

# **Milton Erickson, MD:**

## Meeting with a Remarkable Man

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### Introduction

The late psychiatrist and psychologist, Milton H. Erickson, was an extraordinary man, practitioner and teacher. He gave direction to my own development as a psychotherapist and, at the same time, provided my life with a most reassuring sense of safe-haven.

Because he was an amazing character, I could regale you for hours with so many of his stories.

But instead, I have chosen a few examples from my own experience. These, I think, best illustrate the innovation he brought to his work, his approach to life, and the life-changing influence he could have on those he met and treated, even on me when I was a young graduate student struggling to find my path.

### It Was Just a Matter of Time

It all started in 1973. I was working in an art gallery at Arizona State University when Dr. Milton H. Erickson came in. With his purchase of a piece of art precariously balanced between him and the side of his wheelchair, I offered to help him to his car.

When I came back inside, one of the other gallery workers said, "Do you know who that was?"

And of course, I didn't.

"That's the famous psychiatrist, Milton Erickson."

I turned with a so-what shrug, "Never heard of him" when she handed me *Svengali in Arizona*. As soon as I started reading the article, I could feel the hook sinking in.

### The Story of a Suicidal Patient

In this magazine article, Erickson told about how he treated a suicidal patient, and it went something like this. During the early sixties, a young woman came into his office and said that she had decided to kill herself.

Over the course of his medical career, Milton Erickson was best known for his indirect approach

But she had also decided, as the sane, rational person that she was, that she should give him, the psychiatrist of her choice, three months to convince her

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of her misguided decision. If he could not, then she would go ahead with her plan.

If he tried to put her in the hospital, she warned him, she would act perfectly sane. She knew exactly how to play that "game," and as soon as she was released, she'd not wait another three months, but kill herself right away.

Caught in a dilemma, Dr. Erickson wondered what he should do. What kind of approach would work? Should he even take her on as his patient? Her challenge, though, intrigued him. He decided to take her case, but on the condition that she would do everything he asked.

From a patient's self-described story, an assignment would emerge

She would have to cooperate fully with his treatment and do exactly as he prescribed (as long as it was not illegal, unethical or harmful). Not taking such agreements lightly, she finally accepted his conditions.

In their first session, Erickson began by finding out a little of her history. Born to parents who clearly indicated to her that she was an accident and unwanted, parenting had been minimal at best.

They raised her with the basics...food, clothing, and got her to school, but constant reminders that she was an inconvenient intrusion seemed to have replaced all love and affection.

But life suddenly changed. In her early twenties, her parents were killed in a car accident. And with no close relatives or friends to turn to, her life had pretty much drifted since then.

While competent, she treated her work with casual indifference and moved from job to job. She had a small savings account, but even that, coupled with her capacity to earn, held no particular significance.

She was clearly unhappy, dark-hearted, and felt that her life had no purpose.

Like reading from a list, she recited personal and physical flaws. And assuming that they were as obvious to him as they were to her, she abruptly concluded, "And I'm ugly, stupid, and just a freak of nature."

And just for the record, she neither intended to marry nor have kids.

In short, nothing much was going on, nor ever had. Over the years, she had honed a

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tough surface, impervious with her own truth: life just wasn't worth living.

Erickson then probed further with this question, "What's your most terrible feature?"

"Well, it's rather obvious, isn't it?"

"Well, maybe it is obvious and then again, maybe it isn't. But what do you think your worst feature is?"

"The gap between my front teeth."

As Erickson looked at her, it seemed like a very slight gap, but she seemed to have stored it in her perception as not only terrible, but disfiguring.

Insisting that this was just one of many flaws that made her ugly and unacceptable, she stared him down and waited.

### **Neither Illegal, Unethical, or Harmful**

At this point, Erickson explained her first assignment.

She was to go home and every time she showered, she was to fill her mouth with water and practice squirting it out through that gap between her teeth. And she was to do this until she could squirt with an accuracy of several feet.

