

Teaching How to Counsel in a Changing World:
An Enduring Love Affair with Transactional Analysis

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Abstract

This article describes the author's experiences over the past twenty-five years teaching Transactional Analysis in the United States and Europe. It explains how and why laypersons throughout Europe are currently learning to use TA.

Perhaps it's time to confess that throughout Europe under-cover agents are currently using Transactional Analysis. Let me explain: since the late eighties, together with my husband, clinical psychologist Henry Marshall, I've been teaching a two-and-a-half-year course in "how to counsel" to students from several European countries; and TA is the bread-and-butter of the banquet.

Although the course can be used to enable graduates to become basic counsellors in The European Association for Counseling, most don't aspire to become professional counselors, therapists, or mental health workers. They are talented adults with little or no background in mental health, who have the courage to seek personal growth as a path to helping others. Therefore, they bravely use the invaluable theories of TA in their own professions and private lives: in banks, offices, schools, yoga

classes, with dental and medical patients, and with family and friends. They become “secret service” agents, offering unsuspecting innocents comfort and education via an explanation of an ego state, a script, or stroke deprivation. Games, pastimes, and even the structure of time are taught without much ado and hence TA’s benefits are spread like butter on warm bread: they sink right in.

What about the rest of the banquet? Let me explain. In the late 1970s, as a graduate student at the Fielding Institute, I was fortunate to study Transactional Analysis with John Gladfelter and lucky enough to spend three weeks on Mt. Madonna with Mary and Bob Goulding. By graduation, I was convinced that TA was a valuable method for simplifying the terribly complicated task of growing up...sane. It was clear that TA’s invaluable concepts are accessible and comprehensible, so I began teaching it immediately.

I interned at the Veterans Administration Hospital in Houston, Texas, and taught TA to nurses and any doctor with an inclination to listen. Simultaneously I began working with Alexander Lowen and found that Bioenergetics was a valuable addition to the theories of TA. The combination worked well: TA gave me a map into the psyche; Bioenergetics helped me understand how the mind and body affect each other.

I was seriously practicing Kundalini Yoga at a nearby ashram, when I heard Al Lowen say, “I had looked into yoga before I met Reich, but it did not appeal to my Western mind. Yet throughout my work with Reich, I was aware of some similarity between the practice of yoga and Reichian therapy. In both systems the main emphasis is on the importance of breathing. The difference between the two schools of thought was in their direction. In yoga, the direction is inward, toward spiritual development: in Reichian therapy it is outward, toward creativity and joy” (1977, p. 72).

That statement propelled me to go deeper into yoga, and to find a way to awaken the spirit, while simultaneously experiencing creativity and joy. So I began teaching yoga with a very clear intention: I deliberately leave space for laughter and bliss during sessions.

While serving as staff psychologist for three years in a rehab hospital in Houston, I taught TA to patients recovering from alcoholism and drug abuse. Then came an invitation from Alberto Villoldo, to study with Don Eduardo Calderon, a

noted shaman in Peru. Alberto said, “If you want to know about spirituality, if you want to know more about the mind, spend time with people who have managed to preserve the teaching of the ways of the feminine, of the Earth.” That got me on a plane to Peru.

Shamanism is an ancient tradition that continues to be responsible for the health and well being of millions of people on this planet. Shamans taught me to stay open to the miraculous and to value any healing intervention that works.

As I worked with Don Eduardo I saw that the similarity between the shaman and the counsellor is in their intentions: both intend to empower the person who comes for help. Robert (Bob) Goulding emphasized this point when he wrote *The Power is in the Patient* back in 1978. The shaman acknowledges the power in all life – rocks, trees, the elements, animals, and humans. They teach that everyone has power, but most of us have forgotten that power comes from within. When I, as a counsellor, ask a client, “What do you need, or what do you want, or intend,” I’m reminding them of their power to decide, to choose, to change.

There are of course fundamental differences: psychiatrists and some psychologists prescribe psychotropic medicines to alter the consciousness of their patients, and shamans take the substances to alter their own consciousness. However, the biggest difference between the counsellor/psychotherapist and the shaman is the difference between a profession and a calling. Most intelligent people can be taught to counsel, but teaching someone to become a shaman is like teaching a frog how to whistle. Learning shamanic interventions will not make a person into a shaman any more than learning to swim will make them a fish.

After working with shamans, learning hypnotherapy, taking courses with many skilled psychotherapists and healers, I concluded that TA was still an indispensable tool for helping people understand themselves and their interactions.

Concurrently, Henry was practicing medical psychology with pain patients using mantras as a meditation tool. He taught me the power of chanting mantras and I began to see that although people were benefiting from my interventions, the spiritual hungers of my clients were simply denied or unmet.

