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## **ON SKYPE WITH ERIC BERNE: WHAT DID HE SAY AFTER HE SAID HELLO?**

“The title of this talk, as you may have already figured out, is a put on. If you didn’t figure it out you’re lucky you’re here.” (Berne, 1971, p.7)

This is what Berne said in his keynote address entitled “Away from a Theory of the Impact of Interpersonal Interaction on Non-verbal Participation.” He held the speech on June 20, 1970, and died three weeks later.

He spoke about the game of poker as a symbol for the existential situations in life. This is what he said: “Everybody’s on their own. Nobody is going to feel sorry for you. You’re fully responsible for everything you do. Once you’ve put the money in the pot, you’ve put it in the pot. You can’t blame anybody else. You have to take the consequences of that.” (p. 8)

My talk is about existential situations, meaning and TA.

Death was a permanent reality where I grew up. My parents survived the Nazi camps. Most members of my family did not. And here I stand. Survival, death and presence are existential realities. We must face them to find meaning.

My speech has two parts. In the first part I will divulge the therapeutic journey of a long term TA insider. In the second part, I will take a closer look at TA psychotherapy from an existential perspective.

When I think of Eric Berne, I do so with an inner smile: He was a great story teller, who used his wit to surprise patients and readers alike! It is with this appreciation in mind, that I will tell you a story. It is a story about TA, and about us. I made it up.

Do you remember Jeder, “the typical human being”, Berne wrote about in “What do you say after you say hello?” (p. 65) In fact, Jeder was one of Berne’s long term patients. Early on in his treatment Jeder had a daughter. As a sign of gratitude to the doctor, who had helped him so much, Jeder named her Bernadette. She was a cute baby, but her mother gave her too many hot potatoes for dinner. Around the age of 5, poor Bernadette was repeatedly taken to a paediatrician because of “berning” sensations in her mouth. No wonder, Bernadette became a rebellious teenager. She hated to bear the name she was given out of gratitude to her father’s psychiatrist and henceforth called herself Bee. Unfortunately this did not solve her problems and – with fate playing a dirty trick on her - she ended up as one of Berne’s last patients in the beginning of 1970.

Naturally, she did not admire him for his looks but for his wit and duly told him what a wonderful professor he was. He did not take such admiration lightly and called the bluff. Bee lost the game and was told not to hold a conference about it. She learnt the hard way that games were not a matter of luck but of skill.

After a few sessions and a trip through her psyche, Dr. Berne concluded that she had gained social control and was ready for the next step: Script Cure! Bee had read that this was some new miraculous surgical procedure in which a splinter would be pulled from her toe.

Understandably, she was somewhat afraid of this operation. She had heard Dr. Berne say “I am a head mechanic and that’s all I am.” Nowhere had she read that he was also a foot surgeon.

Bee examined her feet carefully and did not find any splinters. However, she also knew that there was something wrong with her since she had seen her contamination drawn on the blackboard. She trusted Dr. Berne’s judgement and agreed to the operation, also because she was lead to believe that script cure would turn her from a frog into a princess!

Dr. Berne pulled the splinter without an anaesthetic and it took Bee a while to make sense of what had happened: She had never seen a splinter, but figured that if the doctor pulled one, then there must have been one.

Bee felt much better and – without entering into a game of “Gee You’re Wonderful Professor” -realized that this doctor was most knowledgeable, uncommonly perceptive, and on top of it, had great surgical skills. He certainly knew how to pull a fast one.

Perhaps he knew he had no time to waste.

Berne was really not feeling well and referred Bee to a young and promising group therapist at the San Francisco Seminar for further treatment. The young man was not a medical doctor and was consequently not into foot surgery, but highly successful in treating frogs with an overdose of warm fuzzies. Emotionally illiterate frogs were taught to say yes and no and to give and accept warm fuzzies at their discretion. For some tough cases a pig had to be called in to assist in the treatment. This pig was called Pig Parent, was exposed, shamed, blamed and finally exorcised. Bee enjoyed the treatment. Blaming a Pig Parent for her troubles was a great relief. On top of it she liked the young doctor. She appreciated his cooperative attitude, his logical thinking, his looks and the straight talk. These were the happy days of Woodstock and with the help of this young doctor, many frogs were turned into colourful princes and princesses.

