



## The Treasure and the Tragedy of Wilhelm Reich

By Dr. Eleanor Hamilton

### From the Editor:

Eleanor Jane Hamilton (1909-2008) spent her career as an educator and a psychologist in New York and California. She married Albert Edward Hamilton in 1932 who nicknamed her “Ranger”, a name from a fairytale. Her work as a sex therapist (she still worked with people while in her 90s!) was noted as influential in the USA’s revolution in morals and manners during much of the past century. She helped young women get contraception in the 1940s, participated in the Kinsey report on American’s sex lives, wrote a sex and love column for *Modern Bride Magazine* in the 1960s and published several books. *Partner’s in Love and Sex Before Marriage* (1980) earned her appearances on nearly every talk show from Phil Donohue to Merv Griffin to Johnny Carson’s *The Tonight Show*.

SPT Magazine received this memoir, written by Eleanor, about her experience with Wilhelm Reich, from their first meeting to the end of their connection. She notes that while her relationship with Wilhelm was not as intimate as his wife, Ilse, or his son, Peter, she did know him in a special way—as a patient, a student and a close colleague and friend.

While we typically publish first person “articles” related to psychotherapy—research, clinical practices, and other cutting-edge material (be it resources or emerging methodologies)—we felt honored to share this personal insight into a man considered one of, if not the, founding father of body psychotherapy. Some of the material is well known (Reich’s work with orgone and his eventual decline), yet we opted to share the entire story as written (well, we did edit the text) as Eleanor also shares her story and experience as a cutting-edge innovator—the trials and tribulations she endured. Because of the length, we opted for more of a book layout rather than our typical magazine page layout—three columns, no artwork.

## Eleanor Begins:

Whether psychology's debt to Dr. Wilhelm Reich is acknowledged or not, many of our present day systems of psychotherapy rest squarely on his shoulders. Though now dead, he remains impressively alive. And in the context of what a fearful society can do to its greatest innovators, I believe his story, and in effect my story of our relationship, needs to be told far and wide.

Before Reich, most psychotherapists had swallowed—hook, line and sinker— either the pessimism of Freudians, or the mysticism of the Jungians, or the mechanistic machinations of the John B. Watsons, or the power theories of the Adlerians. Bio-energetic analysis, Gestalt techniques and other active therapies had not yet arrived, nor did they arrive until Reich's mind blowing discoveries were well established.

Before Reich, depth psychotherapy was a long drawn out and often unsuccessful affair in which the revelation of causes and the exorcism of long held feelings were supposed to lead ultimate to a cure.

Before Reich, psychotherapists hardly dared look at their patients' bodies, let alone touch them. Physical contact was taboo and the concept of muscular armoring was unknown and certainly not dealt with.

A number of books about Reich have been written by those who knew him far better than I—by his wife Ilse, who lived lovingly with him through

stormy years; by his son, Peter, whom Reich adored, by his devoted student Micky Sharaf, who still revered him even after Reich took to bed Micky's wife.

While not as intimate with him as these people, I did know him in a special way—first as a patient, then as a student, and later as the person who sheltered his wife and son when they fled his violence born of frustration and torment. I honored him and in his way, he honored me.

"We are both generals, Ranger," he often said, with a big grin. This was the highest compliment he could have given me—this man who scourged what he called the "little men" (the moral majority) and those who refused their own birthright and allowed themselves to become contaminated by what he called "the emotional plague."

Reich first came into my life just before our third child, Wendy, was born. My husband, Tajar, and I had been operating a nursery school in New York City at the time, and one day an irate mother of one of our pupils burst into the office demanding we fire her son's teacher because she was a student of Dr. Wilhelm Reich. Until that moment we had never heard of him, though we both considered ourselves psychologists.

"And why is it so terrible to be a student of Dr. Reich's?" Tajar asked.

"He believes that sex is good in or out of marriage. He even believes that children are sexual from birth and

therefore should be allowed to enjoy it in their own ways. Have you ever heard of anything so perverse? Your teacher must be off her rocker to allow herself to be influenced by such a man, and I don't want my child influenced by him."

"It is your perfect right to withdraw your child from our school," Tajar calmly answered her. "But Elizabeth is one of our best teachers. She is deeply loved by the children and admired by their parents. We would have to have a more damning accusation against a teacher than that she studies with a certain psychiatrist to make us even consider asking for her resignation."