She, of course, thought this mildly insane, but he reminded her of her agreement to do whatever was not illegal, unethical or harmful.

She dutifully went home and practiced as instructed, reporting back that she was getting pretty good at this squirting business. So good, in fact, that within three weeks or so, she'd met the required distance.

In the meantime, Erickson asked her more about her day-to-day life. She revealed that she had \$5000 in savings, which at the time was pretty substantial. But that was because she had few expenses.

Rarely going out to eat and spending her evenings alone meant that she essentially saved most of what she earned.

That's when he asked, "What's going to happen with that money when you die?"

"I don't care what happens to it; I guess it will go to the state; it doesn't matter to me."

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And that led to his next assignment: to pamper herself before she died.

She was to spend some of her savings on herself, and while it took some convincing, she essentially agreed to his plan for a make-over.

He knew the owner of a clothing store, and he sent her there for a new wardrobe. From there, he sent her to a beauty salon. A shorter haircut gave her a more *in style* look and she learned how to do her nails and apply makeup.

Erickson could see that she was starting to feel a little better about herself, not yet full of spark and purpose, but she was making progress.

In one of her sessions, she even said that people at work seemed to notice her hair and complimented her on some of the new colors she'd been wearing.

Then, she happened to mention that there was a guy at work who continued to embarrass her.

Erickson, of course, wanted to know more about this.

She said that every time she went to the drinking fountain, this guy would make some excuse to show up there at the same time and engage her in conversation. She would just quickly retreat to her desk, hide her face, and avoid him (because, as she said, she was so ugly).

Erickson, though, was getting the impression that maybe this fellow was interested in her. That made her ready for the next assignment.

"What is your best childhood memory?" he asked.

"I don't have any."

"OK then, what's your best adult memory? No one should die without at least one good memory."

And she shot back, "Well, that's just a shame because I will."

"No, I think we can do better than that. We'll create a good memory for you."

And when she said, "How?" Erickson told her his plan.

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The next Monday she was to dress in her favorite outfit and take some extra time with her hair and makeup.

As usual, she was to go to the drinking fountain, but when this young man showed up, she was to fill her mouth with water, step toward him and squirt just as she had practiced, and then turn around and *run like hell*.

Wide-eyed at such a plan, she immediately refused. But then, Erickson reminded her of her commitment to do what he asked. And of course, because it wasn't illegal, unethical, or harmful, she had to honor her pact.

"Look, it'll be fun." And he could tell that, as reluctant as she was, she was still kind of interested.

"This can be the one thing you do in this life that will be totally out of your control. You'll have no idea what will happen, and that's what will make it so much fun. And even better than that, it'll make a great memory."

When you change the context, you can create a new response

She didn't wholeheartedly believe him, but she did agree to carry out his plan.

Over the weekend, she decided what to wear and on Monday morning, she gave full attention to her hair and make-up.

She arrived at work as usual. But when it came time to head to the drinking fountain, she could feel a little wave of apprehension.

But she continued according to plan, arriving at the fountain just as the young man showed up. Leaning forward, she took a huge gulp. Slowly, lifting her head, she took a step forward and squirted. Then, turned, and *ran like hell*.

And that's when the unexpected happened: he ran after her, caught her; spun her around, and gave her a kiss.

Utterly surprised and speechless, they stood a second before finding their way back to their respective desks. Unable to focus for the rest of the day, she called Erickson for an emergency session.

At her session that night, she said, "Doctor, somebody has turned my whole world upside down. I do not know what is going on. I used to think I knew who I was and now I'm not sure of anything. My mind is just in a whirl with everything feeling uncertain."

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Can you tell me who you see sitting in front of you right now?"

He met her plea directly, "Who I see sitting in front of me is a very attractive young woman, who is very intelligent, very charming and who's getting the idea that maybe a young man might be interested in her."

