

*At a meeting of the FACULTY OF ARTS AND SCIENCES on February 12, 2002,  
the following tribute to the life and service of the late Erik Homburger  
Erikson was spread upon the permanent records of the Faculty.*

## **ERIK HOMBURGER ERIKSON**

BORN: June 15, 1902

DIED: May 12, 1994

Erik Homburger Erikson was born on June 15th, 1902, in Frankfurt, Germany. His mother was a Karla Abrahamsen, a Danish Jew whose husband had abandoned the family before Erik was born. When his mother remarried, Erik took his step-father's name and became Erik Homburger. Some years later, when applying for United States citizenship he took the name Erik Homburger Erikson.

Erikson graduated from the classical gymnasium at Karlsruhe and proceeded to study art at the Baden State School of Art in Karlsruhe, leaving after one year for Munich. There he enrolled in the Academy of Art where he studied for two years. After some subsequent years of travel he came in 1927 to Vienna. Here he was invited by Anna Freud to teach at a small private school mainly for the children of members of the Freudian circle. Soon thereafter he entered psychoanalysis with her and began his training as a child analyst. For some years he took occasional courses at the University of Vienna, mainly in art, art history and one psychology course. He did not proceed to complete the liberal arts curriculum, but took up medical studies instead. In 1930 he married Joan Serson. After being admitted to full membership of the Vienna Psychoanalytic Institute in 1933, he discontinued his medical studies and the Erikson family, now including two small children, emigrated to the United States.

The Eriksons settled first in Boston. Here, with support from some of the area psychoanalysts, he developed a significant psychoanalytic practice at his home in Cambridge. His success in this led to appointments as research fellow in psychiatry at the Massachusetts General Hospital, a consultantship at the Judge Baker Clinic and a research associate appointment at the Harvard Psychological Clinic. As the latter was an affiliate of the Department of Psychology, research associates were expected to pursue doctoral studies. Erikson registered as a graduate student in psychology in 1933. This appears to have been his first formal connection with Harvard. However, the quantitative empirical requirements of the department were uncongenial to his own humane and hermeneutic approaches; he discontinued his studies in 1936 without obtaining the degree.

With the encouragement of Lawrence Frank, Erikson moved to Yale in 1936 to a position in the Institute of Human Relations. The Institute sought to develop an interdisciplinary program combining psychoanalytic theory with cultural anthropology in the study of child development. Erikson was appointed to the rank of Research Associate and Instructor in the Departments of Psychiatry and Pediatrics at Yale Medical School. While at the Institute Erikson was invited to spend time at the Oglala Sioux reservation at Pine Ridge South Dakota. His observations of child-rearing practices increased Erikson's growing concern with the importance of environmental reality factors in the development of the child, and his concomitant de-emphasis on the purely internal hypothetical dynamic factors central to the Freudian position.

In 1939 Erikson left New Haven for the Institute of Child Welfare at the University of California, with an appointment as research associate and lecturer. His main involvement was with an ongoing longitudinal study of adolescent development. As time went on he became uncomfortable with the quantitative and collaborative aspects of the study, preferring his own approach of compiling unique individual accounts of each child. He gradually reduced his commitment to the study and, by 1944, resumed full-time private practice in the San Francisco area. It was during this period that he wrote his classic work, "Childhood and Society." In 1950 Erikson refused to sign the oath of loyalty newly required of faculty members at the University of California at Berkeley. Although his defense of his action persuaded the authorities not to deprive him of his faculty appointment, Erikson resigned in 1951 to move to the Austen Riggs Center in Stockbridge, Massachusetts.

There he maintained consulting relationships with Benjamin Spock at the Arsenal School and with the Western Psychiatric Institute both affiliated with the University of Pittsburgh, where he held the title of Professor. While at Stockbridge Erikson continued to develop his theoretical views, notably through the method of psychobiography. "Young Man Luther" was published in 1954. Its reception was controversial, professional historians criticizing its history, and some psychoanalysts noting that it represented a significant departure from orthodox Freudian principles.

Erikson had become increasingly dissatisfied with the clinical demands made on his time at the Riggs Center, preferring instead to write and to teach. In 1960 he accepted a professorship at Harvard, with the title Professor of Human Development. It was combined with a Lectureship in Psychiatry at the Medical School. Although Erikson's appointment was as not to a specific department, he was invited to become an unofficial member of the Department of Social Relations. It was in that department that he did his teaching, including his popular undergraduate course "The Human Life Cycle" and a graduate seminar on psychobiographical analyses of individual lives.

During this period Erikson wrote “Insight and Responsibility” (1964), “Identity Youth and Crisis” (1968) and “Gandhi's Truth” (1969). In 1970, Erikson retired as Professor Emeritus, returning briefly in 1972 to give the Godkin lectures. They were published later as “Toys and Reasons.” Erikson had been appointed to his professorship at Harvard while holding no university degrees but was awarded the AM (hon) on appointment and the LLD (hon) in 1978.

The best remembered contributions of Erikson were his emphasis upon the continuance of development throughout the life cycle. He identified eight stages of development (the first five of which corresponded to those proposed by Freud) but posited three additional stages from Young Adulthood, Adulthood, and Maturity. Passage through these stages was not solely determined by the mechanical repetition of childhood psychosexual conflicts, but also by social-environmental factors and by a continuing struggle to establish one's individual identity, a struggle that reaches a crisis in adolescence. His development of psychobiographical analysis established an approach that has achieved some significance in the field of biographical literature.

Erikson died in May, 1994, at Harwich, Massachusetts. He was survived by his wife and three of their four children.

Respectfully submitted,

Robert Coles  
Richard M. Hunt  
Brendan A. Maher, Chair