Remove her child this mother did, for she was not to be dissuaded of her own righteousness and was incensed when this was challenged. In a conference with the teacher later that day we asked, "Who is this remarkable man called Wilhelm Reich who can arouse such ire in a seemingly otherwise reasonable mother?"

Without apology our teacher acknowledged that Reich's theories were indeed considered revolutionary, but to her they made excellent sense. She loaded us her copies of *Character Analysis* and *The Function of the Orgasm*. We were never the same again.

At age 58, Tajar lost no time in presenting himself to Reich as a prospective pupil. Later he became one of Reich's close friends. I had to wait until I had given birth to Wendy and was well into the nursing period before I, too, had the privilege of becoming a patient, and later a pupil. It was a mind boggling experience.

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In those days, the analysts, if they were Freudian, committed their patients to five one-hour sessions a week. Stretched out on a couch facing away from the analyst, patients free-associated endlessly as the analyst listened. The Jungians compromised with three such sessions a week but their treatments were essentially the same and sometimes went on for years, or at least until the patient's dollars ran out. Very little, if any, conversation went on between patient and therapist. The patient, in fact, seemed almost a non-person who would hardly be greeted by the therapist on the street if they accidentally met. One sometimes wondered if the therapist was even present during treatments, so little did he interact with the patient.

In those days, of course, there were also a few psychiatric prima donnas, such as Flanders Dunbar, and there were the machinations of the conditioned reflex crowd. Also, hypnosis had once again begun to be respectable. But if you wanted a real go-round on yourself, you went to a strictly classical Freudian who let you lie there exposing your dreams and fantasies and reminiscences until you tired of the exercise.

Not so with Reich. Once a week of active, truth seeking verbal questioning combined with body experiencing was about all that a patient of his could handle. Reich didn't invite one to talk after the first few sessions but rather to shut up and sense, feel, understand the language of one's own body. Remarkably soon, one began to discover the muscular armor that imprisoned one's

psyche, and also remarkably soon, and not without some trauma, did one break loose from it to become more capable of living life in a feelingful way, and to be able to run one's own affairs with joy and positive outcomes. Reich was accused of everything from perversity to criminal seduction because he saw his patients nearly naked. The fact that other medical doctors did the same cut no ice with his detractors. My own gynecologist at that time was horrified that I went to Reich. "Why?" he protested. "He sees his patients in only their underwear."

"But so do you, Dr. Squier," I replied. This should have brought him up short or at least have appealed to his sense of humor, but such was the climate of the time—no one, no, not anyone, who dealt with the psyche of a human being could also have anything to do with that person's body. Body and soul were two separate entities and never the twain shall meet, at least not in the therapist's office. Reich looked at bodies. I mean, he really looked. And he prodded and poked at tense muscles in spasm. He noted skin temperatures and the half-dead aspects of cold spots. He noted the rolls of fat above up-tight areas. He provoked one to howl, cry, laugh, shriek, cuss. He encouraged 'do-it-myself-me', for one, to allow myself to become a baby reaching for mama, even though my arms seemed locked in a vice-like resistance against such reaching. And he helped me endure the sobs of relief that emerged when I found that I could, after all, learn to reach tenderly and

with love towards those to whom I wanted to be close.

No, sessions with Reich were not passive affairs nor picnics in which a patient went on reminiscing about a traumatic past. Sometimes his sessions lasted twenty minutes if they had achieved a therapeutic break-through. They could also last two hours or more if something important was happening. He refused to be locked in by time.

I remember how frustrated I used to be at the end of the classic 50-minute-hour adhered to by the psychoanalysts. Just when it seems that I might be getting somewhere, the analyst announced mechanically, "The hour is over. You can continue tomorrow."

Somehow by tomorrow the 'gem' was lost, if indeed it was a gem. At any rate, I don't think I advanced one single step toward psychological maturity in psychoanalysis, either the Freudian or the Jungian variety, both of which I underwent as part of my student training. They were interesting academic exercises but that was all. However, in my brief year of perhaps twenty sessions with Reich, my world blew apart and came together again in wonderful growth producing ways. I had always been a person with abundant energy. Now I was no longer afraid of its effects on others. I learned to be in contact with it, to enjoy it, and to be in control of it so that I did not intimidate those with whom I had to deal.

About the time that Tajar and I left New York City to found our school in the country, A. S. Neil also came into our lives. He, too, was a pupil of Reich's, and he, too, had been trying out some unconventional

teaching methods in his school in England—the famous Summerhill. And then there was Ola Raknes of Norway, an outstanding therapist, also a pupil of Reich's. Tajar and Neil and Raknes made a trio of great educators from different parts of the world who were deeply influenced by Reich, and who were willing to test his theories in day-to-day living with children.