My dear friend and teacher, Stanley Krippner said, “Modern medicine, nursing, social work, counseling, and psychotherapy address themselves to a person’s physical, mental, emotional, and social problems but rarely to one’s spiritual

concerns. Nor are most practitioners aware of cultural and ethnic differences in spiritual perspectives. Many health care professionals are embarrassed and speechless when a patient or client asks them, ‘But doctor, what does it all mean?’” (Krippner & Welch, 1992, p. 8).

All these influences strengthened my determination to link body interventions and spiritual practices with my use of TA. I made this decision in the early 1980s, as I began to lead workshops in Europe. As this work increased, Henry and I moved to Holland and our world was totally changed. Over the next few years we continued developing a body-mind-spirit approach that respected the complexity of the human condition, while remaining simple and easy to use.

This was contrary to the then-favored approach in training mental health professionals that emphasized knowledge and proficiency in a specific school of thought, i.e., Psycho-dynamic, Cognitive-Behavioral, Behavioral, Person-Centered, Adlerian, etc. This specific-school approach avoids the pitfall of unbridled eclecticism, which at its worst is a hodgepodge of ideas that confuse the practitioner and the client. However, I felt that the dangers of an overly focused approach is that options for intervention can be pre-determined by the theoretical orientation of the counsellor, regardless of the client’s best interest.

I didn’t believe that one method held the golden key to happy-ever-aftering. Life is complicated and there is no miraculous formula that can cancel the pains of the past or totally prevent them in the future. Ken Wilber writes, “As a person (layperson or therapist) gains familiarity with the spectrum — she will be better able to orient herself (or her client) in the journey for self-understanding and self growth. She may be able to recognize more readily from which levels the present problems or conflicts stem and thus apply to any given conflict the appropriate ‘therapeutic’ process for that level. She may also come to recognize which potentials and levels she wishes to contact, as well as the procedures best suited to facilitate this growth.” (2001, p. 13)

Moreover, if we consider the implications of group identity, we can see that once we are identified with any group (for example, “I’m a vegetarian”) we immediately fall into the pattern of group identification / group loyalty / inter-group warfare. “My group’s better than your group” is not just a manifestation of the archaic ego, it’s a biological certainty. And the only saving grace is the appearance of a super-ordinate goal such as the opportunity to be of real service to a client.

As a teacher reaching people who speak French, German, Dutch and Flemish, I felt compelled to simplify the art and science of counseling, and to pass on to my students the best that I had learned. Fundamentally, this meant empowering them to be therapeutic helpers – no matter what profession they practiced for a living.

The longer I worked as a therapist, the more people I saw in my workshops, the more I realized that as people living on an endangered planet, everyone living on Earth today has problems. That's why I thought it important for ordinary people to learn some basic skills in order to counsel each other. To be helpful we need to become therapeutic. Being therapeutic describes anything that helps people feel better about themselves, others, and the world they live in. A sunset is therapeutic. So is a good cup of tea, a smile, or a hug.

Simply put, helping is a key to spirituality and ultimately to good health. As Alan Luks, of Big Brother/Big Sisters says, "There is a physiological explanation, and research has shown that people who help others often experience the same 'high' as runners and other athletes experience when exercise causes the pituitary gland to step up its production of endorphins in the blood. People who volunteer often describe this and we call it the 'Helpers High'" (Luks & Payne, 2001).

The broad application of Transactional Analysis to therapeutic, educational and business contexts was a big support to my dream of including professionals and laypersons in a helping network. TA practitioners are well aware of the struggle for professional accreditation and of the rich talents of many non-professionals. I wanted to pass on my skills in a context that would support those with professional aspirations, as well as those who simply wanted to develop helping skills. "Counseling" seemed to fill the bill.

Psychotherapy extends into treating severe clinical disorders: psychosis, borderline personality disorders, character disorders. It may utilize regression as a therapeutic method. Counselling, on the other hand, is for relatively stable clients and maintains an adult-to-adult level of interaction. From a TA perspective a therapist can regress someone back to their archaic ego (child) to make re-decisions, while the counsellor helps the client re-decide from the adult ego state. For the most part, therapists deal with issues of the inner world, while counsellors concentrate on more external issues. From this perspective, most problems of daily life are more in the domain of counselling than of psychotherapy.

Counseling is not yet fully recognized or protected as a profession in The Netherlands. As a member of the Netherlands Association for Counseling's professional affairs committee, Henry has been working hard to make certification and professional standing a reality. It's not an easy task. But happily, counselling is growing up!

