

CONVERSATIONS
WITH
MILTON H.
ERICKSON, M.D.

VOLUME II
Changing Couples

Edited by

JAY HALEY

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Milton H. Erickson, M.D.

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INTRODUCTION

These conversations with Milton H. Erickson, M.D., took place in the 1950s and 1960s when he was developing a new approach to therapy. Many aspects of therapy were discussed with him over those years. I have selected for this volume conversation about his therapy with marital couples. Other volumes deal with individuals and with children and their families. Naturally, when talking about individuals or families, issues of marriage come up, but in this volume the focus is particularly on the topic of marriage.

The conversations with Dr. Erickson were mostly conducted by John Weakland and myself with, at times, Gregory Bateson joining us. The study of this approach to therapy was part of Bateson's research project on communication. John Weakland and I visited Erickson every year for many years to talk with him about the nature of hypnosis and about how to do therapy. When he passed through the San Francisco area, the Bateson project always met with him to inquire into his ideas and his work. Bateson was often present at those interviews. We had the view at that time that an understanding of human communication could come out of the study of the process of changing that communication.

These conversations were not conducted with publication in mind but for research purposes. Therefore, they are not a selection designed to present Erickson's ideas to the world. The fact that these recordings exist made it possible to transcribe them and present his work in his own

words. Our interest in talking with him was to explore the nature of communication and to answer specific research questions. John Weakland and I were also in practice as therapists and so our interests were practical as well as scientific.

Within the topic of the therapy of marital couples, I have selected conversations with Erickson from different times and put them together in as coherent a sequence as possible. The interviews with him covered many topics and were done at different times with many interruptions for patients, telephone calls, and periods of time between meetings. The reader might wish that a topic, which was abruptly dropped, had been pursued, but because of circumstances it was not.

At the time these conversations began Erickson and his therapy was so unique that it was difficult for us to understand. The standard psychodynamic therapy of the time assumed the therapist was a non-directive, passive listener. In that framework Erickson's therapy seemed different and strange and we struggled to understand what would seem more obvious, at least to us, a decade or two later. Although he was in isolation at the time of these conversations, in the sense of doing a therapy different from his colleagues, since that time the field has gone in his direction and seeing couples and families, as well as doing a directive strategic therapy, is assumed to be the correct way to change people.

Except for editorial corrections and the arrangement of the conversations from different times, the interviews are verbatim. What is here is what was said. The research-minded will find a copy of the original recordings of these conversations on file with the Erickson Foundation in Phoenix.

Readers familiar with my book, *Uncommon Therapy* (Norton, 1973), will find familiar cases since some of these conversations were the raw data on which I based that book.

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CHAPTER 1

Love and Marriage

1959. Present were Milton H. Erickson, Jay Haley, and John Weakland.

Haley: If you were to describe what a good marriage is, how would you describe it?

Erickson: When I describe a good marriage to my patients, I point out to them that there are essentially four kinds of love. The infantile type of love, "I love me." The next stage, "I love the me in you. I love you because you are my brother, my mother, my father, my sister, my dog. The *me* in *you*." Then the adolescent type of love, "I love you because your dancing pleases me, and because your beauty pleases me, and because your brains please me." And the adult stage of love wherein, "I want to love you and cherish you because I want to see you happy because I can find my happiness in your happiness. The happier you are, the happier I'll be. I'll find my happiness in yours. I'll find delight in your pleasure and intellectual pursuits. I'll find a delight in your enjoyment of dancing." So, the mature love is the capacity to find enjoyment in the enjoyment of the other person's enjoyment. It works both ways.

H: Just what do you think a good marriage is composed of, or what a good marriage is? That is, you see things

wrong with a marriage in contrast or against a background of what's good.

