

*Prepublication Draft:*

## ***Erickson's Indirect Presence***

*"I had many patients write a letter to me, explain that they want help  
...and not mail it...they went through that formal conscious process of asking for help  
and then their unconscious would answer them. So when I am just a memory, you still  
write to me and your unconscious can answer your letter."*

*Milton H. Erickson, M.D.*

*1974*

For me Erickson's presence has always been indirect. In the same way that a distant light illuminates objects in a fog, Erickson's heroic life story not only expanded my world view but also helped me see some of the hidden good in my own life. As others have discovered throughout the centuries, there is much to be gained in cultivating a relationship with someone on the other side of life. Though it is challenging to become intimately acquainted with someone who is no longer living, I have always felt that I gained much through meeting Erickson.

In the same way that I learned to love Socrates through the eyes of Plato, my admiration for Erickson initially grew from the chronicling of Jay Haley and then others such as Ernest Rossi and Jeff Zeig who apprenticed under Erickson. Many years later, I had the

opportunity of working with the Milton H. Erickson Foundation Achieves. While digitizing this material I was fully immersed in hundreds of hours of audio recording. During a two year period I listened daily to Erickson speak, I transcribed his words, made connections between the overarching ideas, visualized his hypnotic demonstrations, and spent much of my day and night in and out of trance. When I left the archives, Erickson's voice would go with me.

My encounters with Erickson have occurred on various levels of consciousness. The most intriguing of these occurred at night as Erickson entered my dreams. During the darkness of night, the restless part of my mind was searching for home. It has been this way since the disintegration of my childhood family. I am honored to know the widow Erickson and have visited the Erickson's house in Phoenix on many an occasion. But in my dreams Erickson's house is different; it is more like the place I lived as a four-year-old boy. In the dream I remember most clearly, I am taking a long journey up a hill and once inside the house walk up a long flight of stairs. Somewhere at the top I am hoping to find Erickson. The feeling associated with these images is one of intense anxiety as if waiting to be judged. When I find Erickson, he does not say a word. He simply looks at me, kindly and expectantly. This visual memory yields profound encouragement and the understanding that the rest is up to me.

Along with many others around the world, I have also encountered Erickson through hundreds of written case studies describing his clinical work and the touching stories of his fatherly interactions with his children. After reading these it is natural to imagine the

feel of the connection that existed between Erickson and those he helped. I seriously doubt that I am the only person to vicariously enjoy, through Erickson, the special type of security that can only be known in relation to a strong father figure.

In modernity, this experience with a father as one's hero is rare. Perhaps as a result of over correction from out-dated authoritarian practices, today's fathers are portrayed in the popular media as bumbling, childlike figures that require a great deal of care taking by their wife and children. Even worse, with the demands of an industrial society the father has been absent from the home, banished to a cubical where he spends his time performing subordinate tasks that lack meaning. At the end of the day nothing heroic has been accomplished. There are of course exceptions, but in general this culture lacks pride in the family and has little interest in its deposed patriarchy. I suspect that is partly why Americans do not introduce themselves by describing their family heritage but rather the sports team from whom they derive their pride and pleasure.

When I first started reading about Erickson, I had an insatiable appetite for his heroic healing stories. Similar to the way that a malnourished child eats plaster off the walls to get more calcium, I devoured Erickson's case studies to strengthen my psychological constitution. Characterized primarily by acts of altruism, these stories illustrate how Erickson approached life's challenges with cunning and determination. He had an iron fist in the strength of his will and a velvety softness in the way he approached the needy and the weak. For someone who grew up without a father in the home, Erickson's

indirect presence provided a secure foundation that I would eventually use to grab hold of aspirations that formally seemed out of reach.

This father strength is the same that I hope to convey to my children. I enjoy placing my son or my daughter on my shoulders while walking around. This way they can see the world from a higher vantage point than my own. While writing this paper, I asked my five year-old son about his experience with me as his father. He responded, "I am glad that I am so smart...I asked you to carry me just before the string ray bit your foot." I interpreted his reply as meaning that he felt upheld by his father. At this young age, his trust in his own goodness is still inseparable from his father's abilities and the fact that he will unquestionably benefit from them. I credit my relationship with Erickson for helping me to feel that I have much to offer those who have come into my life.

Reading about Erickson's unique accomplishments has richly contributed to my ability to recognize opportunities for creative problem solving. But not all of the literature has been equally satisfying. What I found more difficult to swallow were the books that concerned themselves mainly with the dissection of Erickson's technique and the invention of new jargon. In the same way that ethnologists eventually recognized that more information is gained from an animal that is studied in its natural habitat, rather than one reduced to small pieces on a lab table, I find that Erickson is best viewed as a forest rather than a twig. The former offers a false sense of superiority while the later inspires awe.

The other way that I indirectly experienced the life of Erickson was through his progeny. Shortly after reading Jay Haley's book, I discovered that Erickson's daughter, Betty Alice, was conducting therapy and training in the city where I lived. So I immediately sought her out. Even though I was young and new to clinical practice, she expressed a strong interest in my ideas and confidence in my developing abilities. The experience was nourishing, like fruit from a really good tree. Shortly thereafter, I had the additional pleasure of becoming acquainted with another of Erickson's daughters, Roxanna. I quickly came to respect her discernment and candor. My time with these two unique individuals has been very rewarding as they have reflected aspects of their father that I would have otherwise missed.

Another level of connection I have with Erickson is through my writing. Serving as Editor for the Milton H. Erickson Foundation Newsletter for five years, I gained a better appreciation for simplicity in written communication. There was a lot of work involved in making contributors' articles easy to read and absorb. When I wrote my introductory comments, they were designed to be concise and to the point. It is not possible to write this way without thinking about the essence of what is being discussed. This skill was recently taken to new levels when I coauthored a full-length book about Erickson with Betty Alice and Roxanna. Much is learned through the exercise of putting thought to written word. While writing about this wounded healer who had so much hope and resiliency, I found myself becoming less concerned with my personal issues and more aware of the meaning that is derived from empowering others.

Lastly, I would say that I have encountered Erickson by seeking to emulate his pioneering spirit and appreciation for discovery. Erickson's stubborn refusal to tell others how to live their life, or exactly how to practice psychotherapy, has forced me to find my own individual path. Erickson's mysterious style of communication and idiosyncratic behaviors remind us that human *uniqueness* defies scientific reductionism. His flexibility and readiness to act in seemingly contradictory ways makes it impossible to confine his work to a procedural cage. Although freedom means more responsibility, it also provides more room to grow. Now with less learned helplessness and greater strength of will, I find myself riding the same wind on which Erickson soared.