

BOOK REVIEW

THE SEMINARS, LECTURES AND WRITINGS OF MILTON H. ERICKSON, VOLUME III: MIND–BODY COMMUNICATION IN HYPNOSIS

Edited by Ernest L. Rossi and Margaret O. Ryan

Free Association Books, London, 1998

Reviewed by Nigel Smith

Milton Erickson's influence on hypnotic methods has been enormous, but recognition of his work by colleagues and researchers has been minimal. This book, newly available in paperback, offers Erickson in his own words as well as through interpretation by one of his closest followers, Ernest Rossi. The first two parts are devoted to seminars from 1952 and 1961. The final part is a presentation of research in the field of psychosomatics and stress which illustrates mind–body communication.

Rossi attempts to explain Erickson's methods in the context of recent published research. Most readers will be aware of Erickson's ground-breaking indirect approach to hypnosis. In the seminars, Erickson is revealed as surprising, tangential, resourceful and thought-provoking. He gives examples of how clients interpret suggestions in their own unique way. Therapists need to be continually attentive in order to stay in rapport with clients who respond literally or unexpectedly.

A typical Ericksonian approach is utilization. This consists of approving the clients' behaviour and asking them to 'utilize that behaviour to their profit'. The freedom and skill of this impromptu way of working are illustrated in several briefly described cases. Could thinking about the comfort of travelling down in a lift be so compulsive that it could be used to rapidly replace a phobia of lifts? Listening to his words, one gains the impression of intuitive understanding and expert timing in planting therapeutic suggestions. Many readers may be sceptical about the ease with which patients with chronic disorders seem to respond in Erickson's hands.

Erickson is at his best when adding to the therapist's repertoire for dealing with the resistant patient. He advocates an alert trance in patients who report that they cannot be hypnotized or that they do not believe in hypnotism. Erickson illustrates the use of confusion to develop a focus of attention, which forms an ever-narrowing spiral until the client's attention is directed towards the presenting complaint. He uses his tone of voice and salient words, rather than a formal induction procedure, to focus the subject's attention. A patient in pain is invited first to characterize and localize all the pains that he is feeling and then to imagine that the pain is 2, 5 or 15% reduced. Would he notice the difference? Erickson's skills can be recognized only by hearing his exact words. As an example: 'You are having difficulty in going deeper and I want you to keep on experiencing that difficulty. There is only one way to keep on experiencing that difficulty. Go deeper...'

Erickson's timeless advice is to 'offer ideas in a wealth of ways so that patients can sort through their own understandings'. This is at the centre of modern client-centred hypnotherapy, with its objective of increasing the client's choice.

Tape-recorded seminars are almost certainly an imperfect way to appreciate Erickson's talents. After a while the absence of real patients, except in anecdotes, becomes a little stultifying. Even the editors accept that the stories are repeated and may not be accurate. This seems a dubious 'evidence base' to rely on. Years have passed since then. Erickson describes the use of double-binds to assist a couple to consummate their marriage. Could such methods be applied in the ethical and client-centred climate of modern practice? Probably not. The teacher and his audience are rooted in the ethics and attitudes of the time. Consider, for instance, the question about whether self-hypnosis can be used to treat 'a homosexual problem'. A modern audience would ask different and perhaps more searching questions.

The editors have added a helpful index, so that, for instance, readers can look up the page that deals with 'unconsciousness, communicating with'. It is difficult, however, to imagine readers referring to this book to resolve a modern-day therapeutic dilemma.

The 'frozen-in-time' feeling becomes more of a problem in the literature review at the end. The reference list ends in 1986, excluding a vast body of information accumulated since then about neurophysiology, psychotherapy, stress, cognitive psychology and psycho-neuro-immunology. In a fast-moving field like this, it is disappointing that the paperback edition is not updated to include new developments. This kind of 'dry-farming' does not bear out the claim in the preface about a 'state-of-the-art' summary.

Erickson's approach is metaphorical, and so is Rossi's. Rossi presents his work as a stepping stone on the path of greater health. His review is an 'exploration of the therapeutic possibilities that may be on our near horizon'. This reads like a disclaimer for scientific accuracy. It suggests that Rossi's ideas are to be read as exciting speculations rather than as present-day reality. Rossi's basic thesis is that memory is state-dependent; experiences are encoded according to the brain and body chemistry that was present at the time of the experience. Certain mind states allow direct access only to those experiences with which they are associated.

Rossi fails to acknowledge the origins of these ideas in cognitive and behavioural psychology. To critics, his love of tables of correspondence and his all-inclusiveness harks back to the pre-scientific age of the alchemist. Drugs, childbirth, wars and religious cures all figure in Rossi's all-encompassing theory of state-bound information.

Metaphor is vital to the understanding of science, but the scale of Rossi's ideas is bewildering and many of his statements are unfounded. This creates confusion rather than a clear vision of future research.

Meanwhile, Erickson emerges like a Zen Buddhist master, who, when asked 'What is Tao?' replies: 'Walk on.'