Bee was one of them and was truly feeling like a princess. Somewhat elated, she went on a shopping spree, spending more money than she could possibly afford. She bought a first Class ticket to India on a newly founded Airline, the Cathexis Pacific. On board she became somewhat confused. Instead of being served a first class meal, she was given baby food and instead of receiving an in-flight pyjama, she was put into contractual diapers. At first she thought that this was a novel way of having fun and played along quietly. After a while, however, she realized that this was no fun at all and started crying. The Stewardess came by and told her this was an unacceptable passive behaviour. Bee protested against such treatment, insisting she was a princess. Now she was confronted for being grandiose. She was told in no uncertain terms that she was no princess. Bee couldn't understand. All those years she was told that she could be turned from a frog into a princess - and now, that she finally was one - she was told that this was grandiosity. Bee was getting more and more uncomfortable in her diapers and courteously asked for permission to take them off.

Now the stewardess accused her of being too nice and called her overadapted. Bee was given the chance of a corrective experience if she agreed to sign a reparenting contract. This meant she was to spend the rest of the flight next to a big fat woman with lactating breasts. Bee looked at those breasts with awe and realized that this was an offer she shouldn't refuse.

Fortunately, the plane soon had to land for emotional refuelling. The passengers were taken to the transit lounge. Bee seriously considered to discontinue her journey, but was unable to make up her mind.

It must have been a sign from heaven: The Red Cross was operating a Redecision Ward for transit passengers! Bee walked in and turned to the doctor on duty, who told her to have a drink until the head nurse arrives. Bee was relieved. She hoped to find someone she could tell what she had gone through on her last flight. A few minutes later, Sister Mary arrived and made it quite clear that she was not interested in listening to Bee's plight. She wanted to hear only the good stuff. Bee understood that this was a different club with different rules and learnt quickly.

In the morning there was a bragging session and Bee told everyone that she had re-decided: Never again would she agree to wearing diapers! All clapped in applause and congratulated her on her redecision. Bee had reached her contracted goal, was friends with everyone, applauded by the staff and ready to go home. This redecision ward was certainly fun! The doctor and the nurse saw the lively side of people. Bee and the others left the airport feeling happy and full of good energy!

Bernadette Jeder never boarded a plane again. Instead she decided to travel home by ship. She booked a cabin on the luxury Royal Integrative Cruise Line. She knew that crossing the oceans by boat would take a long time, but was looking forward to the caring service and the food!

And indeed: The captain welcomed all passengers personally and assured them that their relational needs would be met during the journey. He personally initiated contact, expressing love through his self definition as a permanently reliable and dependable other who valued the individuality of each passenger. Caringly involved, he asked her: "Bee, what are you feeling as you are being truly valued?" Bee did not know what she was feeling as she was being truly valued. The captain interpreted this as a process of psychic numbing and suggested that Bee might be protecting herself from experiencing the pain of unmet relational needs from a previous journey.

Bee was deeply moved by so much healing presence. She was changed forever. The captain was also deeply moved. He was also changed forever.

Lunch was being served at the beautiful Chestnut Room, where Bee ordered a chicken sandwich. When it came, she was somewhat surprised, because it had a fishy taste. The waiter, trained in implicit relational knowing, came without being called, looked at the sandwich and said: "Madam, today the menu is attuna sandwich with validation sauce." He sensed that Bee was unhappy and launched a formal inquiry. The captain came personally and apologized for what had turned out to be a rhythmic attunement error, caused by the empathy staff in the kitchen. One of the chefs had forgotten to disconnect a rubberband!

After a while she got used to the food and enjoyed the attention she was given. She appreciated the process and learnt a lot about human functioning. She became an expert at Relational Bingo and was even invited to sit at the Captain's table. Now she was really someone.

