Phoenix in 1992, I presented “A Five-Part Poetic Induction in Favor of Human Decency (Countering the Hate Movements).” This was one of the first large group inductions done at an Ericksonian Congress. I began by quoting from an article Erickson had written:

Throughout the ages people have tried to believe that normal psychological behavior includes only that which is good at the social level....At times, man’s inhumanity to man is given some euphemistic label, but no effort is made to investigate scientifically the extremes to which the normal, the good, the average, or the intellectual person or group will go if given the opportunity: consider the Spanish Inquisition, the Salem witch trials, or the

introduction of slavery into a country dedicated to the right of everyone to equality and freedom....How did it happen that noble purposes of the Pilgrims led to the position that “the only good Indian is a dead Indian”? [Erickson, 1968, pp. 277-278]

I went on, blending prose and poetry (mine and others’), to discuss hate movements, the collective mind and synchronous musings, social suggestions, the need for the witness to look away for the abuser and hater to do their dirty work, the need for promoting human decency, and ways we can celebrate our senses and our constructive strengths. I finished my talk saying (Ritterman, 1994, pp. 480-481, emphasis in original):

I ask the most important thing of you  
you there listening to my voice today  
enjoying as much as I hope  
and more than I can know  
all your faculties and senses,  
that you *REMEMBER me when you are packing your suitcase  
as you put the clothes you brought back into the suitcase,*  
that you put your own ideas of beauty  
into the folds,  
that you fill the sensuous corners with humor,  
and your shoes  
with an expanding compassion  
to lengthened your gait.  
When you return home and are unpacking,  
*won't you remember me,  
my message to you?*  
And when you wake up  
the next morning,  
will you not allow your eyes and ears  
to fill with beauty  
so that you will have,  
let's say in five years, little room for hate,  
in a decade, no time or space to waste on hate.

When we talk about the heart of Erickson,  
is not the bottom line  
that we *have the courage  
to stand up  
for the best that human nature is capable of,  
whether or not we see that best around us.*

[...]

*For those of you  
who like to travel light,  
five words:  
Hate harms.  
Caring can repair.*

Learning from Erickson

Erickson taught me and daily heartens me with the idea that the smallest possible change, positive or negative, no matter how small, will go on to make others. When we think of change we may think of actions that are too big. I once asked Erickson: Why do you get people to levitate a finger? (He would sometimes make suggestions for automatic responses to communicate with the hypnotist without speaking, saying for example, “You have expressive hands and your right index finger is your ‘Yes’ finger and your left is your ‘No’ Finger.”) He answered my question: “If they can’t receive a suggestion to lift a finger, do you really think you can effectively suggest they change their lives?”

Erickson co-wrote a book, *Time Distortion in Hypnosis: An Experimental and Clinical Investigation* (Cooper & Erickson, 1959) on clock versus subjective time. He really understood the microcosms of the mind. He had his finger on the pulse of how people have control over themselves and how they lose control over themselves. It happens in a heartbeat.

In Puebla, Mexico I recently worked therapeutically (through a translator) with a woman who had recently experienced a bus hijacking. The closer in time the treatment to the traumatic assault, usually the more effective. She had talked to many people about it, but no one had stopped the clock and found out *what bothered her*? What bothered her was not that the driver could have been in on it, not that a gun was held to her neck, not that they stole her cell phone. She had digested and eliminated those poisons. What bothered *her* was that she heard a woman behind her cry and she couldn’t help her. She knew that there were to children up front and she feared that they would cry out and get killed. As soon as the hijackers left the bus with everyone’s money and cell phones, she took charge of the situation and got everyone calmed down. She felt bad that she couldn’t be who she is, during the assault. In half an hour of talking with me, she was changed. She told me, “You came inside. You got it. You helped me get to the real injury underneath the obvious.” I also read her a poem (translated beautifully into Spanish by \_\_\_\_\_):

My Teacher’s Last Gift  
My teacher received a visit  
from a very old Japanese man.

The visitor told my teacher that he saw his life  
as he stood on the top of a mountain  
looking down over the climb that he had taken.

The jagged rocks and sharp weeds  
that cut him along the ascent  
had become overgrown with moss  
and wildflowers.

(from *The Tao of a Woman*, p. 157)

Therapy is like time-lapse photography—it can be like watching a flower open. There is beauty unfolding every day in your office.