And that was her new beginning. She dated this young man for awhile, and moved on into an active social life.

She had reconnected, and with the emotional gears shifted and moving forward, she emerged with new meaning and new purpose.

### An Obsession to Know More

As you can imagine, I was riveted, hooked, and preoccupied with just one thought: I have to know more about this Erickson guy!

How had he known what to do?

How did he know what questions to ask? And how did he know when to give her the assignments?

What exactly was he doing? Was this some kind of new therapy? And how did it work?

None of my psychology classes had taught me anything like this. This was totally different, and I had to know more.

And that was the beginning of my obsession.

I researched and read everything I could about the great doctor, Milton Erickson. From articles to books and even a few workshops, I just seeped in this new-found Ericksonian brew.

When people encouraged me to contact him, "Out of the question," I responded too quickly.

Erickson knew how to creatively tap unconscious abilities to bypass the conscious mind

But they wouldn't let up. "You live in the Phoenix area; he lives in the Phoenix area...Why not study with him?"

But all of that was just too far beyond me. How could I consider such a possibility?

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I had no money. I couldn't even pay for him to teach me even if he would consider the idea. But they still carried on, "He's really easy to approach. Go ahead...just call him."

I was definitely way too timid for that, so instead, I decided to write him a letter.

Actually, I wrote to both Dr. Erickson and his wife. They had collaborated on some of the articles I had read, and I decided that including them both might give me just the edge I needed.

### A Letter of Introduction

I felt all a-fumble as I started, but it went something like this: After reading all your books, I'm thoroughly intrigued.

I'm a graduate student at Arizona State University and I'd like to study with you, but I have no money. That's why I've been working on all sorts of schemes to pay you.

The best one, I think, could be a bartering arrangement. Because I have gardening experience, I'm hoping that we can work out an exchange: I'll do some gardening while you do the teaching.

I even had visions of an article about him in *Psychology Today* or one of the popular psychology magazines since no one in my graduate and undergraduate programs seemed to know who he was.

I just wanted him to be more well-known. His life seemed so fascinating to me with lots of drama, adventure, wisdom, and amazing feats. If only somebody would write his life story; it could inspire others like me.

But what I really wanted, and I said this in my letter, was simply to meet them both and learn all I could. I closed with my name and phone number, sent it off, and waited.

About a week later, after returning from a weekend away, my roommates said that the strangest calls had been coming in very early in the morning.

The caller wanted O'Hanlon's Gardening Service. And he'd never leave a message, but said he'd call back

Sure enough, almost on cue that Monday morning, the phone rang and I answered. "Yes, this is Bill O'Hanlon."

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"O'Hanlon's Gardening Service?"

Again, I said, "This is Bill O'Hanlon."

"Don't you think you ought to survey the territory before you decide to take the job?"

"Yes, of course. Is this Dr. Erickson?"

"Yes, it is," and that's when the conversation started. He suggested that we meet the next morning at 11. And although I had class, it was one I was happy to skip. After all, this was the great Dr. Erickson.

### An Unconventional First Meeting

I was sort of a hippie at the time with long hair and a beard, but I dressed in my best, actually a white suit previously worn in a too early wedding several years before.

When I arrived at his place, it was nothing like I expected.

It was modest and small with an old station wagon sitting in the car port. I wasn't expecting a castle or a huge estate with a signpost that said *the famous Dr. Milton Erickson lives here*. But I was surprised that his house was so much more basic, more unassuming than I had imagined

I knocked and Mrs. Betty Erickson came to the door. When I introduced myself, she graciously said, "Oh yes, come right in. We've been expecting you."

As I entered, Dr. Erickson nodded to me, and as I went to shake his hand, I noticed that his right arm was almost completely paralyzed.

With that awkward moment behind me, I sat down on the couch next to him in his easy chair.

He was watching TV, and we sat through a couple of shows. He didn't say a word, just laughed a few times as Archie blundered his way through *All in the Family*. And I sat there thinking, "Is this all we're going to do?"

