

BOOK REVIEW

The Beginner's Mind

The Complete Works of Milton H. Erickson

Volume 2 – Basic Hypnotic Induction and Suggestion

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Stepping into the Process

Basic Hypnotic Induction and Suggestion, like most things Ericksonian, is more than one would expect. “Basic” does not mean simplistic, limited, or only for beginners. The chapters of this book take us through foundational structures and processes. Many are based on presentations to professional meetings, and so, embrace the need for explanation to an unfamiliar and even sceptical audience. I suggest that “basic” is best defined as: to carefully educate and inform members of the medical fraternity, psychiatric practice, and others dealing with difficult mental issues. Erickson does this carefully, accurately and reliably.

The volume is divided into four parts: 1.) presentations to other professionals; 2.) conversations and commentary from colleagues; 3.) collaborations with Ernest Rossi and Erickson’s wife, Elizabeth; and 4.) a review of the current knowledge and possibilities for the future.

We begin with Erickson speaking to medical professionals in 1944. He explains that therapeutic hypnosis is safe because “... the hypnotist-subject relationship is entirely one of voluntary cooperation.” (p.23) Erickson suggests that therapeutic hypnosis can provide insights into the patient’s emotional struggles and conflicts – something rarely possible in contemporary accelerated medical consultation. Erickson calls it the “art of medicine,” (p.29) which emerges from the client-physician relationship. Experts such as Jerome D. Frank and Scott Miller have produced compelling research on the importance of the therapeutic relationship as a key determiner for therapeutic success.

The role of the practitioner is “... primarily the role of an instrument, merely guiding (p.40) ... giving the patient an opportunity to re-associate and re-organize the psychological complexities and disturbances in his psychic life.” (p.41) More than a half century later, we see these ideas emerging in fields, such as interpersonal neurobiology, and in neuroscience discoveries about memory reconsolidation. Erickson’s prescience is evident, as it is throughout the entire 16 volumes.

In 1948, Erickson described hypnosis in psychotherapy as “... still in its infancy.” (p.44) The therapeutic value being that in “... a hypnotic state, the patient gains a more acute awareness of his needs and capabilities. He is freed from mis-taken beliefs and false assumptions, self-doubts and fears ... of the conscious mind, which opens up a...responsiveness to treatment...” (p.57) by directly accessing the non-conscious.

As might be expected, there are many case studies. Three fascinating excursions into the mind are found in Chapter 6: Edward C. was locked in a catatonic schizophrenic state, unresponsive for three years. How did Erickson release his mind? -- Erickson created a positive rapport with Ann C. by being brutally honest. Just reading the transcript will raise your eyebrows. And, finally, Sandra W., who, under hypnosis, revealed a “sane” personality who “worked” with Erickson to help Sandra. This case is one of the most extraordinary I have ever read.

Some case studies force readers to grapple with the terrible things people can inflict upon each other. More importantly, these case studies can help one realize the extraordinary capacity of the mind to adapt in the service of protecting “victims” from the most unspeakable treatment. Mental illness is often the incongruity between coping mechanisms, created to survive a past event or time and the current experience, when the horror has passed. Memories can remain in the timeless world of the implicit, only finding expression through behavior, emotions, and un-stable mental states. Erickson was a master of not only noticing these “voices” from the inner world, but also knowing how to utilize these as strengths or opportunities for therapy.

In 1966, at the 4th World Congress of Psychiatry, Erickson described an important aspect of mental disease as “... the breaking down of communication between people.” (p.85) We are now realizing the importance of communication, at both the interpersonal and the intrapersonal level – down to the biochemical interplay at the synapse and to the activation (or deactivation) of gene expression. Ernest Rossi has done much to advance our understanding of this deeper microbiological activity in the new field of Psychosocial Genomics, which is the topic of Chapter 16 in Part IV.

Part II shifts focus to Erickson’s “conversational approaches,” and the editors have selected chapters that are rich in conversational text. Chapter 8 is a transcript of a discussion between Jay Haley, John Weakland, and Erickson about an induction. Haley and Weakland, giants in the field themselves, quizzed Erickson: Why did you do this? How do you do that? What are you doing there? All questions I too would have loved to ask. Following, there are chapters on varieties of the double bind, indirect suggestion, and indirect suggestion in hand levitation.

Conversations continue in Part III as Erickson and Rossi add their commentaries to deeper aspects of the double bind, indirect suggestion, and also the two-level communications that occupy the conscious and the non-conscious simultaneously. In a short Foreword, Rossi describes some of the neuroscience that underlies therapeutic hypnosis and boldly states: “... therapeutic hypnosis could facilitate the essence of the act of creation ...” (p.222) Although this might sound grandiose, Rossi discusses the fundamental reality: that changes in behavior and mental states are also expressed in changes in tissue. Synaptogenesis occurs as we develop new paths in the brain and neurogenesis is the creation of new neurons. Gene expression creates the proteins that transform these changes into new tissue. Scientific advances continue into this unknown territory where we all possess a beginners’ mind.

Part IV contains two chapters from Rossi that take us to and beyond the growing edge of his collaborations with Erickson. In Chapter 15, Rossi describes, discusses, and provides examples of the 4-stage creative cycle that underlies so many healing processes. He also introduces some of his own techniques. Erickson always insisted that students were not to just follow, but to create and inspire in their own way.

This volume ends as Volume 1 began – with the current science. Erickson’s prescience has enabled us to feel he is still present, despite his passing more than 35 years ago. The Erickson Foundation continues to influence the world of therapy, introducing fresh and vibrant beginners’ minds into the present frame. What will we discover? Who will put forward new ideas? Who will discover something novel, extraordinary, and tremendous? This possibility is the open doorway that invites us all to find “... an evocative and provocative approach ...that might even shock people into waking up.” (p.222)