E: Yes. So in a good marriage you'll see some of the, "I love me." You should expect that. You'll see some of the, "I love the me in you." You'll see some of the adolescent variety of your good qualities that please *me*. But there should be a very considerable percentage of the enjoyment of the other person's state of happiness. It isn't enough just to enjoy your wife's cooking. You ought to enjoy the pleasure she has *in* cooking. You ought not just enjoy the fact she keeps the kids quiet while you're working. You want to enjoy, really, the pleasure and satisfaction she gets out of dealing with the kids, even though you can't understand why that particular dealing with the kids gives her so much satisfaction. It's beyond your capacity to understand, but you're so glad she enjoys it. You know that as long as she's happy, enjoying the inexplicable things, you're going to be happy too. I point out to couples that happiness in marriage so often depends on giving the other person the privilege of enjoying those special, peculiar pleasures that they have. Enjoying the fact that the other person is happy. You see, it's the being mature, the adult stage, that I emphasize. I look for that sort of thing. A woman who says, "I just can't understand my university professor of anthropology husband enjoying those completely stupid western movies. But for some strange and inexplicable, infantile reason he likes them. I know all the particular actors that please him most, and I always see to it that I tell him when one of his favorite actors is going to appear in a western." She just can't understand it. But she takes a great deal of pleasure in letting him have that pleasure, which to her is infantile and stupid. But it's so nice for her husband to be happy. It's such a

harmless thing. It's a time-limited thing. He never goes to excess, but he so thoroughly enjoys that.

H: Well, certainly a common marriage problem that I see is when one starts to enjoy something, the other can't seem to tolerate it.

E: Yes. So many marital problems are built around the idea, "We must share equally in all things." I point out so quickly, so thoroughly, to them that you can't share equally in all things, because biologically we're totally different creatures. I emphasize the biological differences, which can't be disputed – the individual difference, the fact that he was attracted to her because she was biologically different and had different qualities. Then I point out that for the benefit of the children – and parents do wish their children well – that they want their children to have the advantage of every possible opportunity. If father and mother both go out of the home and bring back precisely the same thing, the children may get an adequate supply of the same thing. But if mother goes out and brings home something, and father goes out and brings home something different, the children have a choice of two things. So mother goes out and takes in the Russian ballet, and she comes back and tells the little children about the beauties of the ballet. Father goes out and looks at the desert landscape and really enjoys that, and the children listen to that. So the children have the opportunity of learning to like both the ballet and the landscape.

H: Well, what you look for in this enjoying the other's enjoyment is some degree of autonomy of each one while in a relationship.

E: Now and then you run across pathological sharing. A couple came to me, both had been unhappily married before, got divorces, and when they met they decid-

ed they would share everything. Well he liked westerns, and she liked musical comedies. So they went to the show twice a week – one western, one musical comedy. She gritted her teeth throughout the western, and he gritted his teeth throughout the musical comedy. They both comforted themselves that they were sharing. I pointed out, “You’re sharing a common drama. As I understand it, your husband really enjoys that western, and you sat there hating it and gritting your teeth. What sharing were you doing? You weren’t even sitting in the same seat that he was, you weren’t sharing anything except proximity.” I pointed out to them how nice it would be, and I hauled in the paper showing them, here’s a western, here’s a musical comedy. This theater on that side of the street, and this theater on this side of the street. Why don’t you go, instead of gritting your teeth, and really enjoy what you see on the screen. You can go at such and such a time, the movie’s over at such and such a time. You come out of the movie, you join each other, and you go for sandwiches. You have shared a delightful evening. They couldn’t see it that way. When she went to the bathroom, he went to the bathroom. They shared. (Laughter) They always ate the same thing. They went to bed at the same hour. They shared everything. Now they’re divorced. They couldn’t stand their sharing. Now that’s an exaggerated type of pathological sharing, but autonomy is so tremendously important because the happy marriage is one in which you have this individual accomplishing certain things, that individual accomplishing certain things. Each for the self there. Then you have the individuals separately accomplishing certain things for the other. Then you have the two individuals accomplishing things together.

H: I wonder what you'd say about what goes wrong besides pathological sharing; what goes wrong with a marriage?

E: Some people grow up in the conviction of the goodness of their ideas. How many homes teach the goodness of their ideas? There is only one religious faith, you know, absolutely only one. And anyone of intelligence would naturally send his sons and his children to Podunk College. No other college in the U.S. is fit to be attended, just Podunk College. In how many homes do you have that type of thinking? So they marry, and the woman comes from Pumpkin Center College and the man comes from Podunk College. They never learn to respect the goodness of separate ideas.

H: If a wife has an idea, Pumpkin City College, and the husband has the idea, Podunk College, where they get into difficulty is when they try to influence each other.

E: Yes.

H: That's when they get in a struggle and marital battles.

