

Wide-Eyed Joyful Wonder

The title of this volume of the Collected Works of Milton H. Erickson, MD: *Opening the Mind* comes from the transcript of an interaction that took place in 1980 between Ernest Rossi, physician Marion Moore, and Milton Erickson. The three gathered in Erickson's small office to respond experientially to Rossi's request to "Open my mind to everything I need to know to become a good practitioner of therapeutic hypnosis." The transcript—with indicative section titles interspersed by Ernest and Kathryn Rossi—is placed, unedited, at the beginning of this volume. It is then resurrected at the volume's close, in edited and annotated form, dressed as a manuscript by the Editors written 27 years later and titled "Novel activity-dependent approaches to therapeutic hypnosis and psychotherapy: The general waking trance" (Rossi, Erickson-Klein, and Rossi, 2008a). The evolution of dual reports of this "mind-opening" experience bookends a volume packed with 50 years of clinical vignettes and discussion.

Ernest Rossi's opening request is striking. He asks for "everything." This evokes the attitude of an innocent at the buffet table: ready for it all, not knowing that it is more polite to pick and choose. Nor does he indicate that he plans to "learn," an ordered, deliberative process. No. He asks Drs. Erickson and Moore to help him "open my mind," metaphying a welcoming and unfiltered receptacle.

There is power and poignancy in the audacity of Ernest Rossi's initial request to "open my mind." It is typical of Ernest's wide-eyed and joyful wonder. It is both difficult and inappropriate to compose a foreword for this particular volume, that opens then closes in this way without experiencing it through Ernest's particular mind. This is being written within six months of Ernest's passing. He seems present in the room.

Between the opening and closing scenes, Volume 3 of *The Collected Works* contains 30 chapters about the use of therapeutic hypnosis that are grouped into four parts: "Problem Solving...," "Symptom Resolution...," "Reorientations to Sexual Satisfaction...," and "Self-Exploration." Despite these groupings, almost all of these chapters center around principles derived from experiences enacted within meticulously described clinical interactions. In these portrayals, it is obvious that Erickson evokes, resonates with, and utilizes the unique characteristics and conditions of each individual in his care. At the same time, he recognizes the commonalities of their suffering and so distills transcendent principles. These are his lessons about both the individuality of therapy and the hypno-dynamic mechanisms of trance.

But it can be hard to dig beneath the surface of these reports to mine the treasures. The 50-year time span bridges a bygone cultural era. It was male-dominated and more formally structured. People dressed, spoke, and interacted differently, particularly with their doctors. So too, Erickson's reports speak that language of detached objectivity, using careful self-reference as "the author" or "the writer," and employing classifications and terms for diagnoses and neuroses that are obsolete. Then, of course, much of this occurred at time in American culture in which the patient expected and followed directives, hypnotic or not. Retrospectively, it is difficult to remain undistracted by these trappings of style, to avoid impugning rigidity and even objectification. It helps to imagine the reports as live presentations, as many were, in smoke-filled rooms seated with dark-suited men, psychiatrists and other clinical professionals, some perhaps smug in their authority. They were being skillfully and carefully challenged by these reports. Challenged to shift their certainty. Challenged to open their minds.

We are not those men and these are never again to be those times. There are treasures in this volume to be found more in who Erickson is to those for whom he cares, than in what he does. There is treasure in the lengthy and patient encounters with "George," the institutionalized man described in Chapter Twelve, with whom which Erickson carefully and literally learns to speak George's "word-salad" language so that, "A complete history sprinkled with bits of word-salad was obtained by inquiries judiciously salted with word-salad" (p. 94). After leaving the hospital and moving into his successful life, he would return to Erickson to report back on his improving adjustment. Erickson writes, George would often "comment wryly, 'Nothing like a little nonsense in life, is there, Doctor?'" There are more treasures in his often-referenced paper on "Pediatric Hypnotherapy" (Chapter Three) in which he honors the "child's ideational comprehension" and admonishes us not "to derogate or minimize the child's capacity to understand." To exemplify that respectful posturing, he offers us the child whose pain the surgeon minimizes with, "Now that didn't hurt at all, did it?" Erickson has the

child respond, “You’re poopid! It did, too, hurt, but I didn’t mind it.” So there is a careful, challenging audacity—mirroring Ernest Rossi’s—lurking beneath the trappings and carefully worded, digestible reports. That is more of the treasure. Poopid indeed!

This brings us to the final chapter: the reprise of “opening my mind.” The editors again discuss the opening transcript in which Ernest, earnestly asked to have his mind opened. In exploring the gentle influence of touch and private space, the Rossi’s gleaned the prescience of Erickson and Moore’s understanding of the role of intensified activity—both motor and sensory—in opening the mind. Moore and Erickson spoke of how they learned what they knew from their own life experiences, because that is what they knew the best. It is hard to avoid the implication, that, of course, the same is true for all of those in our care. This original experience was near the start of the Rossi’s defining journey into the roles of novelty, enrichment, and exercise as stimulator of psychobiological plasticity and activity-dependent gene expression: a common denominator of trance and cultivator of therapeutic hypnosis. It signaled an opening within the opening of the mind.

In this sense, the volume is about opening our minds to how we open our minds. It represents an ongoing unfolding of layers: past the increasingly archaic trappings of style, through the rituals of hypnotic induction and suggestion, into naturalistic, strategic and person-centered “trance-formations,” to Erickson using who he was and all that he learned from his life to help others be who they can be, then go even deeper into exploring the commonality of our shared reorienting responses to novelty and activation to drive gene expression and plasticity within our embodied minds.

Enjoy diving into this and each volume of these Collected Works with an audacious and opening mind and wide-eyed joyful wonder that wants to know “everything” there is “to know to become a good practitioner of therapeutic hypnosis.”

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