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## Letters to John McNeel, Editor, *TAJ* and Dr. Eric Berne

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### Abstract

A nostalgic reminiscence about Eric's death, and an expression of regret at not having written at that time. Appreciation of Berne's significant contributions and a description of conflict felt about modifying some of his theories.

Dear John:

Sometimes there's a sudden total finality in an event: Eric's death. It "cannot be undone." With his death were buried some of his hopes, expectations and enthusiasms; and also hopes, expectations and enthusiasms of many of those of us left behind. There's a painting by Albright, in the Chicago Art Institute. It shows a black mourning wreath hanging on a door; the title is: "That which I should have done and didn't do." In TA language we might retitile it: "That which I wanted to do and didn't..."

However, sometimes there's a new opportunity to do something that was intended before. I did not write a posthumous letter to Eric in the Memorial issue that followed his death, though I had wanted to and formulated many versions in my mind. But some of the writing phobia which Eric had cured me of revived (what a word!) with his death—a negative homage—and I did not do *then* what I wanted to do. Thank you, John, for giving me the chance to do so now, ten years later, still to deal with some of the old issues, and, perhaps, some of the newer ones, in the letter that follows:

Dear Dr. Berne:

Yes, Eric, first let me address you formally, for it's as Dr. Berne that you

first impressed me, when I picked up "TA in Psychotherapy" just by chance. I was a therapist in Chicago, apparently successful, but puzzled and dissatisfied with my work. I was checking it with one consultant after another, being told that my work was fine, that I was being impatient or overanxious or perfectionistic in feeling that there had to be a way for therapy to be more effective, faster.

Reading your book finally provided the answer. In my excitement I got your telephone number from San Francisco information, and called—the first time I ever tried to contact an unknown author. And there you were at the other end of the line! (It turned out that I was lucky enough to have called on Tuesday just before the beginning of the seminar; just about the only time all week that I could have reached you thus, for you lived in Carmel).

Did you ever come to Chicago, was what I said after you said Hello. Yes, in two weeks' time was the surprising reply, on your way to New York. If I could gather four or more other therapists you'd meet with us for an afternoon for \$50. That was in 1966, and I believe that was your first U.S. workshop outside California.

Sadly, the great event was a flop. You seemed to take a malicious pleasure in provoking anger in each one of us. At the time I was too disappointed to figure out what went wrong, only registered your wistful comment, at the end: "Though you did not like me, don't write off TA. Consider inviting Kupfer and Goulding for a 101." Nobody except myself in that small group wished to pursue the idea, but luckily the Haimowitzes and others initiated their own

contact with California and I got to participate in the first Kupfer/Goulding 101 in Chicago. This renewed my excitement about TA even though you had sorely dampened it.

Eventually I spent several months in Carmel to train with David and Bob (and there met Mary), and it's in Carmel that I got to know you as Eric. It's there that our friendship allowed me to discuss with you the pattern of your transactions in Chicago—and similar ones in a variety of other circumstances that I witnessed as time went on. I suggested (and you did not disagree) that you played a Game I called "They'll be sorry they kicked me." The moves consisted in deliberately provoking (to anger) the Rebellious Child or the Critical Parent of others, then later giving them the occasion either to note how smart you were anyway, (or perhaps how vulnerable beneath your veneer) or how otherwise they had underestimated you and should not have criticized you or discounted you. But why?

The way I formulated it then, from the perspective of your Game theory, was that the payoff for you was to thumb your nose at the pompous dummies who underestimated you: eventually they'd get to regret that they had not sufficiently acknowledged Dr. Berne's genius! Certainly that's how both I and a number of other people I know got to feel in relation to you. Even at this moment I feel tears at not having expressed sufficient appreciation to you, while you were alive, for who you were and for so much that I gained from you.

