An Encounter in Armenia

by Gohar Levonyan

The course of our lives is largely determined by meeting with people, each encounter a gift and an opportunity to become acquainted with something new, to unfold the edges of what we know well, to look at things from a different angle. Some meetings are planned, some are accidental. The history of the meeting between members of the Transakt Verlutsutyun Haykakan Asociacia (Armenian Association of Transactional Analysis or AATA) and Bill Cornell goes back several months and covers several cities and countries. The process began in 2015 in Rome, where my colleague EATA Vice President Sylvie Monin said that Bill was planning a private visit to Armenia and that maybe we could organize an event while he was there. My AATA colleagues were enthusiastic, and with Sylvie’s continued encouragement (for which we owe her great thanks) we eventually established contact with Bill and began negotiations about a possible meeting in Yerevan.

In 2016 AATA celebrates the tenth anniversary of its founding. Our first years were characterized by active
growth and education. With support from the European Association of Transactional Analysis (EATA) and participation of international trainers, we have organized a long-term training program in psychotherapy as well as some training events in the organizational field. Now we are active in reforming the organization toward further institutional development.

Recently, for various reasons, the educational program of AATA has been suspended and trainers’ visits are rare. We thus felt a great need for lively contact and professional communication to further our growth and development. The opportunity to meet with Bill was received with great enthusiasm because his work is well known and respected here. I knew Bill would be in Armenia to visit family, but I was not sure if he would be able to spare time for us. However, he was collaborative and supportive and eventually we agreed that he would meet with AATA members to talk about the concept of body script and a body-centered approach.

The meeting was held in January 2016 and was an important event for me personally as well as for AATA as a whole. Bill’s professionalism and personal charm, the informative and intense time together with him, the opportunity to be an interlocutor and a listener in the dialogue with him—these are only some of the things we received. Bill also offered vivid examples from his therapeutic work, including not only the verbal contents of therapy but, more importantly, the body expressions as he illustrated his clients’ physical state before, during, and after the therapy. The few hours we spent with Bill provided us with important and valuable knowledge that is practical, useful, and fresh.

I am grateful to my colleagues from AATA, especially Vice President Arman Navasardyan, who helped with translation and organizational matters, and to the participants, who enriched the time with their questions and thoughts. I also want to share here some of the comments participants made after the meeting.

**Arman Navasardyan:** “The major surprise for me was learning that body therapy does not necessarily mean having physical contact with the client. I thought that verbal contact meant from mouth to ear/mind and body contact meant skin touching skin or body language communicating to the practitioner’s mind. Bill’s method offers a shortcut from mouth to body. Of course, the message reaches the ears and semantic filters anyway, but it connects with the body rather directly as it speaks and reveals body-related issues or symptoms.”

**Yelena Hakhverdyan:** “What mattered wasn’t just the information that we received from Bill but the inspiring way he worked with us. His explanations about resistance gave us a new view of body pain and demonstrated how to work with the pain itself (or with resistance). He showed that, regardless of the reasons for pain (real or imaginary), it is informative. That is, both at the physical and the psychic levels it is possible to work not through the pain but with it.”

**Zara Perikhanyan:** “The meeting allowed us to understand more about how our Western colleagues work. I was impressed by how masterfully Bill nonverbally conveys acceptance. He was knowledgeable and ethical and gave exhaustive answers to my questions. It was a discovery to learn that working with...
the body can be applicable not only in therapy but in consulting too and that it does not require the client to regress.”

Marina Sahakyan: “There was a sense of sincerity and authenticity in Bill’s interactions with us. He shared excerpts from his work with clients with such vividness that it felt as if I were present at those sessions. The topic of shame and the connection with regret and parting with client’s illusions was also interesting for me.”

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Comments From Bill: It is with pleasure and fond memories that I read these reflections from Goya, Armand, and their colleagues in Yerevan. I admit that without the initiative from Sylvie, I would not have known there was an Armenian community that struggles with isolation and severely limited financial resources. Theirs is a vibrant, committed professional community whose access to regular training is extremely limited and where the financial viability of meeting ITAA or EATA certification requirements puts formal certification out of reach for most people. I don’t see an easy solution to this problem, but with what seem, to my mind, ever-increasing requirements that serve well the respectability and governmental recognition of practitioners in the first world, those from more impoverished and/or isolated areas are left in the dust. As an international community, I think we have a responsibility to question our certification structures and to foster means of recognition and validation appropriate to the professional settings in which communities actually live and practice.

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Association of Transactional Analysis. I was both surprised and delighted to find out and then to be invited to meet with them.