As the second TV show ended, his wife brought in his wheelchair, and after settling in, he asked me to wheel him out to the garden.

When we arrived, he pointed to a long row of bushes. "See those rose bushes?" I nodded and he continued, "Do you see that grass tangled in there with them? It's tough to

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get at and weed, but I'd like you to get rid of it."

I looked at my white suit, and I looked at where he was pointing. I looked at him, and he said nothing.

The silence only made me more timid, and even though I wanted to blurt out something about going home and changing and coming right back, I just felt too intimidated.

I knelt down in my white pants and started tugging. The dirt went flying as I made my way down the row, trying to avoid the thorns and leaving the blooms undisturbed as best I could.

He was right; the job was hard, but he showed me where I could find some tools and gloves to make the yanking-out a little easier.

And all the while, he sat in his chair and talked to me. He was telling me stories and asking questions, drifting into so many ideas and connecting them. He did most of the talking, and I was entranced.

Still feeling pretty shy, I wondered if he was even hypnotizing me!

Maybe we were having a therapy session. All of this just made me wonder even more about his way of teaching. I knew the stories he was telling played an important part, but I didn't understand exactly how.

Before I left that Tuesday, he arranged for me to come back the next week, and that was the beginning of our time together that lasted the better part of the year.

### Rethinking the Student-Teacher Relationship

It was actually Mrs. Erickson who saved the day.

One morning she came out with an appointment book and said, "Milton, the boy wants to sit-in on some of your sessions and learn your work. Let's set up some appointments. Then, he can concentrate on what he's learning instead of just doing our gardening."

He knew how to weave answers into stories that connected ideas into action

I was silently thankful to her for speaking up where I was too shy.

And it turned out that those became the sessions, in addition to our many gardening conversations, that took me deeper into what I so passionately wanted to learn.

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I'll diverge here a bit by telling you another story that reveals even more about my early encounters with Dr. Erickson.

At the time, I happened to talk with a friend of mine who was a practicing psychologist and hypnotherapist as well as a priest in the Phoenix area. I off-handedly mentioned that I was studying with Milton Erickson.

At first, he seemed a little shocked, and asked what that was like. Clarifying that I was Erickson's student and not his patient, we continued talking.

And that's when my friend suggested that maybe I should bring up an issue to work on.

"When he works with you on an issue that's important to you, you'll find out how it goes from the inside out. You'll find out how Erickson's approach works because you'll actually be a part of it. You'll have the real experience."

That struck me as a pretty good idea, and gave my focus a little different direction. But I wasn't entirely sure that such a shift in our current student-teacher relationship was appropriate.

On the other hand, I knew that finding an issue presented no problem.

Since the beginning of time, I had been a very finicky eater. And, I still am. But nowhere near as rigid in my food choices today as I was back then.

At the time, though, my food choices were more akin to those of a 6-year-old, so I thought, yes, this might be the issue to work on.

### An Equally Unconventional First Session

The next time Erickson and I were to meet, I knocked on the front door as usual and Mrs. Erickson welcomed me, directing me toward his office door.

Because it was the same time we usually met, she said that I should knock, just to let him know I was coming in, but not to wait for him to acknowledge my presence before walking in.

That seemed easy enough. So, as instructed, I opened his office door and walked in. To my surprise, I saw that Erickson was seated, as usual, but two others were also there beside him.

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I later learned that they were psychology students, but at the time, it appeared that they were involved in hypnosis.

Erickson could be most persistent in reaching a solution

Feeling that I had interrupted their session and shouldn't have barged-in, I noticed that Erickson looked up and motioned to me, "Come in. Sit down over there. And take off that hat and put it underneath your chair."

I immediately followed his direction, and I didn't say another word for the next two and half hours.

But within those first 15 minutes, as I watched one student awkwardly trying to hypnotize the other, Erickson suddenly stopped them and said, "All right. Let me show you how hypnosis is done."

