

Untangling the Eriksons

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THERE WAS A TIME when students pored over the books of Erik Erikson, underlining and annotating, wrestling with the question of Identity. Erikson died a few years ago, bringing on summaries and assessments; his wife, Joan Mowat Erikson, died quietly this month, at 95, in a nursing home on Cape Cod.

Mrs. Erikson's obituary in The New York Times revealed some things that many of her husband's fans never knew: for instance, that she had collaborated closely with him on his ideas, even persuading him to characterize the first stage in his famous theory of human development as "basic trust." (He had been leaning toward "inner confidence.")

And her therapeutic work with disturbed young people, whom she steered toward arts and crafts, provided fodder for much of Erikson's theoretical output in the 1950s, when the couple worked together at the Austen Riggs Center, in Stockbridge, Mass.

After Erikson died, his wife continued on, relying partly on his notes to add a ninth stage to the theory of development, which she covered in a book called *Life Cycle Completed*.

Erikson, a German-born Dane, had always acknowledged his wife; he spoke briefly of her contribution in the preface to his 1968 collection, *Identity: Youth and Crisis*. She was an American educated at Barnard College, and her command of English apparently was crucial to him. But it is his name that is on the books, not hers. Most of us skipped the acknowledgments and went straight to the theories.

Perhaps no generation in American history has been as obsessed with its childhood as the Baby Boomers. Whatever the cause of this craving for self-understanding, Erikson fit right in. (It was his work that gave rise to the popular notion of an "identity crisis.")

Childhood, it seemed, could explain every problem; Erikson's

books laid out how. His captivating portraits of great men in their youth (Gandhi, Luther, William James) flattered us with the idea that our discomfort with ourselves was not just normal; it could well be the prelude to a distinctive career.

Erikson trained with Freud in Vienna, then moved to the United States, in 1933. His theories owe much to Freud's view, which placed sex at the center of everything, including child development. The Eriksons, however, in working out their eight-stage theory of development, enlarged the view to include social context.

Certainly, this was a great part of Erikson's appeal. To him, history figured vitally in the formation of identity. And for a generation dragged into history by the Vietnam War, the idea offered comfort. By declaring much of our pain impersonal — part of history, Erikson helped to make it bearable.

Reading Erikson, we could sense that the conflict played out between child and parent was a metaphor for what was happening between the individual and society. It even seemed possible, in long midnight talks over jug wine, that the government's betrayal of basic trust had caused a whole generation to go developmentally haywire.

The eight-stage idea kept us going well after the war wound down. There was so much to hash over about ourselves, so much to discuss. We gave Erikson a good run.

Today, many of his insights hold up fairly well. But he seems to have followed Freud out of fashion. Like Freud, he was too Freudian. And too sexist. Try reading "Womanhood and the Inner Space," one of the essays collected in *Identity: Youth and Crisis*. Even 20 years ago, it was hard to take (some early feminist ruminations are on record). Now, two pages of it are enough to send a person into short-term therapy.

For many people, Erikson's ideas about psychological problems have been rendered moot by advances in medication. And new theories dominate the therapy business, including the theory that each of us has a story we believe is the truth about ourselves. The story is often wrong, though. Change the script, the theory goes, and you can overcome whatever is keeping you down.

Too late, and almost as an aside, a script of Joan Mowat Erikson's life has been slipped to those of us who had focused on her husband. She evidently had a wonderful marriage, companionable and loving, romantic until the end: the kind of marriage most of us desire.

Younger women might feel drawn to her story but suspicious. Did Joan Erikson compromise too much, and put her husband first? Did she tell herself the "wrong" tale of her life? To read now of her collaboration, of her interest in weaving and jewelry making, in art as therapy, is to wish that young women, especially, had heard more from her.

As it was, we embraced the husband's creations. We found plenty of nourishment in them too. Only they seemed mainly about men. So we read with the eyes of young men — young men preparing for the world. Here was how to build a self. Here were the eight obstacles to be met and conquered. It was a hero's model of life.

The great "identity crisis" that was coming, of course, was far different. It would belong mainly to women. Work or family? Family or work? It is still going on.

Erikson missed it by a mile. And it is strange. For so long, the Eriksons, gentle, thoughtful and well-meaning, the experts in identity, did not see what history was about to deliver. They even helped prepare the way. You might say they were creatures of their time. They might say: exactly our point.

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