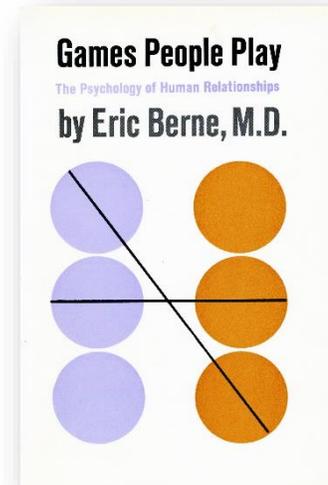


Theological Musings from Dave's Laptop

May 24, 2016

I've been interested in the personality theory known as "Transactional Analysis" very nearly since psychiatrist Eric Berne first published *Games People Play* in 1964. According to Berne, one of his first clues to the existence of what he would come to call "ego-states" came from the writings of Canadian Neurosurgeon Wilder Penfield.¹

In his research on déjà vu experiences, Penfield reported that when he stimulated a particular point in the brain, the patient reported being transported to an experience in earlier life, complete with sounds, smells, colors—the whole panoply of sensory and emotional experiences associated with that event. The same brain location always brought the same experience, while different locations brought different experiences.



Beginning with the awareness of these ancient or archaic reservoirs of experience, Berne developed an extensive system for understanding, improving, and healing interpersonal relationships. This system is known as "Transactional Analysis," or "TA." Berne's most famous popular book on the subject is *Games People Play*, while his best-known technical book is *Transactional Analysis in Psychotherapy*.

While I find a great deal of what Berne wrote to be helpful in self-understanding and in the therapeutic process, it is the concept of "ego-states" that most people find immediately helpful.² I have given the explanation that follows to a great many persons over the years, and I don't believe there has ever been a person who learned what I am about to tell you without several "aha's!" along the way.

Berne's idea of "ego-states" is that each of us experiences an ongoing internal conversation that is entirely normal, but also generally out of our awareness.³ This conversation takes place between various parts of our inner selves, parts that Berne calls "ego-states" or "sub-selves."

The fundamental assumption of TA is that all human persons have the identical personality framework of six sub-selves, but that the content of these sub-selves varies with our own personal experience of life and of the world. As the diagram on the next page illustrates, we have three primary sub-selves, and two of these sub-selves are further subdivided.

The three primary sub-selves are our "Parent," our "Adult," and our "Child." The content of our Parent and Child ego-states is like a video recording of our life experience

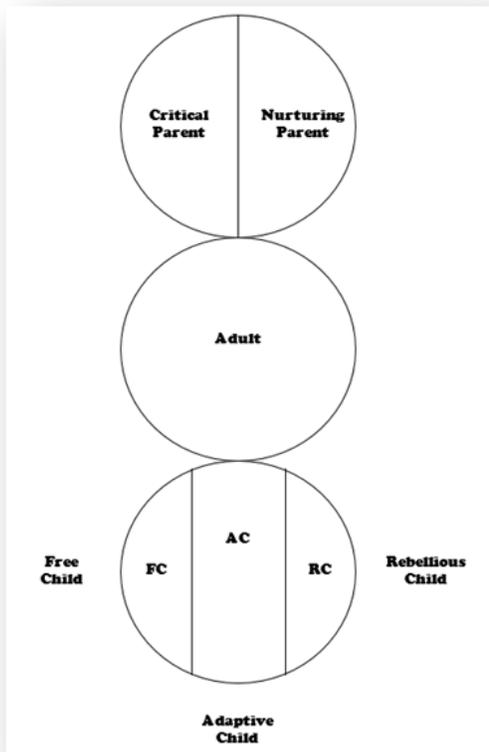
¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Transactional_analysis
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wilder_Penfield

² Berne's ego-states have obvious similarities to Freud's "id," "ego," and "superego," but the concepts are not entirely identical.

³ This is a healthy conversation, not to be confused with the experiences of schizophrenia.

up until about the age of eight or nine years old, complete with all the sensory data that Penfield discovered through neurosurgery. Those two sub-selves seem to “stop recording” at some point shortly before the age of ten, and those recordings cannot subsequently be altered or erased, though they can be replayed.