He looked down at the floor and began talking, nonstop for the next 45 minutes.

The first story he told was about a woman who had come to see him about her weight problem.

Using a narrative of hypnosis, he told her: you are going to discover three new things about weight and food in the next week, and each time you discover one of them, I would like you to call me. It doesn't matter when you call...in the middle of the day or night. I will answer my phone and I want you to tell me what you have learned.

Erickson continued his story: Three days later, she called him around 7 in the evening and said, "Dr. Erickson, I have discovered the first thing, and it's really quite amazing.

"I went to the grocery store, where I usually spend 20 to 30 minutes, maybe 40 at the most, and I shopped for 3 hours. I saw all sorts of new and different foods that I'd never noticed before. And the most amazing part was I just bought enough of for a small taste of each.

"And when I got home and ate, I felt satisfied. I didn't feel deprived or restricted or that I'd sacrificed what I really wanted to eat with these smaller portions. You know, I think I can lose weight this way."

And Dr. Erickson responded. "All right, then. Call me when you discover the next one."

As he continued with this story, I thought, "Wow, this is quite a coincidence."

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I had planned to tell him about working on my finicky eating, but before I even had the chance, I was listening to this food story.

But then, as he went on with several more, it didn't really seem like such a coincidence.

The setting for his next story was the Georgia Psychoanalytic Society where he was teaching hypnosis.

Erickson was staying with a husband and his wife who were both leaders in this organization, and his wife said, "Since you are an honored guest with us tonight, I'd like to make you a special dish. Just tell me what you'd like."

Erickson replied, "Well, since I'm in the South, I'd really love some of that milk gravy I've heard others talk about. It seems to be a southern specialty, and I'd love to try it.

At that point, the wife blushed in silence while her husband collapsed in hysterics onto their couch.

Erickson looked at them both blankly and asked for an explanation.

The husband spoke first. "My wife came from a very wealthy southern family. I, on the other hand, came from a poor southern family, but I've worked my way up as a successful physician, and I've made a lot of money in the process.

"I've always wanted her to make milk gravy. It's been years since I've had it, but she tells me it's the food of poor white trash and she refuses.

"Now, though, since she's made this promise to you, she'll need to keep it, and that means I'll get some too."

That night, delicious milk gravy seemed to swallow up an assumption long perpetuated and believed as truth.

Realizing that not only her husband, but the great Dr. Erickson loved her southern milk gravy, she relinquished such an irrational claim. Plus, milk gravy became one of the staples of her southern hospitality.

Again, as I sat and listened, the stories about food continued, and now, their content seemed quite intentional.

His next story took us to a workshop he was attending in Hawaii. Erickson was staying with a couple who had organized the event, and they took him to their favorite club, a

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place where they always ordered the same meal.

Upon arrival on this particular evening, Erickson said, "I see something else I'd rather have." And he ordered 12 raw oysters on the half shell.

Although the club's reputation for fresh seafood was well-known, the couple was surprised by his choice, and even more so when the slimy raw oysters arrived.

But Erickson slid them down his throat with great relish, thoroughly loving the experience. Sensing a little curiosity on their part, he ordered another dozen and offered them each a taste.

Still shy, especially with the oysters right up close, they looked at each other and then at Erickson. It was a long moment, but without a word, they each scooped one up and swallowed.

The oysters slid down easily. They apparently tasted so good that the couple cancelled their usual and Erickson ordered another round.

This was the beginning, as it turned out, of not only raw oysters on the half shell, but the ordering of other "risky" menu choices from time to time.

With story after story, 45 minutes had elapsed, and finally Erickson looked up, directed his eyes at me and asked, "Now, what can I do for you today, young man?"

And I said, "Dr. Erickson, I think you may have already done enough."

With that, he continued on, more generally, talking about changing patterns and being less rigid and becoming more flexible.