Our little school in the Berkshires was the first to initiate a conference of psychiatrists and educators to discuss Reich's theories in relationship to education. Neil was the invited guest from England. What a ten-day period of intense discussions we had, often lasting well into the night, in which almost all orthodox educational theory was turned upside down and inside out. Yes, Reich had influenced education all right. Between him and Kinsey, whose statistics were rocking the world, and Benjamin Spock, who was coming into his own field of pediatrics with his baby care, it was an exciting time to be in the educational field. But Reich, never far from the cutting edge of ideas that revolutionized existing status quo, was not let alone for long by tormentors who couldn't stand his challenge to their own cut-in-stone theories.

In Europe, he had been harassed by Hitler, had fled from Germany to Holland and then to Norway, and finally to the United States. Even in our own enlightened and freedom loving county, he was constantly under attack.

Here, curiously, his enemy was the Food and Drug Administration (FDA), which hounded him unmercifully. Reich had discovered

something that he called "orgone energy". Today, many scientists call this same orgone by another name—life energy—and under this nomenclature it has had more public acceptance. Reich found that life energy—orgone—was different from other forms of known energy, though it showed many of the characteristics of electrical energy. It was possible to concentrate it in something that Reich called an "orgone accumulator" and persons exposing themselves to these concentrated doses of orgone were found to heal faster of whatever ailed them than they might reasonably be expected to have healed without the exposure. An orgone accumulator was nothing more than a box shaped like a telephone booth in which a patient could sit for ten to thirty minutes. Anyone could build one at home. It consisted of an external layer of organic material (generally Celotex) surrounding an internal layer of non-organic material (generally galvanized metal). They could also be made with a number of layers of organic material (rockwool) and then inorganics material (steel wool) up to ten such double layers.

Reich invited physicians and scientists from all over the world to conduct experiments with interested patients and to keep careful records of their results. He freely offered blueprints of the box, and he consulted often with those who used them. Finally, because the requests for boxes became so numerous from patients who didn't have enough carpentry skills to make their own, he employed a carpenter to make some to rent to patients. He

never profited on these, however, nor offered them for sale. And he insisted that those who used them keep careful records. It began to look as if orgone energy was a wonderful catalyst for the body's healing energy to accelerate its own healing capacity.

But the FDA was worried. This was not something they could control. Orgone energy, if indeed there was such a thing, was not injected or imbibed or brewed or put into bottles to be sold over a druggist's counters. It was not even something that hooked up to an electrical outlet. How could they "get" a man like that—a man who made claims that people healed faster, and even cancer, if detected early enough, might be halted in its growth when exposed to orgone energy.

Reich was obviously on his way to trouble.

In the course of his experiments with orgone—healing energy—Reich also discovered something else; he called it DOR and said it was one of the most destructive energies on earth at that time. This discovery came about when he exposed one gram of radium to concentrated orgone. At once the Geiger counter went wild—in other words, it moved out of range of measurability. Personnel in Reich's laboratory became violently ill, as did many people for miles around in the countryside. Reich immediately reported the effect of this explosive discovery to the departments of health, both local and national, and also to the Department of Defense, since it appeared that DOR was a violently destructive force. He received no meaningful responses and no medical help or investigation. He and his

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coworkers, on their own, transported the gram of radium, which had proven so destructive, to an isolated spot far removed from homes or villages and buried it deep in the earth. Then they dismantled the orgone boxes in the laboratory, and eventually they had to destroy even the car in which the radium had been transported, since anyone who rode in it thereafter became ill.

Shortly following these experiments, an international congress of physicians, psychiatrists, and educators was held at Reich's laboratory in Ranglely, Maine. Reich insisted on housing our little family in his own personal cabin on a lake several miles away from the laboratory so that our young children would not be exposed to the effects of DOR. And, as a preventative health measure for everyone, he insisted that all attendees at the conference bathe twice daily in Ranglely lake. Also, all seminars at the laboratory were held with windows wide open. Even so, some attendees became ill. Our children remained well but both Tajar and I suffered throughout the seminar with lassitude and nausea. At the end of it, Reich advised us to drive to the ocean and bathe in the sea. Within hours we once again were restored to our usual health. Surely DOR was no hoax, even if the FDA insisted that orgone energy must be.

