

The Philosophical Position of the Ericksonian Psychotherapist

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In the seven years I studied with Milton Erickson, I was most interested in the principles which guided his work, particularly his philosophy of life. In this chapter, I will highlight what I extracted of those values, sharing with the reader vignettes of my interactions with Dr. Erickson which revealed his assumptions about human nature.

My first philosophy lesson was administered by Dr. Erickson in my initial meeting with him. Prior to that visit, I had done my homework. I had read everything my teacher, Jay Haley, had published on Milton's work, I had studied Herb Lustig's recent video of a session of Milton's, and I had adapted his approaches to the clients I had treated as an intern at the Philadelphia Child Guidance clinic. Finally there, in his little office in Phoenix, facing him, I was confronted with his first direct question. "Why have you come to see me?" I found myself responding, "What impresses me most about you is your philosophy of life. No matter what the case you are confronted with, you are so positive! I'd like to be like that."

"Young lady," Milton, responded, inhaling deeply and moving his face closer to mine, and penetrating with his steady gaze, "I'm neither an optimist nor a pessimist, but rather a realist, which means that into every life a little rain must fall. Therefore, it behooves us to enjoy the sunshine."

Years later, after Milton died, Erickson's youngest daughter, Kristina, shared with me a variation on that theme. I was then working with torture survivors, people whose bodies and personalities had been shattered. She said, "I think my father would like you to know something he understood from having suffered his own two bouts of near total paralysis from polio. He used to say to me, 'Kristina, I find that to do a-ny-thing is pleasing.'" Putting these two paragraphs together, I began to recognize the underpinnings to all of Milton's work. Start with whatever ray of light, shred of hope, or crumb of real positivity is at hand and help the client make a realistic step which will enable the person to create further openings from the confines of his or her own mental limitations.

Since initially I came to Milton as a psychotherapist and a student of Jay Haley's, rather than as a young woman seeking personal council, Milton asked me to begin our discussion by defining my theory of psychotherapy. This conversation revealed Erickson's ideas about transformation in therapy. I proudly rattled off a few paragraphs about how I worked to change people, rather than analyze them ad nauseum. "Young lady, he responded, "in psychotherapy, the therapist changes absolutely nothing. We create the circumstances under which an individual can respond spontaneously and produce his or her own change. Heartened by the possibility of change—no matter how small, positive or negative-- that person will naturally go on to make other changes."

As our interaction progressed, and I went deeper into trance, Milton asked me what I would REALLY like to talk about. To my surprise, a flood of

emotion came forth, and I began talking about wanting to have a child. Immediately afterward, I was embarrassed, and Milton said, "Now, we can talk about whatever you like. Tell me about one of your cases." He then demonstrated with me, to me, and for me, that whatever therapist and client are talking about, they are always addressing what is most important to the unconscious mind, if in a coded language. He was demonstrating his belief that the human being tips his or her hand or reveals him or herself in everything she does. He loved holograms, because the hologram conveyed this essential idea that the whole can be seen from any part. Erickson is known for indirection, but in fact he worked very directly, but through whatever content the person wished to provide.

For example, if a person spoke to him in body language, he communicated directly back in body language, matching whatever content or format the person wished to speak in. He took the person from where they were not from where he wanted them to be or from where some theory would suggest they are. He emphasized that you know where a person is by looking at what they are looking at. I remember I used this wisdom on a horse-back riding lesson in understanding my horse. I knew absolutely nothing about horses. My teacher was irresponsible. It was night time and my second lesson. "This horse is in heat," I complained to my teacher. "How do you know that?" the teacher asked. "She's ignoring your instructions and paying all her attention to what is going on out there in the pasture." The horse, like a woman having an affair, was distracted. Milton believed that therapists ought not try to get clients to speak the therapist's language, but rather, take the client where the client is, and speak directly to them in their language and about whatever content they choose to use to express their problem.

Milton had no mentor or teacher, it is said. I disagree. Pain was his teacher. If anything can get a person practical, it's what to do about pain. After one visit I had with Milton, we had literally spent seven hours, eyeball to eyeball. He said that as long as he was in trance, he could feel no discomfort, but once the trance was broken, he felt as if someone had been rolling a baseball bat up and down his spine.

Much of Erickson's work can be understood from looking at how he learned to deal with excruciating pain. The kind of pains he suffered taught him for example, "If you want to destroy something, analyze it." Of course, he was enjoying a dig at psychoanalysis, but he was also teaching that the way to confront symptoms is to see them in their parts, to decompose them, and that in this broken down state, big troubles become manageable. He taught that many pains have a before, a during, and an after. He wrote a beautiful paper about how to work with pain in those three different stages.

He took these practical understandings of visceral pain and applied them to many other human dilemmas. Troublesome patterns people suffer—like the abuse cycle—are subject to being broken down into before during and after phases. We know from Erickson that each of those three phases of any symptom pattern—whether it is an individual's mental set or a family's sequences of interaction—gives therapists that many clinical opportunities to enter in and help to create a circumstance under which the person can respond spontaneously and change. Working with abuse in this manner—

treating the fighting, the forgiveness, the building of tensions- helps to destroy the entire symptom pattern. Few psychological symptoms are continuous and non-stop. Erickson learned many of these lessons from physical pain.