Back on land, however, Bee was feeling nauseous and went to see a doctor. He examined her briefly and told her to face the truth: "Madam, you had too much attuna. You are suffering from the side effects of relational hyperintention. Change your diet to authentic food!" She did and after a while she was fine.

Bee felt ready for the project of her life time. Deep down, she had always been a business woman, which is probably why she liked TA to begin with. Bee went into the construction business, teaming up with a neurobiological architect, a knowledgeable and kind white haired gentleman. Together they co-constructed an entirely new reality – the first transactional shopping mall! What a mall!

To give credit to the medical model, there is a state of the art pharmacy, selling prescription drugs against relational hyperintention, rubberbands against sexual disconnects, Botox spray against transactional ageing and silicon refills for self-reparenting breast implants.

In the Classic Shop one can find replicas of Occam's Razor and Gordon's sword, an original script apparatus, buttons and electrodes, t-shirts, sweatshirts, and fuzzies, original English Rackets, all kinds of games, game plans, textbooks, stamps and scripts, a player piano with parental tunes and, for the final common pathway, a nice selection of tombstones.

Situated in a prominent location is the finance branch of TA: The mall hosts the head office of the International Transactional Bank Corporation which specializes in the trading of options, currencies and pay-offs. Mortgages are offered at a discount for citizens of New Guinea.

Inside the bank is a notary office, which issues seals of approval for all types of franchises and master franchises. Candidates for a master franchise must arrive in proper attire and wait in line. The waiting times can be long and frustrating. Some have protested against such treatment with the effect that, when they finally came to the end of the line, they found themselves in front of a counter with a sign that read "This window is closed."

The mall also has plenty to offer for youthful technophiles. Enthusiastic and playful workaholics with a brilliant overreactor adaptation find everything they can dream of in Pauls Soft Ware Shop, which is currently being managed by Iacoco and Vanzetti.

The shop has the exclusive rights to sell a revolutionary hi-tech tool, an application for download on an iPhone: When installed, you can hold your iPhone to the face of any person and within 5 seconds the personality adaptation of the person will appear on the screen. You also receive information about the respective open, target and trap doors.

An update of the app is currently being developed to advance TA as a two-person-psychology. With this latest version, called the "Ultimate Bull's Eye", the camera of the iPhone captures the faces of therapist and client with one click. Within 10 seconds it tells you which transactions offer the best fit between the personality adaptations of client and therapist. It also identifies their interlocking games and scripts. With this app, immediate and simultaneous script cure is guaranteed for therapist and patient!

You may understand that Bee was getting worried. She realized that TA was in danger of becoming obsolete. Just think of it: Who needs a therapist, when the job can be done by an iPhone!

Thank you for listening to my story. I hope the absurd reveals some truths.

I have been in TA for over 30 years. I had the good fortune to learn from many fine people. They taught me interesting theories and applied methods they believed in at the time. When I look back I remember the people much more clearly than I remember their ideas. In fact I hardly recall specific interventions but I am still touched by the meaningful encounters.

So what is psychotherapy about?

The existential psychotherapist James Bugental wrote: "Psychotherapy is not what you think. It isn't the healing of an illness... It is about what you aspire to in your life... It is less concerned with looking for causes to explain what you do and more concerned with discovering ... the meanings you make of what you are doing." (Bugental, J. 1999, p. 1)

In my experience, we can discover meanings when we face existential realities in the presence of authentic people. The same applies for the therapeutic setting: The therapist needs to be himself; he needs to be real, to contribute to a meaningful dialogue.

And here comes the paradox: It has been my observation that our therapeutic approaches can actually stand in the way of being ourselves, of being real. I think this happens when we neglect the existential dimension and give too much weight to the psychological perspective. I call this a psychocentric approach.

