

The Thinking of Erik Erikson

Look, this (psychoanalysis) is my work, and I'm glad for that. But I have never felt that we honor Freud by refusing to give his theories the critical attention that he, in fact, always gave them. He was a careful thinker and writer, both ----- I mean that that (the use of the word "careful") his concern for what he'd thought and how he said what he thought, spoke it, wrote it. In my five years in Vienna, I never felt the need to be indoctrinated, nor the desire of others to do that. We were all trying to find ourselves, of course, but we weren't inclined (not then, not there) to turn ourselves into a sect (to use a word!), a secular one or a religious one. Freud had faith, needless to say ---- but it was a faith in the individual's ability to use the intellect, and doing that to understand what is driving him, what makes him shudder with fear or tremble with foreboding. When some of us, who are called his 'followers,' start hanging on his every word, then we are giving up (surrendering) our own obligation to use our minds (to give thought to what an important psychological explorer, I think of him, discovered). So that is where I stand --- loyal to a discipline that has meant to very much to me, and grateful for all it enables in any of us who choose to use it, for ideas in general, and for ideas about themselves!

Erik Erikson, as quoted in, *The Erikson Reader Ed. Robert Coles*, p. 135, Norton, 2001

He now offered them a conscious and direct partnership: he made the patient's healthy, if submerged, part his partner in understanding the unhealthy part. Thus was established one basic principle of psychoanalysis, namely, that *one can study the human mind only by engaging the fully motivated partnership of the observed individual, and by entering into a sincere contract with him.*

But a contract has two partners, at least. The changed image of the patient changed the self-image of the doctor. He realized that habit and convention had made him and his fellow physicians indulge in an autocratic pattern, with not much more circumspection or justification than the very parental authorities who he now felt had made the patients sick in the first place. He began to divine the second principle of psychoanalysis, namely, that *you will not see in another what you have not learned to recognize in yourself.* The mental healer must divide himself as well as the patient into an observer and an observed.

The intellectual task here, namely psychoanalytic insight and communication was a massive one. Today it is difficult to appreciate the psychosocial task involved. Freud had to relinquish a most important ingredient of the doctor role of the times: the all-knowing father role....

Erik Erikson, as quoted in, *The Erikson Reader Ed. Robert Coles*, p. 147, Norton, 2001

I will therefore speak of *Hope, Will, Purpose, and Competence* as the rudiments of virtue developed in childhood; of *Fidelity* as the adolescent virtue; and of *Love, Care, and Wisdom* as the central virtues of adulthood. In all their seeming discontinuity, these qualities depend on each other.

Erik Erikson, as quoted in, *The Erikson Reader Ed. Robert Coles*, p. 191, Norton, 2001

(Wisdom) It is the essence of knowledge freed from temporal relativity. *Wisdom, then is detached concern with life itself, in the face of death itself.* It maintains and conveys the integrity of experience in spite of the decline of bodily and mental functions. It responds to the need of the on-coming generation for an integrated heritage and yet remains aware of the relativity of all knowledge.

Erik Erikson, as quoted in, *The Erikson Reader Ed. Robert Coles*, p. 206, Norton, 2001

Clinicians know that an adult who has lost all hope, regresses into as lifeless a state as a living organism can sustain.

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Erik Erikson, *Insight and Responsibility*, reprinted, *The Erikson Reader Ed. Robert Coles*, p. 192, Norton, 2001

I would like however, to approach the question of structural unity on the basis of clinical, developmental, and evolutionary speculation. Not that I could even begin to suggest methods of inquiry approaching the rigor demanded by Piaget, and exemplified in his synthesis of the experimental and the clinical. Most of us have our roots in one or the other, in the experimental or the clinical methods; that is, we know man either when he is well enough to lend parts of himself for study in suitable settings, or sick enough to fall apart into discernible fragments of behavior. The workers who turn to the first, the experimental method, are on the whole cautious in making any promises regarding their ability to reveal man's nature. But it is clear that their methodological modesty disguises the expectation that all their reliable data added together will eventually be equal to the total functioning of man --- if, indeed, man could only be prevailed upon to realize that life would be much more manageable if he would consent to be the sum of his reliably investigated parts. I belong to another breed, the clinicians, who are modest and vain in different ways. Much less cautious, we speak with relative ease of the core of man's personality and of stages of its development. But then, our subjects want to become whole; and the clinician must have some theories and methods which offer the patient a whole world to be whole in. Mistaking our patient's gratitude for verification, we are sometimes sure that we could explain or even guide mankind if it would only consent to be our collective patient.

Erik Erikson, as quoted in, *The Erikson Reader Ed. Robert Coles*, p. 202, Norton, 2001

“Thus different cultural systems have different outlets for the expression of the deep ambivalence which pervades the woman who, much as she may have welcomed the first signs of pregnancy and much as she may be looking forward to the completed baby, finds herself inhabited for nine long months by a small and unknown, but utterly dictatorial, being.”

Erik Erikson, *Childhood and Society*, reprinted, *The Erikson Reader Ed. Robert Coles*, p. 44, Norton, 2001

“Let us consider then, what we may call the metabolism of generations. Each human life begins at a given evolutionary stage and level of tradition, bringing to its environment a capital of patterns and energies; these are used to grow on, and to grow into the social process with, and also as contributions to this process. Each new being is received into a style of life prepared by tradition and held together by tradition, and at the same time disintegrating because of the very nature of tradition. We say that tradition “molds” the individual, “channels” his drives. But the social process does not merely mold a new being merely to housebreak him; it molds generations in order to be remolded, or to be reinvigorated, by them. Therefore society can never afford merely to suppress drives or to guide their sublimation. It must also support the primary function of every individual ego, which is to transform instinctual energy into patterns of action, into character, into style --- in short, into an identity with a core of integrity which is to be derived from and also contributed to the tradition. There is an optimum ego synthesis to which the individual aspires; and there is an optimal societal metabolism for which societies and cultures strive. In describing the interdependence of individual aspiration and of societal striving, we describe something indispensable to human life.

Erik Erikson, *Young Man Luther*, reprinted, *The Erikson Reader Ed. Robert Coles*, p. 349, Norton, 2001

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Erikson quoting Gandhi: “*That line of action alone is justice which does not harm either party to a dispute.*”

Erik Erikson, *Insight and Responsibility*, reprinted, *The Erikson Reader* Ed. Robert Coles, p. 461, Norton, 2001