And all of what he said made perfect sense, and it was only several years later that I realized just how much.

One day after I had long since stopped going to his house, and shortly before his death in 1980, I was in an upscale restaurant and ordered one of the specials, an "unknown" entrée.

As I ate, I realized it was unlike anything I had ever tasted, and I loved it. This trying-something-entirely-new felt like a taste-sensation holiday, and if Erickson had been there, I know he would have understood exactly what I meant.

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### Back to That Tuesday Session

When the psychology students left, Erickson and I went out to the garden.

By now I had worked up my courage and said, "Dr. Erickson, I don't know how you did this, but today, you seemed to know exactly what was on my mind. How did you know what to talk about? Why did you decide on food and flexibility?"

And as I might have expected, he launched into another story.

This one was about a physician couple who came to see him from the Midwest, a place where Erickson himself used to live.

Erickson would create a context in which people could see where they were and a vision of where they wanted to be

This was the husband's second marriage and they were now having marital trouble.

The husband told Erickson that his first wife was a physician whom Erickson knew, but he did not want to divulge her name because that might influence Erickson's therapy.

Suddenly, Erickson interrupted their session to phone his friend Barbara. When she answered, he said, "Barbara, this is Dr. Erickson. For some reason I had this urge to call you during my session here."

As he said this, he looked toward the husband, and said "Nancy" into the phone. At that point, the husband jumped out of his chair, admitting that Nancy was his first wife's name.

After Erickson told me this, I wondered how he knew to say *Nancy* right at that particular moment.

"I think my unconscious must have recognized when the husband emphasized certain syllables over and over again in his conversation. For example, he told me they went to Nantucket, and he must have used the *Nan* and *C* sounds so many times, that my unconscious somehow associated them with my friend Barbara."

Erickson further added, "During therapy, we can perceive at a different level within the unconscious mind." And this is a statement that turned out to be one of the most direct explanations he ever gave me.

So often, he told stories to make his point. And his stories were wonderfully poignant, but on this particular day, I discovered the difference between his gardening and his

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therapy.

Gardening was as explicit as his therapy was implicit.

And that became the pattern in his sessions. I'd ask a question and 20 minutes or so later, I'd wonder what exactly the question was that I had asked.

His masterful storytelling skillfully answered questions implicitly, entrancing the listener into meaning and metaphor that just probed deeper into self-discovery.

### Erickson's Early Influences

In addition to being a great storyteller, Erickson lived a fascinating life. The circumstances of his life, actually some of his wounds, provided the architecture for his healer paradigm.

From such wounds came some of his greatest contributions and skills in therapy, not the least of which was his persistence in reaching a solution.

Within therapy, the unconscious mind can perceive at a different level

But over the course of his medical career, Erickson was best known for his indirect approach to therapy and for enlisting unconscious abilities to bypass the conscious mind.

I was taken by surprise when he told me that his sense of optimism only grew stronger because of his early life experiences. Scandinavian in origin and born in a western boom town, Erickson grew up on a farm.

But when the mining towns went belly-up, his family went back to the Midwest. As Erickson said himself, his family was one of the few families to migrate east and maybe that was what accounted for the backwards approach he so often used.

At 17, he developed polio, although at the time, the diagnosis was more suspected than confirmed. Erickson would tell how expert doctors came from the city, and after examining him had concurred regarding its severity.

Stepping outside his room so Erickson could not hear, they told his mother, "The boy won't last through the night."

But Erickson did hear, and upset that these doctors would tell his mother that her son was about to die with such callous words, he was determined to prove them wrong.

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And despite high fevers and drenching sweats, he survived. Before morning he requested that his family reposition his dresser so the mirror could reflect the sunrise that brought him into a new day.

He had proved these slick-city doctors wrong, and that was a triumph he'd never forget.

Within hours, though, paralysis set in. And without the use of his legs, he was relegated to sitting in a wicker rocker in his room. Life on the farm went on around him, and mostly without him.