In spite of illness and DOR, I consider myself to be blessed that I was privileged to be present that remarkable summer, for it was then that Reich was first able to demonstrate the isolation of pure orgone in a vacuum tube.

Its physical appearance was that of a pulsing electric blue, a concentrated cloud-like substance. This was no mirage. All of us had seen it with our own eyes.

It was also at that conference that our youngest daughter, April, was conceived. We never knew whether she had had her beginning in in Reich's cabin or on Mt Desert Island beside the sea where we healed from DOR after the conference. At any rate, her presence in our lives has been a continuous blessing.

Reich, who could often become a roaring lion with adults, was invariable tender and gentle with children. Rather than imposing his will upon theirs, he considered them his true teachers. While he was an impatient man in general, he was endlessly patient with the young.

But he ferocious with curiosity seekers who trespassed upon his private property. I remember an episode in which a supposed transgressing visitor wandered down the trail to his house beside the lake where we were eating dinner and Reich raced to the door with a gun in his hand, shooting it into the air to frighten off the luckless visitor, who, it turned out, was an old friend who later gave Reich a piece of mind about such summary treatment.

But Reich remained avid in his aversion to trespassers. He had been hounded to death by curiosity seekers and bureaucrats and those who came to sneer at or spy upon his experiments. By the summer of 1949, he was ready to frighten the boots off anyone who came unannounced or uninvited onto his land or near

his laboratory.

On the other hand, his small son, Peter, along with Neil's little daughter Zoe, and Dr. Wolfe's little girl, Erica, and our own Wendy, played happily hour-after-hour while Reich smiled benignly, pointing out to us—their parents—the marvel of their existence and their positive outreach to life. This was Reich at his best.

But the pressures on Reich increased as his fame grew. The FDA intensified their program until the day came when Reich was ordered to destroy all his orgone accumulators and all his published material relevant to orgone. Libraries were ordered to burn his books. This was indeed one of the most unenviable periods in all of US history of publishing. William Steig, the great cartoonist and an erstwhile patient of Reich's, offered to raise one hundred thousand dollars (then an impressive sum) for the defense of Reich and his work. One of the create civil liberties lawyers of the day was willing to take Reich's case. But Reich was a scientist who thought that his work should not be presented in a court of law but in a laboratory. He felt that his detractors should observe what went on there, first, before asking him to defend his work in a courtroom. As tension grew, Reich took to alcohol and occasionally in a drunken rage became so terrifying to his family that Ilse finally gathered up Peter and fled to our home in Massachusetts. She and Peter lived with us there, for the next several years.

Reich visited them from time-to-time; sometimes he was his old exuberant adventurous self—always into exciting research projects, some of which seemed bizarre and yet others yielded mind-boggling

positive results. One of his colleagues described him as a powerful stallion, raring to go yet tied to an unyielding concrete post. The early fifties were not a time for a man like Reich.

Eventually, he and Ilse parted company, and Reich became involved with another woman. Except for the legal hassles that sometimes involved Ilse's presence, or on the rare occasions when he dropped by to see Peter, Reich, Tajar and I no longer enjoyed the close and warm exchange of good feeling that once was ours. This saddened us immeasurably.

And the pressures grew. Reich was finally required to defend himself and his orgone in the court of law in Maine. Stubborn man that he was, he refused to discuss his work anywhere except in his own laboratory and then only with those scientists who had taken the trouble to become knowledgeable about it. And so he refused the summons. "Contempt of Court" it was called and the police were sent to bring him bodily to the courtroom—manacled between his captors. Unyielding to the last, he felt that he needed no defense except what he, himself, could give. Refusing legal counsel, he insisted that he could be his own best lawyer. The net result of his trial was a term in prison. Eight months later he died of a heart attack there on the very eve of the termination of his sentence.

Reich had always said that he would join the company of martyrs in mankind's evolution. He told me once that all persons who discovered any new principle were inevitable candidates for martyrdom, and

he quoted an impressive list of the greats of this earth who had, indeed, paid their lives for their discoveries. "Inventors can live and thrive and stand on the shoulders of discoverers," he said. "But, whoever discovers a basic new idea is doomed to death."

His book, *Murder of Christ*, was his expression of this conviction. He began to prepare Peter when he was quite young to accept the idea that his daddy might well end up in prison, and that Peter must not conclude that his father was a bad man because of it. Rather, it would mean that his daddy was way ahead of his time and that his unsettling ideas had angered "little men" to the point where they conspired to shut him up.

