

HOPE AND RESILIENCY: UNDERSTANDING THE PSYCHOTHERAPEUTIC STRATEGIES OF MILTON H. ERICKSON

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What an excellent book this is. Readable, informative, entertaining, practical – the stuff of human life is in these pages in a way that demystifies the techniques of Erickson but maintains the wonder of his therapeutic and healing mind. This might partly be due to the fact that two of the authors were Erickson's children, and absorbed his values and his philosophy of human nature but it is also due to the way the book is written. It reminds me of books like that of Virginia Satir 'Peoplemaking' where one reads the book with total absorption and at the end feels compelled to reread, sure that one has missed content so easily read. This is one of those books, which you read avidly because it is so interesting, but when you are asked to recall its detail you cannot, because the whole is so much more important.

The book is divided into two parts, which follow on after 'A biographical sketch of Milton H. Erickson' of nine pages. There is also a summary chapter before the appendix, which has a useful set of self-development exercises. There is a good set of references at the back and also on page x.

Part 1 entitled 'Foundations of healing and health' focuses upon some of the most current themes in therapy, namely the human condition, mental health and healing, the role of the clinician and a philosophical framework. This section is some 32 pages long. Erickson's concepts of health and healing clearly place 'hypnotherapy' as an adjunct to other concepts. Emphasis is placed on the inner resources of the patient and not the actions of the therapist. Hand in hand with Erickson's approach is a reliance, not on prescriptive views of what it means to be a perfect human being or therapist, but on the resiliency of the patient and on the spiritual concept of hope. Central too is acceptance of the patient and the reality that implies to the therapeutic alliance and its development. This is simply captured in 'The goal of the therapist is strategically promote the health-orientated goals of the patient' (p. 32).

Part II unpacks Erickson's six core strategies with exemplars of each clinical strategy. (To use the word technique would debase the holistic complexity of Ericksonian methods.) It should be said that the magic of this book is that it does not use jargon or vocabulary that cannot be understood but mainly the words that Erickson used. The section begins with six axioms that illustrate the functional definition of everything that is to come in the next six chapters:

- Distraction: unintentional progress impedes self sabotage;
- Partitioning: when everything cannot be made right, it is good to have something that can be rectified;
- Progression: it is not possible to cure every sickness but there is always some good that can be done for those who suffer;
- Suggestion: all problem solving begins with the idea that change is possible;
- Reorientation: the greater the complexity of a person's psychological problem, the greater the opportunity to discover a simple solution;
- Utilization: whenever you try to make a person change you encourage animosity, but if you offer an opportunity, your energy is not wasted.

Distraction, partitioning, progression, suggestion, reorientation and utilization are all given separate chapters in which they are explored and exemplified. Thus Chapter 7, in dealing with distraction has 6 case reports of interventions with patients presenting with different complaints (an old gentleman scared of elevators, a girl who could not bear to be watched, a homicidal patient in an elevator, a boy with a bleeding leg, a woman who watched where she sat and a boy with severe acne). Each case report is discussed and analysed.

My own analysis of the case reports showed that distraction does not involve avoidance, but acceptance, and that a behavioural framework is not sufficient, whilst a modern cognitive behavioural model might well offer a better framework of explanation, depending whether one comes in from the body, the mind, emotions or behaviour. Perhaps analysing the case report is to step outside living the Ericksonian experience and give credibility to aspects of problem solving that unbalance rather than enable human resilience. Analysis from a behavioural or cognitive behavioural framework is certainly not playing by the rules of Ericksonian hypnosis. The case reports are designed to bring alive the individual patient and therapeutic alliance in a way that maintains the mystery of Erickson. And I am more sold on Erickson's idea of a human being, and spiritual concepts of hope, forgiveness, reconciliation, compassion, belief and acceptance, than I am on the model of humans as machines or even just ghosts in a machine. There is soul in Ericksonian therapy.

The authors are clear that the book is only an introduction to Erickson's work, and that in concentrating on the six clinical strategies they have left out Erickson's systematic assessment of each patient's personality and life situation. Nor do they include his activation and dynamic use of emotional processes such as anger, vulnerability and shock or his didactic instruction. At the same time, the chapters are cast in such a way that professional dialogue about Ericksonian hypnosis can occur and develop. The book is both a validation of reason and common sense and of the irrational complexity of human beings that need to be creatively and individually engaged in therapy. The wonder that is captured in play, metaphor and paradox is part of the wonder of change that occurs in life. In modern life it is all too easy to be dehumanized and be overwhelmed, to limit life and its possibilities in a network of language that imprisons past and future experience. This book is one that liberates in a way that is true to the master's thoughts: 'When you read a book backwards . . . you read a different book than if you read it first chapter to last . . . You should read a good book backwards, start with the last chapter, then read the second to last chapter and so on. After you have done so, reread it front to back and you will have a marvellous experience.' You can read this book from any starting point – it is so alive, and wanting others to be alive, like Erickson did.

This is a book that I will treasure.

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