### Setting a New Course

But this was a time, too, when the power of his inner resources was beginning to take hold.

It seems that with both the power of intention and imagination, he began to change the course of his life by tapping into his unconscious imagination to vividly experience his world.

And he told it like this: One day, in utter frustration because he could not move his chair, he just closed his eyes and imagined that he was near the window in his bedroom that overlooked the farm and the nature he loved.

The power of  
intention can  
initiate change

With eyes closed, he fell into a long reverie, and several hours later, found himself at the window. The only explanation was that his intense concentration and the shifting of his upper body had rocked his chair closer to where he had imagined himself to be.

Within this imagined reverie, he climbed up into his tree house right outside his window. He remembered the joy he had in climbing and playing. So vivid was the thought of that experience that it must have moved his body with degrees of muscle memory.

Using that same visionary process, he deliberately tried it a second time. He closed his eyes, and went inside himself to imagine climbing up to the tree house.

Opening his eyes, he looked at both his arms and legs and noticed slight muscle twitches. He realized that such stimulated muscle movement must have been responsible for initially rocking his body and then rocking his chair.

From there, he determined that it was the power of his intention to be near the window that had given direction to the rocking movement of his chair.

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Erickson continued to experiment with these powers of intention and imagination as he watched his little sister who was just learning to walk. She would get up, wobble, and fall down. And he envisioned that same process for himself.

While paralyzed, he couldn't feel his body move, but with eyes closed, he could see his body move.

He could see also slight changes in blood flow. His arms became redder in the areas about to move as more blood flowed to where he had imagined movement.

In this way, he learned to move, if you will, through imagination and muscle memory.

Exciting as it was, it was equally painstaking in its progress, and only gradually did he build up his arms. Moving his legs was far more difficult, and as he grew older, his upper body experienced the most success.

### **Moving Forward with Clarified Purpose**

As an undergraduate, Erickson aspired to become a medical doctor. And because of polio and the rigors of medical study, he sought advice on how best to prepare.

At the time, the dean of the medical school he visited recommended both vigorous upper body strength training and exercise. He was also advised to learn German to make his understanding of medical texts easier to understand.

During the summer before medical school, Erickson came up with a perfect plan to accomplish his first task and spark his life with a bit of adventure.

He and a friend decided on a canoeing trip; the hours of paddling would provide him with plenty of exercise.

At the last minute, though, his paddling mate backed out.

Not wanting his parents to worry that he was setting out alone--he had a full portion of that mid-western stubborn streak--he headed out in his cut-offs, shirt, and bandana with some Beef Jerky, fish hooks and fishing line, and if I remember correctly, \$2.36 cents, which was a bit of money in 1919.

That was essentially it, and not only did he manage to survive, but he became the lead "paddler" of his canoe.

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And just how he accomplished such a feat is an excellent question. As he related to me, when portage was required, he would put his German to work.

Unable to carry the canoe himself, he'd stuff his German book into the waist of his cut-offs, shinny-up a tree to get himself to a high point, usually a bridge near the area of portage, and sit, reading his German with his paralyzed legs obviously exposed.

Eventually, somebody would pass-by, conversation about his polio and medical school plans might ensue, and an offer to carry his canoe would shortly follow.

He used the same technique when it came to food. Too proud to ask for a handout, Erickson would paddle his canoe within hailing distance of fishermen on the river. Not close enough to bother their fishing, but close enough to stick out his fishing hook and line.

As the end of the day neared, often the fishermen, curious to know more about this lone canoeist, would wave and invite him closer.

Erickson knew how to let others discover their own generosity

As he approached their boat, they would talk and laugh a bit and later, upon noticing his withered legs, they'd offer him some of the extra fish caught in their nets. Sometimes they would invite him back to their homes and he would stay the night.

Erickson had that uncanny ability to let others discover their own generosity and goodwill in the process of helping others. During this particular summer, that very generosity was extended to him as he prepared for medical school.