In the past few years I had the gall to revise your Game theory (and its implications in relation to Script) so, if you'll forgive me, Eric, for the presumptuousness, I want to analyze the pattern of your harmful transactions in terms of my own theory, rather than the Game theory, because it makes more sense to me this way. (I've spelled out my revision in "Let's Not Call It Script When It Ain't" published in *TAJ*, April 1979. That was a hard article to write, feeling disloyal all the way, but I believe that were you alive I could have convinced you I was correct, because you believed in

revising theory on the basis of additional Clinical material.) My theory really enlarges on your own original concept that we seek out strokes in the here-and-now, even negative ones, in accordance with early childhood repetitive (albeit, now, dysfunctional) patterns to which we got addicted. (That's what I call racketeering.) By racketeering people "hook" others into giving them ongoing strokes within the dyadic transaction, and it's within dyadic transactions that "payoffs" are sought, repetitively, rather than through the dubious alleged internal "payoff" that follows a switch in Ego-State, as is claimed by Game theory. When there is a switch it's due to a biological Fight/Flight reaction to frustration at the point where continuing strokes as payoffs either cease to be forthcoming, because the partner is crossing transactions, or else their cessation is anticipated and feared, and the racketeer "quits before getting fired" i.e. crosses the transaction. Behind racketeering there lies a racket, expressed as substitute feelings for which the racketeer seeks reinforcement (strokes) to maintain it.

So, (in terms of my own theory), your transactions that provoked anger represented the way you racketeered for negative strokes in order to feed a "smart-alecky" racket that substituted for anxiety, or yearning to be appreciated as "you." With dismay I often saw you operate with a rather callow sense of humor and sarcastic invitations for negative strokes. I now interpret these as substitutes which appeared whenever emotions related to neediness or softness or warmth "threatened" to surface. I do not know how or why such a racket would have originated in your early childhood, but I can imagine how it may have been reinforced. I see you as the skinny little Jewish kid with thick glasses and a big nose trying to make it in a Canadian grade school where boys were probably encouraged to have a "stiff upper lip" and where brains did not matter as much as brawn. Rather than be discounted you'd racketeer for negative strokes, by golly! My hunch is that little Eric did not get the positive strokes he yearned for for his looks, or even for his

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intuition, or his way of viewing the world as a "little professor" questioning the Emperor's New Clothes. Smartness turned to smart-aleckyness with which negative strokes could be garnered, and at least it's fun to get others to feel so ridiculous that they daren't mock you next time, or end up feeling bad about it. But later in life your racket prevented you from receiving and registering many of the genuine strokes that *were* forthcoming.

With pain, I remember an episode that confirms the above. Following a presentation you had made in Monterey I came up to you at the exit and expressed my enthusiasm about the content. You looked blank and failed to respond. At the time we were already friends, so I could confront this. Whereupon you said, sadly: "If you had praised how I looked I would have heard you." And off you went, head down.

I also remember some of your more provocative "revenge" behavior. This was after I had been pushing you very much to let me observe your private treatment group in Carmel, to which you normally did not allow observers (in contrast to the San Francisco groups). Finally, one day, you assented, subject to getting the group's approval, five minutes before inception, while I waited outside. "They agreed," you said, opening the door and inviting me in. Then, to the group: "This is Mrs. English, a therapist from Chicago, and, as discussed with you, today it is she who will be running the session, while I observe." Bang! There I was! Option to argue or flee or muddle through, (as I did) scared and unprepared, with you sitting in the corner, poker-faced throughout the session, refusing to say another word even when addressed directly! Then, at the end, outside, with a mischievous twinkle and a formal bow, you said, as though nothing unexpected had happened: "Well, Mrs. English, I'll be glad to refer patients to you in Chicago, when you go back!"

However you also used your abrasiveness usefully to cure my writing phobia, practicing therapy without a contract, I must say, for which I am nevertheless ever so grateful.