It cannot be denied that it was indeed a dangerous matter to be a follower or a friend of Reich during those tumultuous days. Our house, for example, was searched by the authorities for the presence of an orgone accumulator. (We had quietly dismantled it at Reich's suggestion long before the FDA investigator arrived at our doorstep.)

We were called fools by our colleagues and only those staunch souls who, like ourselves, believe in the essential soundness of Reich's teachings, sent their children to our boarding school. We were shocked by the book burning judgment, not believing such a thing could happen in free America.

However, personally, I didn't believe Reich had to pay the price he did for his contribution to psychological thought. Part of his suffering, it seemed to me, stemmed from his own

hostile approach to those servants of the law who may have thought they were acting in mankind's best interests, mistaken though they were. Had he been willing to use the skillful services of a wise lawyer, I like to believe that he would have escaped prison. But who can say—Reich may have been right that "little men" cannot tolerate a great new idea. God knows, "little men" today cannot tolerate the idea of world peace.

Some have called Reich paranoid, though if he was, he came by it with reason. The last time I ever saw him, he had come to our house to visit Peter. He refused all food offered him, saying how could anyone know if the food was poisoned (though he had eaten many times before at our table).

And when he opened the trunk of his car to get something for Peter, we saw that he carried a literal arsenal for what he considered his own self-defense. Seeing the shocked expression on my face, he said, "Ranger, if you ever say to Peter that I am suffering from paranoia, I will destroy you."

"Why should I ever do that, my friend," I replied. "I am not a psychiatrist with neat diagnoses of men's behaviors. And to me, you will always be a great teacher and a dear friend."

But, both Tajar and I were left with the disquieting fear that the back of this lion was broken and that what we were witnessing were his roars of protestation and pain. One could call this paranoia, but it felt more to us like the anguish of a great-giver-of-good-things whose gifts had been thrown in his face because they were not understood. As he waved to us

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for the last time—to Peter and Ilse, to Tajar and me—we were heartbroken.

Was Reich right that every new idea has a provocation to kill its author? Did a powerful segment of society suffer from emotional plague? And could that same segment not only destroy human progress but reverse the development of mankind so that men not only killed other men but destroyed the earth itself?

Certainly, whenever I have been out on the cutting edge of an idea that has proven right and reasonable and sane, eventually I have met with inexplicable resistance that sometimes has taken violent form. For example, when I wrote *Sex Before Marriage: Guidance for Young Adults Ages 16-20*, I not only received anonymous threatening telephone calls in which the callers informed me that New Englanders knew how to deal with its witches, but I was also threatened with the burning of my house and warned that I would be tied to a pole and dunked in our pond to determine, as the witch hunter did of yore, my innocence or guilt before God. I have also been visited by religious fanatics who came to “save my soul.” I have received dozens of letters imploring me to turn to God, as well as letters asking me to write to libraries requesting that they put my books under lock and key so that children would not be contaminated by them.

The other hopeful side of the coin is that I have also had thousands of letters expressing appreciation for the ideas I expressed in my books, the gems of which I owe to Reich. Back in 1969, 1 out of every 4 letters I received was damning. By 1982, only 1 in 20 twenty was negative. In fact, the American Library Association paid me the highest compliment in listing my book, *Sex with Love: A Guide for Teenagers*, among the best 40 books of the year for young readers. And after appearing on television shows such as The Today Show and Woman to Woman, as well as being the guest of hosts like Phil Donahue and Merv Griffen and many others, did my ideas receive overwhelmingly more positive responses than negative ones.

Does this mean there is a growing body of person’s unafraid of the “little men” of whom Reich spoke? And if so, will they develop the strength to oppose those who would deprive us of our right to deep happiness? Or will these “little men” blow up the earth before mankind as a whole can know the full joy of human ecstasy?

I wonder!

Certainly, whenever I have been out on the cutting edge of an idea that has proven right and reasonable and sane eventually I have met with inexplicable resistance that sometimes has taken violent form.

**Eleanor “Ranger” Hamilton, Ph. D., (1909-2008)** was a psychologist, family therapist, sex therapist (and advocate for sex education), an author and columnist. She pioneered the field of sex therapy in the 1930’s. Her numerous books and magazine articles revolutionized bedrooms throughout the US in the 1950’s. Eleanor offered a broad understanding of the 1960’s “total movement” that altered perspectives about roles, gender and personal responsibility for the remainder of the century.