Small changes. No meds. Part of clients’ own natural sequences. Indigenous rather than imperialist. Erickson used to say to me, “You shuffle the deck of cards.” But I see it more specifically than that. He set up *tai chi* movements, sequences that you can spontaneously move when challenged. To do that requires entering into *subjective time*. Erickson was producing psychophysiological changes. Tracking physiological observable responses—with eye fixations,

rate of respiration, tensions in the body—these were hallmarks of his work. When he worked hypnotically with Mondy, she re-experienced some of her spankings again and again. They actually hurt—she winced and gasped and even got angry with him. He taught Mondy to work her own mind--use her very own movements, to play with abandon, picking her very own television channels, so to speak, in order to shuffle the deck. It was then and is now the best piece of clinical work I've ever seen. Many years later it is a centerpiece in my development: use the relationship to alter subjective time and sequence.

During the time I was studying with Erickson, I was also studying family therapy with Jay Haley and Sal Minuchin. I was developing the understanding that interactional systems hypnotize their members. I saw how family members made suggestions to each other--just like Erickson did--but without any training in hypnosis. They were getting each other into and out of unconscious states and trances, sometimes ones that made each other feel good and other times ones that made them wish they were dead. Working with Minuchin, I noticed how family members with power over other family members could induce in those family members different states of mind. A mother yelling at one child and favoring another, right in the session, could trigger in the scapegoated child a change in physiological state (see Minuchin, Rosman, & Baker, 1978). The child could come in happy and curious, and within a few bouts of mother insult, look like the suicidal child, slumped, crying, clearly manifesting physiological responses and observable changes. The favored child would perk up like a watered plant. The case of David was where this was revealed to me. TELL DAVID STORY \_\_\_\_\_

I was also working on my doctoral dissertation (Ritterman, 1978). There was a new medication out called Ritalin, and I was doing a study comparing the use of Ritalin versus family therapy with hyperactive boys. What I learned was that (1) families needed to put their child in a different trance if they were jumpy, and (2) the jumpy boys needed to learn to concentrate. There was no substitute for that. Many of the ones who were drugged (“pills, not skills”) became delinquents. There may be a neurological substrate for some, but a lot of what is called “ADHD” is really the failure to command the attention of children.

I put together the family work with Haley and Minuchin that trained me to observe sequences and patterns with this idea about time, and I realized that as people interact with each other they go in and out of subjective time. So I developed a model of therapeutic observation and intervention that I feel offers some antidote to the notion that the causes of human suffering are underlying biochemical imperfections that need a pill to fix them. Medicate the greedy, the violent, the sadistic...maybe...but not those who suffer powerlessness and loss of self control because they are oppressed and marginalized and driven to such desperation that only a pill seems the answer.

My life work is about how to help people wake up from these bad trances, and enter into alternative states of consciousness. Be it a person from New Orleans after Katrina, a couple dealing with infidelity, a woman whose husband turns her off, or a man who panics when he dances—the underlying approach can be the same. This realization, *the need to be here now*, led me to write a book of poetic meditations, *The Tao of a Woman: 100 Ways to Turn* (Ritterman, 2009).

#### Trance and Stance

Virginia Satir (1983, 1988), the mother of family therapy, used to say: “What’s the problem with the problem?” Hypnotic phenomena can utilize the keeping of different information in different channels of the mind. For example, an amnesia—a forgetting—really entails one part of the mind keeping something from the other. So it appears that one has forgotten, but rather,

the memory is placed somewhere else, out of the interfering reach of the analytic brain. (As you get older, the brain loves to play with this skill of hiding things, like people's names!")

What I am proposing is that we learn where the channel changer is, and learn what other channels are already available, and help our clients learn to go from the automatic channel automatically to another, more benign channel. Don't stop at the channel that shows violence and bloodshed, but when you arrive there, shift to the channel about survival and heroic citizens. Our work is to help clients to fill a channel with all the programs they already have that are on that channel; and to stay longer in that channel and to let the feelings and ideas of that channel trigger in them a different state of mind or trance, and thus produce automatically a different stance.

#### TELL STORY OF BLUE GLASS BOTTLE PITCHER

##### Stopping the Clock

I have a cell phone and a computer. The new technologies are helping us become a global culture. But there is a gigantic price we pay. When faxes and e-mails began streaming into my house during what was still called "The Dinner Hour," we bought our first microwave oven. My then eight-year-old son was playing Nintendo in the living room and asked when dinner would be ready. I looked at this new dial and instead of saying "Half an hour," as I always had, I said "35 seconds"—and Judah said, "That's too long!" And I understood, even as I threw out the microwave in protest, that my son was already living in a dimension of time that was different from what I had known (Ritterman, 1995). But this is the way of the world, so we need to learn to help clients shift *quickly*.