As is so often the case as I travel and meet with TA folks around the world, our gathering was filled with respect for clients and intense curiosity to learn more about how and why we do what we do. The group raised questions and offered client examples that led and focused our conversation—all of which was translated into Armenian and Russian. In a relatively short period of time, we immersed ourselves in a rich clinical discussion. The participants’ comments in Gohar’s article capture well both the content and spirit of the seminar.

For me, our gathering was an opportunity to learn a little bit about real life in Armenia. I had many questions for my guests that had to do with the cultural, political, and economic realities of life in Yerevan. I was there to visit my son, daughter-in-law, and grandsons. My son Seth is on the consular staff at the U.S. Embassy, but all of his work is with Iran, which borders Armenia to the south (where the U.S. does not, as yet, have an embassy). Seth was trained to speak Farsi, not Armenian, so they are relatively cut off from ordinary, daily contact with the inhabitants of Yerevan.

As has happened elsewhere on my travels, I encountered a TA community that struggles with isolation and severely limited financial resources. Theirs is a vibrant, committed professional community whose access to regular training is extremely limited and where the financial viability of meeting ITAA or EATA certification requirements puts formal certification out of reach for most people. I don’t see an easy solution to this problem, but with what seem, to my mind, ever-increasing requirements that serve well the respectability and governmental recognition of practitioners in the first world, those from more impoverished and/or isolated areas are left in the dust. As an international community, I think we have a responsibility to question our certification structures and to foster means of recognition and validation appropriate to the professional settings in which communities actually live and practice.
Am a contractual trainee in private practice on a long-term transition from personal fitness trainer to transactional analysis psychotherapist. My work week is typically made up of sitting, exploring, psychotherapy sessions; prescribing, moving, personal training sessions; and presenting and consulting in larger organizations,

mainly around physical health and lifestyle but with progressively more transactional analysis involved there too. I attend an exam group monthly, and while my original plan was to be sitting my oral exam at this conference, things have not worked out that way.

I didn’t plan much for the 1-3 April 2016 United Kingdom Association for Transactional Analysis (UKATA) Conference in Hinkley and was happy to go with the flow based on some positive experiences of the people and learning I’d had at previous TA conferences. I wanted to gain a rich experience of discovery and growth in my writing, my practice, and my sense of self as well as in the relationships I have within the TA community. I picked a body workshop, a heady workshop, and an organizational workshop. I bought a suit for the awards ceremony, packed my bag, and set off with three friends from my training center feeling excited and nervously optimistic.

On arrival we were greeted with warm smiles, directions, and hugs. The theme of “Exploring Culture, Diversity, and Difference in the 21st Century” was already alive for me on many levels as I noticed differences between the cultures of my usual work week and being in the TA conference community. In the opening
keynote address, Keri Phillips invited us to voice our cultural differences and similarities in small groups. It was a lovely way to name and support the conference theme and connect at a deeper level with the friends I came with.

I found my first workshop, “Our Speaking Bodies” with Celia Simpson, patient, reflective, sensual, and grounding. It involved some wonderful partner work and brought to light some of my unknown thoughts about me and my body that I have developed over 20 years as a personal fitness trainer. I was able to reconnect with myself and my partner in a new and playful way. It was a delightful experience of learning with a light touch.

We later went to the bar, and much fun was had by many. The entertainment on both Friday and Saturday nights was great. By this time my nerves had calmed but my optimism remained. The learning was deep, the people were warm and friendly, and it was lovely to be part of a group enjoying each other’s company. One of the keynote speakers highlighted that many of us hold a Don’t Belong injunction, but despite that, I think the TA community does connect and connection very well.

My Saturday morning workshop was “Viewing Organisational Boundaries with Seven Eyes” presented by Joe Holmes and Debbie Robinson. They offered a beautiful adaptation of a piece of supervision theory for use in organizations. We explored agitation in boundaries with energy and humor in the face of conflicting styles and attitudes. The vibrancy in the group work spilled out of the workshop and continued over tea breaks, meals, and drinks for the rest of the conference.

I found Saturday’s keynote address by Mark Widdowson informative, thought provoking, challenging, and funny. I enjoyed his sharing of his insightful understanding of culture as well as some of his own personal experiences of fitting in or not. I was particularly interested in his comments about the TA community’s use of jargon, our attitude toward short-term work, and the need for more research in TA. His call for evolution fit neatly with the theme of growth from reflection and challenge that characterized the earlier workshop I had attended.

