The Utilization Principle In Ericksonian Hypnosis and Psychotherapy

I. General Introduction

1. The utilization principle is Milton Erickson’s most important contribution to hypnosis and psychotherapy. Generally stated, “utilization” means the creative acceptance and use of any pattern—behavioral, cognitive, emotional—as a primary basis for achieving a goal (e.g., a therapeutic outcome)

2. These patterns may be positive or negative. In effect, any pattern can be utilized ethically and positively.

3. A few examples
   --the boy who stomped his foot
   --the woman with the gap in her teeth

II. A General theory of utilization

1. Two minds can be distinguished: (a) the creative unconscious (organized like a quantum field of infinite possibilities), and (b) the conscious mind of everyday reality.

2. In this view, the creative unconscious is a superpositional field in which all possible versions of a pattern are simultaneously present.

3. When a pattern moves from the virtual reality of the creative unconscious into the classical reality of the conscious mind, it must collapse from infinite possibilities to a specific actuality.
4. The specific actuality—its form, value, meanings, and subsequent unfolding—is determined by the human presence(s) receiving it. That is, a pattern has no innate or fixed form; it is created by human consciousness.

5. One a pattern moves into a specific form, it may become fixed via “neuromuscular lock”, thereby ensuring its automatic re-enactment in that form. (This forms the basis for all conditioned responses, including the automatic negative experience of psychological symptoms.)

6. To unbind a fixed form and allow new (more satisfying) versions to unfold, the pattern must be skillfully held (absorbed) with a human presence as deep as the original context.

7. To be effective, this new human context requires deep acceptance, kindness, skillful attunement, and positive curiosity about new possibilities. This is the contextual basis for the utilization principle; it is not a manipulatory trick, but rather a relational “sponsorship bond” that allows the unbinding and reorganization of old patterns.

8. Another example: Man with pornography addiction

9. Caveat: Remember that what is being accepted and utilized is the core archetypal pattern, not the specific way that it is being expressed.

III. A Four Step “Mantra” for Utilizing An Experiential Pattern

1. “That’s interesting”
2. “Something is trying to wake up (or heal)”
3. “I’m sure that makes sense”
4. “Welcome”

(Note: Welcoming a negative pattern typically calms it down, thereby allowing additional resources to be included and new meanings to be developed.)