E: And how many struggles are there? What is the name of that island in Delaware where big enders, little enders, and that controversy on which end of the egg should you break first. The complete oversight that you break an egg for the purpose of eating it. That momentous question that brought about internecine war – the two political points of view. The big enders and the little enders about how to crack a boiled egg. I try sometimes when I can't get anywhere in getting the patients to understand, letting them set up opposite camps. Whether, for example, on December 5th should they go out picnicking on the Birdie River, or go to the Arboretum; and the couple just arrayed against each other on that debate. They really battled that question. Where did they go on that day that I had picked out for them? I knew where they were go-

ing to go. They had had over a month's battling. They attended the Phoenix rodeo.

H: You mean you picked the day of the rodeo? (Laughter)

E: I picked the day of the rodeo, knowing that they would attend. Then we went over that very, very bitter battle. Shall it be the Birdie River or the Arboretum? Why make an issue of it?

Weakland: This is a demonstration of how pointless that battle is, is it not?

E: It's a proof demonstration, utterly surprising. They battled up to the time they suddenly realized that it was rodeo day. (Laughter) Then I raised the question of how many other things do you take divergent points of view on and miss the rodeos because sometimes you get too absorbed to see the rodeo that's coming along. Because it isn't as plain and easily recognizable as the Phoenix rodeo. There's so many little things of that sort that you can do. If you can't get them to recognize the futility and absurdity of diverse points of view, to settle the future, then you let them encounter a reality situation.

H: You seem to have a set of premises about what's a good marriage and what's a bad marriage. We wondered if you could lay those out reasonably clearly.

E: The major premise is this: that there *is* such a thing as a good marriage. And what is a good marriage for you would be a bad marriage for me. What would be a good marriage for me would be a bad marriage for you. In other words, the premise is that there is a good marriage possible for each and every one of us. "What kind of a good marriage do you want, that is compatible with you? You know very well that if you hadn't married your husband, with your own natural proclivities, you would have married someone else. Your marriage to A would lead to one kind of a good marriage. Your marriage to B would lead to another kind of

good marriage. Or, if your marriage to A would lead to a bad marriage, it would be a different kind of a bad marriage than the marriage to B. Because A is one person; B is a totally different one." So you offer these premises. "Now can a bad marriage be turned into a good marriage? By alteration of your desires and wishes. You can have your mouth all set for filet mignon, and then you'll find that they have oysters on the menu. Now in your marriage, this marriage of yours, you wanted certain things. Apparently they are not there. What are the things that *are* there? No one person ever exploits *all* the possibilities of a marriage. The richness of your own personality belongs to *you*. It's going to take your spouse quite a long time, if ever he succeeds, in doing something to discover all the richness of your personality. The same holds true for him. It'll take you a long time. What are the things you want?"

H: Well, granted that it is from one point of view an individual matter, still I think you must have some ideas about how any two people relate to each other in a way that's going to make a problem, and how any two people don't but relate in some other ways.

E: You seem to think that there should necessarily be a problem. In ordinary everyday life with your friends, you're very careful not to mention, with certain friends, certain political questions, certain religious questions. When I visit one of my friends in New Orleans, somehow or other we have extensive conversations and never mention the racial problem. It just never happens to come up.

H: I'm not saying there has to be problems . . .

E: I think that in marriage each of the parties ought to be aware of the fact that there are certain blindnesses that are incomprehensible, and that you just do not make an issue or a problem of it.

H: Let me put it another way. Suppose in a week, or in a period of time, you have eight couples come in, or at least eight problem marriages come in, and you wanted to say how these were similar, granted the great variation of individuals. What was similar about the problems?

E: I usually feel that there is too much effort on the part of one spouse to convert the other spouse.

W: Yes, well that fits with what Milton was saying a minute ago about the positive. What I got from it was — make the most of what is there instead of looking for something else.

H: Yes.

E: You can have a completely delightful friendship with somebody who stupidly votes the wrong ticket. (Laughs) Who idiotically goes to the wrong church. Who criminally, wrongly, takes a false attitude on racial matters. But you can have an absolutely delightful friendship. In marriage you ought to wonder *why* your spouse can be so silly, idiotic; but every artichoke has those petals that are discarded. The only way you can enjoy the artichoke is by heaping up the discard, and ignoring it. Being grateful for that nice delightful, delicious, soft, base of the petal.

H: So the reform, or the effort to convert, is one of the things you see that they have in common.