We are not responsible for the content of those recordings. We were children. We were “the camera.” Those recordings contain what we learned about ourselves and the world from our parents, or from the adults who functioned as parents to us during those years.



The **Adult** ego-state is current and “real-time.” Our Adult is our mature, logical, reasonable “Executive Self,” and our Adult is our primary resource for healthy, purposive, redemptive action in the world.

As you can see from the diagram, the **Parent** has two sub-selves, the “Critical Parent,” or “CP,” and the “Nurturing Parent,” or “NP.” The Critical Parent contains the necessary parental functions of limit-setting and behavior guiding, such as “You cannot hit your sister” and “You have to eat your vegetables.” The Nurturing Parent contains the necessary parental functions of care, affirmation, and tenderness.

In the best of all possible worlds, children would grow up with both biological parents, who would share the Critical and Nurturing roles, avoiding having one parent being the “easy” and the other being the “heavy.” Not all are so fortunate, of course.

The **Child** ego-state has three sub-selves, the “Free Child” (FC), the “Adaptive Child” (AC), and the “Rebellious Child” (RC). The Free Child is the source of real, genuine laughter, of healthy sexuality, and were the Image of God to be located in such a personality schema, the Image of God would be “Free Child,” too.

The “Adaptive Child” is that part of ourselves that tries to follow the Parental rules, that tries to please the Critical Parent, and that tries hard to be good. Conversely, the “Rebellious Child” is the “You Can’t Make Me Do It” part of ourselves. The Rebellious Child makes a point of flouting the same rules that the Adaptive Child tries to follow.

Usually, when we’re acting out of our Rebellious Child, we believe ourselves to be “doing our own thing.” The fact of the matter, though, is that the Rebellious Child is just as beholden to the Critical Parent as is the Adaptive Child, because the Rebellious Child has to consult the parental rules at every point in order to attempt to do their opposite.

It is from the Adaptive Child that our tears almost always come, because it is in the recesses of the Adaptive Child that our deepest pain resides. Even for those children who are fortunate enough to have “perfect” parents, it is our nature to over-hear criticism and to under-hear affirmation.

The result of this, for virtually every normal human being, is that at some point prior to the age of ten, we come to the quiet-but-dreadful conclusion that “*It’s never good enough. No matter what I do, it’s never good enough. The problem must not be something the matter with what I do or don’t do. It must be that something is the matter with ME.*”

Beyond all this, every one of these sub-selves has a different voice that can be heard on a recording. Most of us recognize our Adult or “business” voice, because we use it for most normal interactions with others. We probably recognize that our voices are different if we’re reading a gentle story to a child versus scolding the dog. And, whether we ourselves recognize them or not, those who know us best know when we’re using our Free Child or Rebellious Child voices.

The voice that is the most difficult to hear is our Adaptive Child. Because it is in these depths that we sequester our deepest pain, we never allow our Adaptive Child to speak unless we are very sick, very afraid, or very overwhelmed, such that our Adult selves—which work to unconsciously seal off this pain—have been rather completely short-circuited.

The first step in the journey of inner self-discovery is to give ourselves permission to listen to the perpetual internal conversation between the various dimensions of our Parent and Child ego-states. Let me say again that this is a universal conversation, not a mentally-ill dialogue.

One way to begin to pay attention is to recognize that anytime we experience an emotion, of whatever valence (such as *mad, sad, glad, or afraid*), whose intensity is significantly greater than that warranted by the stimulus (or “what just happened”), that intensity almost always means that “what just happened” pushed “play,” and our emotional response is not to the current stimulus, but to something (usually to *someone*), we experienced in the past, usually before the age of ten.

Remember that we are not responsible for the content of these “old videos.” We cannot erase them, nor can we change them. **But we can push “STOP,”** just as we would do with a DVD player or a VCR.

We push STOP by engaging our Adult to recognize the real, archaic source of our emotion, and by giving ourselves permission to explore the kind of inner dialogue that has been thus revealed. And it is quite frequently the case that the assistance of a wise therapist or spiritual director (a “soul healer”) is enormously helpful in revisiting those old sources of intense emotion, inviting God’s healing into the deepest places of our spirits.



