

BOOK REVIEWS

Review Essay of a Classic Text

Erik H. Erikson, *Insight and Responsibility: Lectures on the Ethical Implications of Psychoanalytic Insight* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1964/1994), 256 pp.

In 1961, Erik Erikson (1902–1994) gave an address to the Psychoanalytic Institute in San Francisco titled “Human strength and the cycle of generations,” in which he revisited the eight stages of development considered the hallmark of his life’s work.¹ For that audience of fellow analysts, he emphasized the virtues that contribute to ‘ego strength.’ As someone who lived through both World Wars and emigrated to America during the Depression, it is significant that Erikson chose to emphasize virtues that support the optimal unfolding of individuation and promote societal well-being. In his optimistic appraisal of developmental challenges and opportunities, he anticipated subsequent psychodynamic themes, including the intergenerational and psychosocial components of family systems theory, the human potential movement, and the current emphasis on positive psychology.

The relevance of Erikson’s proposed virtues for those of us engaged in the supervision of ministry—whether supervision of pastoral care in congregations, chaplaincy, pastoral counseling, or spiritual direction—is the focal concern of this essay. What can Erikson’s developmental, psychosocial perspective potentially contribute to the formation or evocation of virtues in both supervisor and supervisee? Is Erikson’s psychoanalytic *Weltanschauung* still relevant or hopelessly dated? If relevant, how is it explicitly useful? If dated, can it still speak, from its mid-twentieth century vantage point, to twenty-first century ethical dilemmas?

In considering the importance of virtues and ego strength, insight, and responsibility as themes of Erikson’s life work, it seems fitting to briefly introduce this pioneer of psychobiography with a biographical note. Erik’s mother, Carla Abrahamsen, left her prominent Jewish family in Copenhagen while pregnant with Erik to give birth in the company of relatives and friends in Germany. Carla never revealed the identity of Erik’s father but Erik, who grew up blond, blue-eyed, and tall, bore the marks of his mysteri-

ous paternity. During the first three years of his life, Erik lived in the company of his “vagabond” mother and her bohemian friends. These early influences were recapitulated in his own later adolescent wanderings and artistic inclinations. At the age of three, Erik was adopted when Carla married Erik’s pediatrician, a benevolent Jewish doctor who provided a stable bourgeois home in the close-knit Jewish community of Karlsruhe. Despite his step-father’s good intentions, Erik developed an “outsider” identity by virtue of his mixed heritage. Looking back in his 70s, Erikson wrote “Before long I was referred to as the ‘goy’ [gentile] in my step-father’s temple; while to my schoolmates I was a ‘Jew’ (Erikson 1957, first ed.: p. 27).” It is clear that this childhood experience of being seen as the “other” influenced Erikson’s lifelong interest in “identity.”

As an adolescent, Erikson rejected his step-father’s invitation to train in medicine and entered a period of *Wanderschaft*—a psychosocial moratorium in which he resisted claiming a vocation and traveled instead in the company of his childhood friend, Peter Blos. Erik found his vocation and met his future wife, Canadian-born Joan Serson, when he joined Anna Freud’s circle in Vienna to support her work with children. Anna Freud became his training analyst, thereby supplying Erikson with his ticket to a new identity when, in 1933, he emigrated to America. The young couple and their two sons were welcomed by Joan’s mother to Boston, where Erikson quickly found a place in the psychoanalytic community.²

Without delving further into Erikson’s personal formation as an analyst, the themes of ego identity, psychosocial context, and ego strength clearly emerge as red threads from birth through the early adulthood of Erikson’s life. In appropriating Erikson’s work for supervision, it is possible to model attention to personal history as a dimension of formation using Erikson’s stages as a template that summarizes significant developmental stages for both supervisor and supervisee. Taking seriously the idea that we are “all the ages we’ve ever been,”³ it is possible to draw parallels between the ways that beginning supervisees appropriate new learning in supervision and the original challenges they may have faced during their preceding life stages. What follows is a brief overview of Erikson’s virtues with reference to the ways the crises inherent in each of his life stages may arise in supervision.

When initiating a supervisory relationship, consider the earliest life experience of both supervisor and supervisee. What does the supervisee understand of the balance between trust and mistrust, with its attendant virtue of *hope*, from the critically important first year of life during which secure at-

tachment ideally forms? If a tendency to fall into distrust and hopelessness is evident, is a reparative basis for trust possible? I have known persons of faith with less than ideal parenting histories who have found it possible to reach past a lack of early parental security to a sense of connection to God as the one who “keeps us from falling.”⁴ The context of supervision in ministry always includes attention to religious experience, faith, and theological reflection—concerns which can be brought into dialogue with the psychoanalytic emphasis on finding meaning, making sense of one’s life in ways that offer healing.