In a psychocentric approach we observe our clients. We look at them while they tell their stories and talk about their problems. We tune in and figure out what is going on. We use our theories and models to understand and intervene. We look at behaviours, problems, deficits, pathologies and resources. We look at our clients and turn them into the primary objects of our observation and attention. We do this when we stroke them (because we think they may need it), when we make contracts and empathize, when we analyze ego states, transactions and games, and, of course also when we work with the transference, to just name a few. We turn clients into our objects of our observation. We see them as objects and they also see themselves in this way.

When we look at what **we** are doing (Supervision), we turn ourselves into objects.

When we look at the process between us and our clients we turn the process –the therapeutic relationship - into an object.

With all of these interventions our focus is psychocentric. As a result the client may become overly concerned with himself and the therapeutic situation. The therapeutic frame of reference may become too important. Whenever the psychological perspective is in the foreground, there is less space to be existentially authentic.

To some extent, this is inevitable in our professional work as psychotherapists or counsellors. But I have found it useful to reduce the psychocentricity in my work.

How can we do this?

We need to get away from the egocentricity of traditional psychotherapy: **We do not find meaning by attending to our egos.** (Tyrangiel, H. 2005) **We do not construct meaningful lives by focusing on ourselves but by relating to the world.**

We need to move beyond our psychoanalytically derived preoccupation with the past. To quote Victor Frankl: We do not need an archaeology but a futurology of the person.

Meaning occurs to us when we move the focus beyond our own egos: I find that I can do this by adopting an existential approach.

**And this is what I mean by existential:**

My mother did not know why she survived the death camps. “Some did and some didn’t. It was my **destiny**” she used to say. But I always had **hope**. **Destiny and hope** are existential.

She was liberated by the Red army. **Freedom** is existential.

My father told me how he had to take **decisions** at the spur of a moment. These were existential decisions. **Deciding and choosing** are existential.

My parents told me how they shared their breadcrumbs with others. **Connectedness** and its opposite, **Isolation** are also existential.

Isolation is existential, loneliness is psychological.

My father lived to the age of 92. He took care of me when I was young and I took care of him when he was old. This is existential **response-ability**.

The mass murderers were **guilty**. All Perpetrators in the Nürnberg trials pleaded not guilty. Some people feel no guilt when they are guilty, while others feel guilty without having committed a crime. This is the difference between guilt and guilt feelings. Guilt is existential and **guilt feelings** are psychological.

War, genocide, persecution and abuse are existential phenomena. Their consequences cannot be adequately understood by psychological constructs like episcriting or transgenerational trauma. They cannot be "cured" by psychotherapy. This did not work for my late parents, it did not work for me and it will not work for my children. Nor will it work for the perpetrators and their offspring.

Existential phenomena demand an existential response. **For me** this involves understanding how a civilized society can become destructive, knowing how we can all be manipulated to behave in ways we would never think possible; and doing my share to counteract blind obedience. You may hear some of it shining through in this speech.

It is important for me to integrate an existential perspective into my therapeutic work. I have given some thoughts to how we can do so as transactional analysts. For me, this is work in progress and I am happy to share my ideas with you.

## **Autonomy, authenticity and redecision**

Berne expressed his existential world view by stating that transactional analysts have a *“high esteem for, and a keen interest in, the personal qualities of honesty, integrity, autonomy and authenticity, and their most poignant social manifestations in encounter and intimacy.”* (Berne, E. 1966, p. 305)

Berne wrote that *“the most authentic people in the world are young infants whose vision and relationships have not yet been seriously impaired by “the jazz.” In effect, transactional analysis attempts to re-establish in the patient the clear awareness and the candid intimacy of childhood... ”* (1966, p. 306)

According to Berne, we need to re-establish old qualities to achieve autonomy and authenticity. For Berne, this meant intrapsychic therapy: *“Since in most cases transactional analysts take the side of the Child and the Adult against the Parent, it tends to promote autonomy... and to increase authenticity in contaminated personalities.”* (Berne, E, 1966, p. 306)

In Berne's understanding, the attainment of autonomy and authenticity involves an ongoing fight against pathology: *“The attainment of autonomy... is a continual battle against sinking back into the old ways”* (Berne, E. 1964, p. 182). Berne's view was clearly psychocentric: He thought that we reach autonomy and authenticity by focusing on our internal experiences, by dealing with the past.