But not too quickly! Once human beings lived by the rising of the sun and the rising of the moon, and went out or stayed inside, ate specific foods because of the seasons of the year. The natural rhythms of the environment in which we lived synchronized the bio and body rhythms of the creatures, including us humans. We were daytime animals, unlike the owl who is nocturnal, and so we slept when it was dark and woke like the rooster with the light. There was synchronicity to our relationship with nature and also with each other. Humanity has a Nature Deficit Disorder!

#### DESCRIBE SLO-MO.....\_\_\_\_\_

In musical notation there is a symbol called a *rest*. No matter how fact the piece, the rest takes the place of a note that is played and heard in the rhythm of the music, but the rest is not played or heard. It is a silence that is essential to good music.

The Joy of the Future  
The only road to bring you  
from yesterday to tomorrow  
is the one that passes through today.

Live in the present  
for the joy of the future.

(from *The Tao of a Woman*, p. 154)

We need to help clients learn to bring their trance states and their *rest* notes right into the ongoing interactions in their lives, right into the environments that trigger them unconsciously and automatically to get stressed and overwhelmed. I call this *being in your mind* instead of

letting others who are behaving in an unfair, greedy or nonreciprocal manner take over and drive you out of your own mind.

### Occupy Your Mind

I live near Oakland, California, one of the homes of the OCCUPY Movement. So I say: OCCUPY YOUR MIND. IT IS YOUR FINAL AND OWN TERRITORY. Don't let anyone conquer your mind or hypnotize you into something you don't want. Don't let THEM define YOU. Since Thomas Szasz (1961) wrote *The Myth of Mental Illness*, various authors have sounded the alarm. Psychiatrist William Glasser (2003) aptly titled his book *Warning: Psychiatry Can Be Dangerous to Your Mental Health*. There may be a (limited) role and time for medication, but "The medicating of Americans for mental illnesses continued to grow over the past decade, with one in five adults now taking at last one psychiatric drug such as antidepressants, anti-psychotics and anti-anxiety medications" (Wang, 2011, p. \_\_\_\_). Too often 10 minutes and a prescription! It takes time to understand the context, the reasons, the alternatives—and to offer human help. There is growing evidence (see Whitaker, 2010) that the overuse of medications can launch someone on a lifelong career of psychiatric chronicity and more and more medication. There is a massive effort by the psychopharmaceutical-industrial complex to reduce or eliminate psychotherapy, both individual and couple/family (see Caccavale, 2011; Hoyt & Gurman, in press), and replace it with more pills. Think for yourself! Hold your ground!

When I was in training, one of my supervisors told me that I was too personal, that I worked "too close." I told him that I needed to have a different supervisor. And so I got Jay and Sal and Braulio—and Milton.

### Gift To/From the Heart

Sometimes I do embroidery, stitching stories on to cloth. I made one for Erickson, depicting some key moments in his life, with the word *Love* written beneath, that held the answer to a riddle he liked to ask: "What has 5 rows of 4 each, with 10 total?" (Another teaching: You have to think outside the box--the rows form the shape of a star, not lined up in parallel lines.)

I learned so much from him. When we were near the end of our time together, he surprised me by asking "How are you going to repay me?" I didn't know what to say. He smiled. "You have two choices: either give me all your money, or become the best healer you can be." I chose well--the path with a heart, the path of hope and healing.

I also made and gave him another embroidery, which is on the cover of my book (see Figure

1). He enjoyed it—and it was returned to me after he died.

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insert Figure 1 about here  
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I then wrote another poem:

### A Lesson from the Heart

I embroidered for my Teacher  
a gift that he received  
weeks before he died.

It appears to be an ordinary apple tree,

like one he described from his childhood,  
but it is a representation  
of the coronary arteries.

Your heart is an upside down tree  
drawing nourishment from the earth  
and rooted in the divine.

Even your broken heart  
can be port of entry  
for one who grieves.  
(from *The Tao of a Woman*, p. 156)

If you turn the book you're holding upside down, you can see that it is a diagram of the coronary blood vessels, drawing sustenance from the soil and reaching for the light.

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