Erickson also learned that some pains, insufferable in one body part, when transferred to another body part, can be tolerable: just as someone getting a shot can comfort herself by digging a fingernail into the fleshy part of her palm, because that digging gives her control over pain. He learned that part of what hurts about pain is that it is out of the person's control and therefore surprising and even humiliating. We know people can change by moving their problems from one facet of their life to another where it is less bothersome, but still keep the problem. Other therapies could never come up with such ideas because they are based on theory rather than the tangibles and practicalities of urgent human suffering.

I was once on a panel with one of Erickson's daughters where we were to talk about our relationship with him. She and I said the same thing. We felt accepted by him. Erickson accepted people for who they were. He was not trying to change a person because she was having trouble. So many therapies set out to make better people of clients or to get clients to conform to some model of mental health, without co-dependency or without dysfunction in the family. Erickson liked to watch minds open like flowers blooming in the sun. He didn't compare a rose to a sunflower. With a reputation supreme manipulator, he actually meddled less than any other clinician I'd been privileged to study with. He did exactly as little as necessary because he really did accept people for who they were.

He said, "Shellie, you are as unique as your fingerprints. There never has been and never will be anyone exactly like you. So you have the right to be that, fully. There are things you can change and other things are like your fingerprints. You can't change them. So just accept them." He helped people to get the wisdom to know the difference. He also conveyed a complete acceptance of the person's fingerprint.

Part of accepting the fingerprint formed the basis for his paradoxical work. He said that when, as a teenage athlete he had been paralyzed down to the use of one eye, he became a keen observer of human behavior.

Paradox and other methods came to him simply by observing how people actually work...not hypothesizing about their childhoods, but watching folks in motion. He noticed how if you ask someone running along campus on their way to class to tell you the time, they may start off again in the wrong direction. This observation formed the basis for his distraction techniques in psychotherapy.

He added to this his observation that if you want a baby to put down a knife, you give it something else to pick up and the baby will let go of the knife. Otherwise that baby will hold on, as if for dear life, to the dangerous object. Likewise, in childrearing in general and in treating human problems, distraction can allow the mind to be open to something new.

Paradox related to his observation that people don't like to be told what to do. They don't like you to say, well, stop this problem behavior! It tends to

make them dig in their heels and persist. Tell them to keep on doing what they are doing and even improve on doing themselves in even better, and they will rebel. If he hoped for a client to carry out an assignment on a Wednesday, he'd said: "Your mother might prefer you do this on Monday or Tuesday. I myself, am hoping for Thursday or Friday, and I'm certain your husband would be pleased for it to occur on the weekend." He observed human behavior and developed techniques from those general observations tailored to the unique individual at hand.

He also taught that it's O.K. if your client thinks you are God, but you'd better not get confused. People make mistakes. He said the Navaho weave an error in every rug to show that only God is perfect. He disliked therapists or doctors telling people what they were capable of in terms of recovery. His resentment formed when a doctor told his mother her son would be dead by morning. Paralyzed, he was able to get his mother to position a dresser mirror so that he could see the sun rise from his bed. He managed to be fully conscious at sun rise, long enough for his mother to see the doctor was wrong, before he lapsed into a several day coma. He had made his point to his mother.

When Kay Thompson and I talked in a conference in Italy about her amazing recovery from a major accident, she explained that were it not for Milton's philosophy, she wouldn't have dared envision a physical healing which the doctors said was impossible.

Just before this workshop in Italy, I had been thrown from the thoroughbred racing horse in heat which my teacher had put me on, and I had crushed a bone in my elbow. I was told I'd never straighten that arm again. "How dare you tell me what my arm is capable of doing," I knew to protest. When the physician wanted to leave the arm casted in a bent position after surgery, I knew when the arm needed to come out to prevent it from healing in a bent position. I had to go to three different doctors before I could find one who would listen to my body. If I had not known Erickson, I would not have believe in my own body and its special healing powers. My arms look symmetrical.

One of Milton's favorite tricks was to show highly educated people that their broad and deep studies had not prevented them from suffering a philosophically rigid mental set. He had lots of ways to shake up minds. One was his brain-teaser puzzle: "If a farmer plants five rows of trees, four trees each row, ten trees total, how is this possible?" I used to watch Milton open this trap with a variety of visitors from around the world. Everyone I saw fell in, laughing or scratching their heads. I'll leave the reader with this one. Milton did not give the answers. He gave his students and his clients the new problem of a great puzzle. He said to me: "You're in your thirties and want to think you know it all right now. If your theory of life were right and mine wrong, life would be deadly dull. I'm in my seventies and I learn something new every day."

To summarize from these vignettes, Erickson helped me to form a pragmatic and yet intriguing philosophy of psychotherapy. To condense some of the foundational ideas, we can consider the following eight principles:

Principle number one: Be neither pessimist nor optimist, but rather realist: Help your client to go through the best door that is open.

Principle number two: Therapists create the circumstances under which change can occur. It is the Client who makes the changes.

Principle Three: Therapists need to speak in their clients' language not the other way around.

Principle Four: Let (your own) pain be your teacher.

Principle Five: Accept the things you cannot change.

Principle Six: Observe human behavior. Let those observations, and not some theory, guide your interventions for each unique situation.

Principle Seven: Therapists are not Gods but Guides.

Principle Eight: Therapists don't need to provide answers, they need to provide mind-openers.