From an **existential perspective**, however, we can be autonomous and authentic at any moment in time. We are free to take new decisions, in the here and now. We do not need to change our lives through **red**ecision, but move on with life by deciding and responding to the present realities. Therapeutic dialogues focus on the the existential challenges the person is facing in the here and now.

## Games

Berne described existential phenomena when he wrote about the advantages of games: *“The answer to the question “Who am I?” ... and the next question, “What am I doing here? are existential questions. The existential advantage of sexual games is that they go a long way towards answering these two puzzles, although not as far as real intimacy goes.”* (Berne, E. 1970, p. 176)

Games, however, do not answer our present existential questions. Games confirm and reinforce our script decisions. They answer the questions of our past.

From an existential perspective, games can be understood as psychological maneuvers to **avoid existential responsibility** in the here and now.

This is why I see the antithesis as a truly existential intervention: Many antitheses invite clients to face reality in the here and now. A good example is the antithesis in the game of “Wooden Leg”. Berne writes: *“When the patient asks, “What do you expect of a neurotic? ... the reply is, “I don't expect anything. The question is, what do you expect of yourself?”* (Berne, E. 1964, p.162)

Berne described the existential advantages of games. To my understanding, these are not existential realities but basic **psychological** positions. For example, in the game of “Now I've got you son of a bitch” (Berne, E. 1964, p. 87) he defined *“People can't be trusted”* as an existential advantage; likewise in the game of “Courtroom”, the existential advantage is described as the *“Depressive position, I am always wrong”* (Berne, E. 1964, p. 98).

It is therefore no surprise, that we end up focusing on psychological issues when we follow up on the existential advantages as described by Berne. **In the case of “Courtroom” we would focus on a depression.**

Applying an **existential understanding** of games, we focus on constructing a **meaning** with the patient, which serves as a basis for action.

From an existential perspective, we do not look for causes in the past (such as script decisions). Instead, we discuss, which of the existential realities the client needs to meet - instead of engaging in a game.

Let me illustrate this with a simplified example: In a therapy group, Heather was playing “Stupid.” She was ambivalent about leaving her husband and

had repeatedly turned to the group for advice. Two members were unwilling to enter into this conversation, because they had previously experienced Heather's responses as "Yes, but."

I asked her: "Who takes the decision to leave your husband?"

"Only I can do this", she replied.

I continued: "Will you take responsibility for your decision?"

After a minute, she said "Yes."

I asked her: "Can one take such decisions without feeling discomfort?"

"I guess not" she replied.

We then talked about her feeling guilty for splitting up the family. She realized that taking such a decision inevitably leads to existential guilt. She also realized that she would stay stuck if she continued feeling guilty and that, in order to move on, she needed to accept the responsibility for her actions including the existential guilt, which is part of life.

## **Permission**

The traditional view in TA is that people need permissions (to exist, to be who they are etc.) and that people who were not granted these permissions as children can receive them in the process of psychotherapy.

From an existential perspective I cannot see how adults can possibly need any such permission. Our existence is not subject to permission, nor is being who we are etc. There may, of course, be consequences if we behave authentically. Others may not like us or what we do.

Instead of thinking in terms of permission, I prefer to work with people to discover their courage to be free.

## **Looking for permission binds us to authority, finding courage sets us free.**

Courage involves taking risks. Whenever we do anything, there is the risk of failure. We may cause damage and pain..

I find it interesting, that TA literature, with all its financial terminology, never mentions risk, which is a basic concept in economics. I ask you: How can one become a winner without taking risks? Risk is also existential!

We cannot protect our clients from the risks of life. On the contrary, they need to assess and take risks and deal with the consequences. We do not help

them by cushioning the realities of life. This is why I no longer favor regressive procedures such as permission and protection.

We do not need to be cured to face reality, but need to face reality to be cured.

Thank you.

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