Clearly, as a supervisory relationship begins, there must be sufficient access to trust and hope on the part of the supervisee to support the mutuality of a mentoring relationship. On the other hand, supervisors are human beings who make mistakes. A reasonable degree of mistrust on the part of the supervisee is also warranted initially, at least until a viable collaboration is established. Hope is required to sustain the ministry in which the supervisee is engaged. Erikson writes “*Hope is the enduring belief in the attainability of fervent wishes, in spite of the dark urges and rages that mark the beginning of existence*” (p. 118, original italics).⁵

The toddler or “anal stage” in which “autonomy versus shame and doubt” is posited as the crisis and opportunity to be negotiated holds interesting possibilities for supervision. The potential bio-social challenges of “holding on and letting go” are evident in the need to renegotiate one’s sense of self to accommodate new skills, while selectively retaining and relinquishing family of origin and personality orientations that may or may not serve one’s vocational purposes. I’m thinking of ministers with a strong need to be liked by all, difficult if not impossible in congregational settings where some are bound to be critical of authority. Failure to please may result in a sense of shame, not feeling good enough, and doubt of one’s calling. The differentiation required to function as an autonomous leader can provide the *will* necessary to stand up for difficult decisions that must be made in the best interests of the community. When there are lingering issues from this formative life stage, supervisees may struggle with procrastination, a tendency to be chronically late, and a passive-aggressive attitude reminiscent of the toddler’s “me do it” and defiant “you can’t make me” stance. Just as parents must avoid power struggles with their toddlers, a stance of firm and reasoned patience may be necessary for the supervisory relationship to progress. “*Will...is the unbroken determination to exercise free choice as well as self-restraint, in spite of the unavoidable experience of shame and doubt in infancy*” (p. 119) and, one might add, throughout life.

The preschool play, or Oedipal, age challenges children and by extension, supervisees in their beginner modes, to establish a sense of *purpose* in life and work. Finding the optimal balance between initiative and guilt is key. Taking inappropriate initiative in an ill-informed or intrusive way should be an occasion for guilt on the part of supervisor or supervisee. Lack of guilt, or lack of initiative, is equally problematic. The supervisor's role is to encourage steady progress, understanding that mistakes will be made, and that some false steps are necessary for learning. When supervisees lack confidence they may need to act "as if," similar to the child's need to learn through play. Erikson writes: "*Purpose... is the courage to envision and pursue valued goals uninhibited by...guilt and by the foiling fear of punishment*" (p. 122).

The latency stage, or school age, is the ultimate learning orientation; functioning as it does to absorb available knowledge with the goal of achieving *competence*. Industry, in the form of consistent, concerted effort is to be encouraged so that supervisees who compare themselves to more successful peers are not overwhelmed by a sense of inferiority. In childhood, as in life, this stage focuses on the acquisition of culturally necessary knowledge and skills. "*Competence...is the free exercise of dexterity and intelligence in the completion of tasks, unimpaired by ...inferiority*" (p. 124).

In adolescence, or the apprenticeship learning phase, one ideally discovers one's own latent abilities. The challenge Erikson foresees is one of claiming an identity or, conversely, experiencing identity confusion. When Erik, in the course of his analysis, expressed doubt in his ability to succeed as an analyst who still saw himself as an artist, Anna Freud quietly responded "You might help to make them see" (Erikson, 1975a, p. 30). The wise supervisor at this stage sits back to watch the supervisee test his or her wings, offering encouragement or suggestions as needed. "*Fidelity is the ability to sustain loyalties freely pledged in spite of the inevitable contradictions of value systems. It is the cornerstone of identity...*" (p. 125). Erikson remained loyal to the psychoanalytic community that affirmed his complex sense of self and faithful to his partner Joan, despite the many challenges they faced together in later life, including the birth of their mentally retarded third son, Neil.

The engaged supervisee in the young adult stage of learning claims hope, will, purpose, competence, and fidelity in service of a calling they have come to *love*. Isolation must be overcome if they are to enjoy a sustaining sense of intimate connection to peers, mentors, and an abiding faith. None of the ministries named, whether congregational care, chaplaincy, pastoral psychotherapy, or spiritual direction, are easy to do well over the long haul. Burn

out, discouragement, boredom, or distraction are all possible pitfalls along the path. *"Love...is mutuality of devotion forever subduing the antagonisms inherent in divided function."* (p. 129). Erikson is speaking here primarily of a man's love for a woman in the context of their diverse cultural and biological roles. The antagonisms supervisees must overcome include the functions of caregivers and careseeker in all the possible varieties of those roles. Caregivers can never be certain that the care they offer is just right, that the careseeker's needs have been satisfied; but care that is offered respectfully, in love, inviting appropriate and mutual intimacy, is the best gift one can offer in response to the overwhelming demands of human need.