It takes an enormous amount of emotional and spiritual energy to remain *unaware* of this ancient pain and sorrow. Imagine, for example, that each one of these ancient experiences is encapsulated in a large and sturdy helium balloon. Let’s say that there are fifty or more of them, all tied to your waist, and that it is your job to perpetually swim downward in a deep pool or the ocean such that you keep all of these balloons under the surface of the water all of the time. If this were possible, you can imagine how much energy this would require.

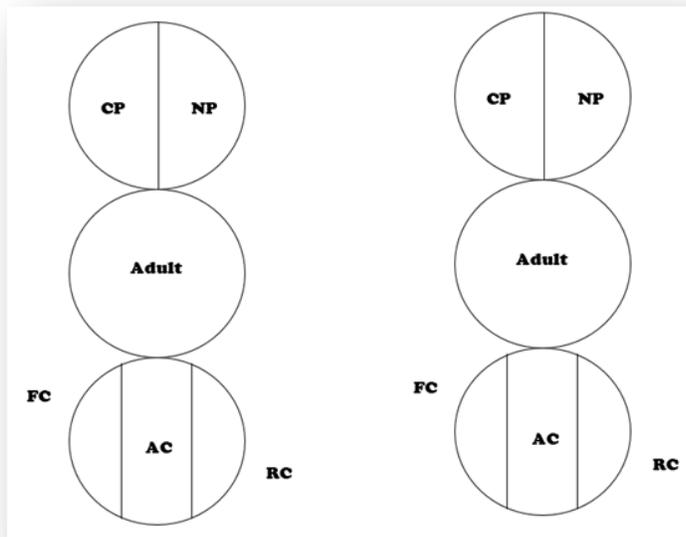
Every now and then, one of the knots comes undone, and one of the balloons (the memories/experiences) breaks loose and breaks the surface of the water, thus becoming available to our conscious mind. Our usual response is to quickly grab the balloon, retie the

knot, and resume our downward Sisyphian effort. You can imagine the deep soul weariness that attends all this.

On the other hand, if we choose to explore these memories and to let them speak as they become available to us, often with therapeutic help,⁴ then, as they would do were they really helium balloons, they pass through our conscious awareness and go off into the sky, where they explode and are gone. Thus, one by one, the energy required to “not know” becomes less, and one “balloon” at a time, we become more alive. **This is actually Very Good News.**

If you’ve been tracking with me so far, it may have occurred to you that, given these realities, interactions between persons are never so simple and uncluttered as to consist of simply my speaking and your listening, or your speaking and my listening. The truth of the matter is that any interpersonal communication involves one PART of me speaking and one PART of you listening . . . and the part of you that is listening is quite frequently not the part to which I think I am speaking.

The most frequent way our interpersonal communication derails is that I think I’m speaking from my Adult when I’m actually speaking from my Critical Parent. In such a case, the part of you that listens is not the Adult to whom I think I’m speaking, but your Rebellious Child, which is the sub-self that most frequently responds to the Critical Parent. When you respond from your Rebellious Child, I consciously shift into my Critical Parent, and things escalate from there. I suspect that you know what I’m talking about.



There are at least three things to take away from all this:

1. The single most effective and influential thing any of us can do to improve our self-concept and our interpersonal relationships is to give ourselves permission to begin to know our sub-selves.
2. To the extent that we are unaware of this inner conversation between our Parent and Child ego-states, that conversation will determine the course and direction of our lives—completely outside of our awareness—no matter what our Adult selves believe that we are doing with our lives.
3. While God is certainly able to heal and to redeem the inner wounds that we all have, the most effective way for such healing to come is through working with a soul-healer such as a Christian psychotherapist or spiritual director.

I hope that your introduction to this framework for understanding has resulted in several “aha’s!” since page 1, and that, now that you know where the “door” is, you will

⁴ We tend to remember things when we have become strong enough to let them speak.

choose to respond to God's call to walk through it. I wish I had chosen to walk through it as soon as I discovered that it was there.

Dave