E: They have in common. And the insistence on the *right* to convert. That's in error. They have the right to think that they can convert. But then they ought to recognize so does the other person have that same right. That establishes a stalemate. Well, why center your life around a stalemate? And there are so many other things. You see, I think therapy is primarily a matter of getting people to function adequately within a reality framework. The reality framework is that of eating and living and responding today, in today's

realities, in preparation for tomorrow. I can think of one of my friends who is in his 28th year of analysis. (Laughter) He is earnestly seeking to understand his conflict. He desperately wants to fall in love, to marry, to have a home and children. He's desperately seeking to find out what sort of conflict prevents him from doing that. He's past 60 now. The calendar says that he can't fall in love. The calendar says he won't have children. But he's paying his analyst for five hours a week, exploring the question. All he has to do is look at the calendar. I told him back in 1934, "Listen, by 1940 you will have all the answers. If you're not married by 1940, you never, never will be married." Now I know he took what I said up with his analyst. In fact, he's taken it up with several analysts. You see, he's outlived his analyst. (Laughter) But the coming around of the year 1940, good heavens, if he didn't say, "I do," by that time, that ends it. You get these men in their late 40s who come in to you so pitifully. They tell you, "I went to college, I postponed marrying that nice high school girl until after I got through college. By that time she was married. In fact she was married by the time I was a sophomore in college. So I got engaged to a girl in college, but I postponed marriage until after I graduated. She married someone else. I got engaged another time. We postponed marriage until after I got suitably placed. She married someone else. All my life I've wanted a wife, a home, and children. I never did get suitably placed. I've never forgotten my desire. Now I'm 48. I've got a job working for my brother as a hired man on his cotton ranch. I met a nice woman, she's a widow, she hasn't had any children. She's had her menopause. Would it be all right for me to marry her?" My question was, "What else can you do? You're 48. You *could* marry a girl in her 20s or 30s and make her pregnant,

but you never can join with her in 20- or 30-year-old anticipations for family; you're 48. If you've been afraid of marriage, and wife, and children all these years, you better pay respect to that fact. You say this woman you want to marry is 46. She's through her menopause, and she was never pregnant. She and her husband postponed pregnancy. I think you two have a great deal in common." I saw the brother about a year after the marriage. I asked how the married couple were getting along. He said, "There's been a transformation in my brother; he's actually become ambitious. He and his wife are working very nicely and they're building up a nice home. It's the center of the community so far as the children of the neighborhood are concerned." A safe way of having children. I don't know how many community projects she entered into which centered around children. So did he. Now why should I, in handling that couple, why should I go into all that horrible delaying about marriage, the avoidance on the part of both of them? You're going to live today, tomorrow, next week. Just thumping on the forces that entered into their 20s and 30s would serve no purpose. I think it's awfully important for them to live *today* and take care of the Girl Scout troop or the Boy Scout troop, and trick-or-treats on Halloween.

H: One of the things that I've come to conclude, somewhat reluctantly, is that helping a patient understand himself, become more aware of himself, has nothing to do with changing him.

E: Not one bit!

H: Well, I thought you would agree with that. (Laughs) It is bedrock to most psychiatry. They don't know how to talk to a patient unless it's to make him more self-aware.

E: Make them more self-aware, but they never do get the patient to become aware of the things he *can do*.

H: I notice how rarely you try to work on *why* a patient does anything, as if you consider it irrelevant *why* he does something.

E: Well, look over the lives of a lot of happy, successful, well-adjusted people and ask them why. (Laughter) It's so nonsensical. They're happy, they're well-adjusted, they like their work, they have got a joy of living. Why should we analyze their childhood, parental relationships. They've never bothered and they are never going to bother.

H: But apparently even at the couple level, if you see a couple in a struggle with each other, you don't attempt to work with them on why they have these attitudes toward each other at all?

E: Once in a while, you see a situation – I'm trying to think of one – where you better give them insight.

H: Well, can you differentiate those from others?

E: I'm trying to call to mind some specific case. Maybe I will later. But now and then with a patient or a couple, you better give them insight. Not on everything but on certain items.

H: Now, by "insight" do you mean why they're doing something they're doing?

E: Yes. A good deep analytical interpretation, understanding.

H: Well, if a patient does, as so many do, say, "I want to know why I'm afraid to go up a tall building." And they are constantly working on why they have the problems that they have, what do you do? You shift them away from the why, I gather?

E: I shift them away from the *why*. "Will you tell me *why* you would want to go up in a tall building? Have you got one single legitimate reason for going up there?" (Laughter) I think that's much more important than having to devote their lives to "being very careful to remember every day, every hour of the day, that they're afraid to go up in the tall building." You know,