Fortunately, on my quest to integrate simple methods that non-professionals and professionals could use effectively, I had some clear intentions:

1. To raise the visibility and perceived value of counseling for solving the more basic, common problems facing Western culture today.
2. To make it easier for students to understand and overcome problems, discover simple ways to resolve conflicts, learn more about human behavior, develop intuition, and to become more peaceful.
3. To create a supportive community of people dedicated to reaching their own potential while helping others.
4. To offer exposure to interventions on the soma, psyche, and spiritual domains.
5. To emphasize the importance of humor, play, community, and service.

Eric Berne gave me a clue how to proceed when he wrote, "For certain fortunate people there is something which transcends all classifications of behavior, and that is awareness; something which rises above the programming of the past, and that is spontaneity: and something that is more rewarding than games, and that is intimacy" (1968, p. 18).

That statement gave me permission to take the best of what worked for me to develop awareness, spontaneity, and intimacy. I turned to Transactional Analysis, Bioenergetics, Gestalt, and a bit of Jungian Psychology. I mixed them together with yoga, mantras, and a dash of shamanism. The mixture brewed into what I called "Tri-Energetics." It provides a simple structure into which a variety of approaches can be incorporated.

Tri-Energetics was not developed as a theory. It evolved through years of experience working with clients in therapy and counseling. Consequently, its strength lies in its practical application. However, as a service provider, I believe that people seeking help have a right to know the assumptions of their helper, and the methods

available to her. As a woman who has seen psychological theories used to justify almost anything, I want to be very clear that Tri-Energetics is no exception: its application depends on the intention of the person practicing it.

Tri-Energetics begins with the view that soma-psyche-spirit is a unity. It regards needs-wants-intentions as our fundamental functions, and sees flexibility-tolerance-curiosity as fundamental qualities that help us function optimally. It proposes a simple formula for satisfaction: Know what you need; say what you want; have clear intentions. Be flexible, tolerant, and curious.

People who come into counseling often don't know the difference between what they need and want, often don't know what they want, and can't express their wants when they do know. And most people are unaware of the importance of clear intentions, especially in their personal interactions. Further, too many people don't know the difference between religious dogma and spirituality.

It occurred to me that flexibility, tolerance and curiosity are attitudes that determine the roles and games we play. The absence of flexibility, tolerance, and curiosity mark the boundary between a personality style and a personality disorder. By employing these qualities, they can become habits that determine our personality and hence our destiny.

Volumes could be written about the ramification of the attitudes of flexibility, tolerance, and curiosity. Just for fun: Emotional flexibility helps us perceive and pursue options. Physical flexibility is essential in preventing disease. Tolerance brings empathy, compassion, and reduces stress by allowing for acceptance. Curiosity is the opposite of defensiveness. If we're curious, we're not defensive. Curiosity is the gateway to spirituality. If we're not curious, all becomes dogma. And as author Tom Robbins says, "Curiosity, especially intellectual inquisitiveness, is what separates the truly alive from those who are merely going through the motions" (2003).

Eric Berne, intuitive genius that he was, wanted to bring psychiatry out of the ivory tower where it was mysteriously veiled in elaborate words and cloaked in foggy theories. At risk of over-simplification, Berne clarified the psychiatric concepts of the organization of the ego into three discrete psychological entities: the Parent, Adult and Child. Transactional Analysis remains the heart of the counseling course we teach because the basic theories of Transactional Analysis are so helpful in understanding how the ego functions.

Here is a brief example of how TA is taught in the Tri-Energetic counseling course. Tri-Energetics focuses on needs, wants, and intentions. TA emphasizes which ego state a person is in during a transaction. Clarifying which ego state someone's in when they want something helps them reconcile incompatibilities of needs, and intentions. For example, someone says, "I want that job but I want to sleep late." Perhaps the Critical_Parent ego says: "You'd better take that job, or else." This forces the rebellious child to say, "I'd rather sleep in." Understanding the conflict gives the adult ego a chance to process the data and decide whether or not to take a job that requires getting up early. By discovering what the needs of each ego state are, we can more easily discover our patterns, develop clear intentions, and make way for change (as I write, I remain grateful for Mary and Bob Gouldings', What-do-you-want-to-change refrain).

Transactional Analysis allows the therapist/counsellor to focus on the needs, wants, and intentions of the parent, adult, and child ego states. That is precisely why for problem solving, self-awareness, and emotional issues, we teach the concepts, theories, and practical applications of Transactional Analysis.

As therapists working in a dramatically changing world, we take solace in times of worry that some things – like women, wine, and Transactional Analysis – improve with age.

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