In spite of a good deal of other therapy I was heavily handicapped professionally by a writing phobia that prevented me even from submitting an abstract of a paper for presentation at a meeting. You urged me to present at the 1968 summer conference. I mentioned my theory on episcrypt (which I called antiscript at the time). You insisted that I had to submit a written summary and write-up for later publication in the *Bulletin*, but I managed to manipulate time and deadlines so that I got on the program at the Monterey conference without doing so. The first thing you asked me, when I arrived, was: Where was the written material? Putting my best Wooden Foot forward, I reminded you of my writing phobia, and assured you that I'd give a good presentation anyway. The welcoming smile vanished. You informed me curtly that you would not attend the presentation, although you had planned to do so. Indeed, you made a point of walking by the door twice, while I was presenting, looking in till you caught my eye and then walking off. And after the presentation, when we were having lunch, and Claude Steiner, who had attended, made a positive reference to my talk, before we could continue with the subject you coldly stated you were not interested. Again, later, at the swimming pool, when I tried to discuss the topic with you, you told me that you would not discuss that or any other theory with me until I had written it. At the time I was furious, but a month later, in Chicago, suddenly I found myself typing away, (also furiously) and sure enough, I sent you the article on "Antiscript."

Your response was prompt, both positive and negative again. You suggested that the phenomenon be called "Episcrypt" rather than Antiscript, spelling out that epi—outside of center—better represented the "hot-potato" idea I was offering. You praised the concept, but criticized the writing and yourself corrected the first few pages of the manuscript, which you returned. "Get it all revised by an English teacher," you added. By now I was not going to be deterred—in fact the negative statement stimulated me all the more. I

as too involved to experience the phobia. The article was indeed sloppily written, and I rewrote it, sending it back with an indignant letter to the effect that I didn't need no english teacher to correct my style. Eventually you published the article in the October, '69 issue of the Bulletin. During that year there was a great deal of communication between us on ideas, also by letter and long-distance telephone, and it was an exciting time. I am proud that you sent me chapters of the book you were writing (published as "Hello") and that you considered my suggestions. I was arguing with you about your concept of script. You agreed to some revisions in the theory. (In fact the glossary definition in "Hello" published posthumously corresponds to some of the points I was making then and is different from the more rigid definition in the text, which you did not get to revise before your death.) Through winter, spring, and early summer of 1970 I was accumulating notes and clinical data to discuss with you in person—we were to have a series of meetings right after the 1970 conference.

And then, suddenly, you were dead. A large attendance at that conference, the largest ever, but you were not there. And David Kupfer, who still managed to make it, was yellow and wizened from the cancer which killed him later that year.

You did not live long enough to enjoy the international triumph of your theories and the growth of the association you founded. You did live to see a start in that direction. I remember your whimsical statement, at the time of the 1969 ITAA lunch, when you surveyed the roomful of people around you and realized that you didn't know everybody in that room personally. Maybe it was time to go hide in Chinatown and start over again with a small group where you'd know everyone, you said. Yes, recognition was difficult for you Eric, so was effusive gratitude, so were certain emotions. It is because of your expressed skepticism about certain emotional manifestations that I got to thinking about rackets, seeking to distinguish between "real" overt feelings and the equally "real" (but camouflaged)

underlying feelings expressed through racket substitutes.

Like little Gordy in the story you wrote, you used your penknife to cut through the knots of my writing phobia when others had failed to disentangle them. Indeed it represented many inter-twined emotions. "Cure first and figure out why later," you used to say, and thanks to you I became able to write out some of my ideas while you lived and even, to some extent, after your death. The cure holds, though I still suffer from the anxiety attendant to "why." I now know there's a connection, through "magic thinking" to my "survival conclusion" that connects writing to death. In addition to my feelings of pain and loss, when you died this was reinforcement to my scary "conclusion"—and there were subsequent reinforcements too—all of which I am still struggling with emotionally. The "why" issues need to be dealt with, also their concurrent tangled emotions, and often they need to be dealt with over and over, and from many different angles, as I have come to recognize in myself and in people I work with. You did not live long enough to involve yourself sufficiently in this domain. Our loss, and this has led to certain changes in the theory and practice of TA, some of which I believe you would approve of, and some which may be turning you in your grave.

Finally, what stands is how you have catapulted us—individually, as in my case, and collectively, as in the case of the whole organization, its standards and its Journal—into the creative path that keeps leading to ever new perspectives on human nature. You did not reap commensurate appreciation and rewards, Eric. Still, for whatever it's worth, now, although you're dead, thank you.

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