When the supervisee has reached a level of growth and development comparable to young adulthood, the continuing capacity to *care* becomes a defining virtue. The former mentee has earned the right to be a mentor, if they care to be generative. Supporting those who care for others requires one to balance generative service with self-care. Receiving the encouragement, and challenges, of peers provides an antidote to a self-satisfied or exhausted stagnation. *"Care is the widening concern for what has been generated by love, necessity, or accident; it overcomes the ambivalence adhering to irreversible obligation"* (p. 131).

In the final stage of life's lessons, when identity lived with integrity has been earned, the laurels of wisdom are evident even as physical integrity is threatened by aging. The experienced supervisor of supervisors has learned to recognize the challenges of transference and countertransference in both self and other. Despair can engulf those whose careers are cut short, expected to go quietly into retirement while they still have more to give. The idea that age is just a number holds true for many of the Boomer generation who, with good health, can continue to be generative into their eighty's and beyond, serving as mentors to the life-longer learners of subsequent generations. *"Wisdom...is detached concern with life itself, in the face of death itself"* (p. 133).

Do Erikson's virtues still matter in today's world? Perhaps now more than ever. Erikson has been accused of sexism for his lack of inclusive language and his psychoanalytic emphasis on embodied experiences of "inner and outer space." He has been seen as supporting the status quo by those whose politics lean left and as pandering to revolutionaries by those on the right.⁶ But surely the qualities of personal integrity associated with the virtues of hope, will, purpose, competence, fidelity, love, care, and wisdom serve to identify the strength of character and personal resilience that Erikson himself embodied through his calling as a healer and his sincere desire to make sense of the cultural differences that divided his world and threaten ours. Nuclear

madness and regional armed conflicts have been joined today by the global challenge of climate change. Unless humanity is able to hope for the possibility of a shared future, with the will to alter destructive patterns of consumption, the purpose of respecting the integrity of God's creation, fidelity to the gifts inherent in all life, competence to embrace ethical opportunities, love for those who are "other," and care for our shared spaceship earth, the accumulated wisdom of generations will not save us from descent into chaos. We can only hope that the virtues Erikson identified to inspire his generation will continue to light the way for generations to come. If we embrace the insights of one who helped to "make us see" the challenges facing individuals and society we will then have the responsibility to work for the good of all.

Felicity Kelcourse
 Christian Theological Seminary
 Indianapolis, IN

NOTES

1. The terms "psychoanalytic" and "psychoanalysis" refer to methods of psychological investigation and approaches to clinical evidence in psychotherapeutic treatment that adhere in general terms to those developed by Freud (1965–1939). Erikson was a psychoanalyst, and while he modified Freud's thinking to emphasize ego strength and the broader psychosocial context of development, he retained Freud's basic views regarding the unconscious, repression, regression, the importance of sexuality and the significance of early life experience, especially from birth to age six.
2. Biographical information for Erikson's life can be traced to the following sources: Lawrence J. Friedman, *Identity's Architect: A Biography of Erik H. Erikson* (London: Free Association Press, 1999); Robert Coles, *Erik H. Erikson: The Growth of His Work* (Boston, MA: Little, Brown and Co., 1970); Erik H. Erikson, *Life History and the Historical Moment*, First ed. (New York: Norton, 1975); Kit Welchman, *Erik Erikson: His Life, Work and Significance* (Philadelphia, PA: Open University Press, 2000).
3. Felicity Kelcourse, ed., *Human Development and Faith: Life-cycle Stages of Body, Mind and Soul* (St. Louis, MO: Chalce Press, 2004) includes the table of Erikson's eight developmental stages with both Erikson's virtues for each stage and possible vices as suggested by Don Capps.
4. In saying this, I am extrapolating from Erikson, who shared Freud's suspicion of religious institutions and was accused, when he changed his name from that of his adoptive father, Homburger to Erikson, of repudiating his Jewish heritage.
5. Erikson's psychoanalytically-trained audience would recognize in this statement Freud's view that sexuality and aggression, *Eros* and *Thanatos*, form the *Scylla* and *Charybdis* of life's deepest existential challenges.
6. For critical appraisals of Erikson's work, see Welchman, *Erik Erikson*, chapter 10.