Amazingly, he never directly asked for help. Even then, his approach was indirect. And that lasted through his many years as a therapist and became a hallmark of his therapy.

He would never tell people what they should do. He avoided the explicit and cultivated the implicit.

He would orchestrate a context in which people could see where they were and a vision of where they wanted to be. And instead of working from the outside, he let motivation inspire from the inside.

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**Dr. Ericksonian: Man, Practitioner, and Teacher**

Developing such an indirect approach has become the empowering legacy of his therapy.

Erickson avoided the explicit and cultivated the implicit

Instead of saying, "You know, you really need to change this." He would say, "I wonder how quickly you will change...or I wonder in what way you will change."

And that's what I would invite you to discover more about on your own. You'll find his books full of so many stories that can inspire your work.

And now, one last story about Erickson, the wounded healer.

When he was about 7 years old, he developed an abscessed tooth. As he set off walking to the doctor who was about 5 miles from their family farm, he thought it was just a very bad toothache.

But the pain grew worse and worse as his pace kept time to his throbbing jaw. As it grew more intense, he could feel the swelling take over. Even at 7, he knew all about infection.

By the time he reached the doctor, he was feverish with pain. And the doctor, upon seeing him, was shocked that his family would send a boy this ill walking such a distance.

But Erickson reassured him that his family had thought it was just a toothache.

Lancing the abscess brought immediate relief. Erickson felt 100% better and couldn't believe how quickly he was essentially pain free.

And he was equally impressed that with one movement of the doctor's hand, such suffering could be alleviated. He thought the doctor was a god, saint-like with amazing power.

The doctor, in turn, was just as impressed with Erickson's bravery; he'd uttered not even a whimper and had walked such a distance.

After the procedure was done, the doctor handed Erickson a nickel.

Now, for a 7-year-old boy in 1908 to have 5 cents was like having \$500 today. It was

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just an incredible amount of money. So struck by the doctor's generosity, Erickson, right on the spot, decided that he would one day become a doctor.

And this was reaffirmed when he was 17. "Next to a farmer, the next best thing," he used to say, "is a doctor." He attributed both his determination to attend medical school and his dedication to work as a psychiatrist to the farming roots of his early life.

The Ericksonian Hypnosis he later developed emerged from that very same life interwoven with years of academic experience.

Using his imagination and unconscious ability to move, as well as an approach that used indirect suggestion, he developed the core of his hypnosis and therapy.

And basic to this core were two very important principles:  
change the context to create a new response and  
trust the unconscious to evoke responses that come from within rather than  
imposing them from without.

So, as I conclude here, I'm hoping that this introduction to Milton Erickson will excite you as much as his work first excited me when I read that article in *Time*.

He's touched my life, my work, and my practice. He's captivated me for the last 30 years, and I hope his approach to therapy and hypnosis will captivate you as well.

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### About the Author

Bill O'Hanlon, MS, LMFT, has authored or co-authored 29 books and has published 54 articles or book chapters. His books have been translated into French, Spanish, Portuguese, Swedish, Finnish, German, Chinese, Bulgarian, Turkish, Korean and Indonesian, Italian, Croatian, Arabic and Japanese. He has appeared on Oprah (with his book *Do One Thing Different*), The Today Show, and a variety of other television and radio programs.

Bill is a Licensed Mental Health Professional, Certified Professional Counselor, and a Licensed Marriage and Family Therapist. Bill is a clinical member of AAMFT (and winner of the 2003 New Mexico AMFT Distinguished Service Award), and certified by the National Board of Certified Clinical Hypnotherapists and a Fellow and a Board Member of the American Psychotherapy Association.

He teaches three very popular distance learning courses for NICABM

- [The Science of Happiness](#)
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To visit Bill's website, or subscribe to his monthly Possibilities Newsletter, click here: <http://www.billohanlon.com/>

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