Saturday afternoon I went to a workshop given by Ioana Preda and

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develop therapeutic relationships. I have a renewed, clearer sense of my body, my thinking, and my direction as a person and a therapist. I’ve formed new relationships with wonderful people and deepened the relationships that existed already. And here I am writing too.

I have plenty to carry forward from this conference, including playing out aspects of my own script that have caused agitation and discomfort. I am reminded of a comment from the Saturday morning workshop that agitation is where the growth lies. I think that is right, and there is new exploring to do in therapy this week. However, I am also aware that for me, the vast majority of the conference was fun, relaxing, playful, and collegial. I discovered a lot and have grown with and without agitation with a wonderful group of people.

Helen Rowland on “‘Why’ and ‘How’ to Get Out of Neutral: Psychotherapy, Politics, and the Normative Unconscious.” It was excellent, heady and challenging, with a to-and-fro debate and an energetic exploration of theory and practice that also carried on in the spaces outside the workshop.

The Sunday morning workshops were of similar quality, which is to say fabulous. They echoed my themes for the weekend of personal reflection, agitation within cultural boundaries, and being in my body. Leilani Mitchell did a particularly good job of sharing with us her experiences with the current refugee crisis and inviting us to become involved too.

And then, apart from more hugging and good-byes, it was over. Did I fulfill my soft and fluid contract for this conference? Yes, indeed. It was a rich experience of discovery and growth that has already touched my practice and helped to
Celebrating the French-Language TA Journal

by Laurie Hawkes

Every other year, there is a gathering coorganized by the French-language TA journal Actualités en Analyse Transactionnelle (AAT), the Institut Français d’Analyse Transactionnelle (IFAT, the French TA Association), and now the Association Beige por l’Analyse Transactionnelle (ASSOBAT, the Belgian TA Association) and Association Suisse d’Analyse Transactionnelle (ASAT-SR, the Swiss association for the French-speaking part of Switzerland). On that occasion, the editorial board of Actualités likes to invite a guest speaker, and this year, to continue the idea of featuring Eric Berne Memorial Award (EBMA) recipients, Susannah Temple was invited to headline the 1 April 2016 event.

But that was not counting on the possibility of a strike, something not unheard of in our socially active country! Due to such problems with French air controllers, Susannah’s flight was canceled and she was unable to come. Imagine the stress of the editorial team, having to come up with an interesting day for the some 50 people who had registered! Many of them were coming from far away and had train reservations, so it was not possible to simply cancel the day. The editorial board of Actualités—and especially France Brécard, who had organized Susannah’s visit—had a very busy day trying to figure out what to do with the crowd.

I’m happy to report that their plan worked out quite nicely. Brigitte Evrard, who was to talk about ego state development in the afternoon, gave a longer talk in the morning, which everyone I spoke to found really interesting. Brigitte had been intrigued with Berne’s mentions of René Spitz, and she delved into Spitz’s work in order to better understand what he and Berne had in common since they were doing their thinking around the same time.
In the afternoon, the editorial board offered a panel discussion about violence. The topic was all the more timely because after the massacres by jihadists in Paris in January and then November of 2015, there had been the two bombings at the Brussels airport and in the subway on 22 March 2016, a mere 10 days or so before we all met.

After the sobering panel, France organized the audience into small groups to explore their desires and obstacles to writing. Nothing like drumming up some new authors’ vocations to keep the journal alive and well!

The day of Actualités is also the occasion for giving out the Raymond Hostie Award. Raymond was one of the first European transactional analysts. A Belgian pastor and theologian, with tremendous cultural sophistication, he is remembered with affection and high regard by all early European TA people. He is also responsible for starting the French-language journal in 1977. It publishes original French articles on transactional analysis as well as translations of articles from the Transactional Analysis Journal and the German TA journal. The Hostie Award, created in 1987, is determined by all subscribers voting on an article that they found interesting in terms of the theory and/or practical applications of transactional analysis. It must have been published originally in French in Actualités during the 2 years since the last award was given.

This year, the recipient was France Brécard for her article “La lutte avec nos demons: pourquoi nous n’écrivons pas... plus” (“The Struggle With Our Demons: Why We Don’t Write... More”) (Actualités en Analyse Transactionnelle, No. 146, April 2014, pp. 44-54). France gave a lovely speech about her two grandmothers and how each of them had written elegant and moving diaries during the war years. In her AAT article, she explored negative messages from our inner Parent, drivers, injunctions, beliefs, and script system and the ways these can block us. France also offered simple ideas for overcoming such blocks and ended with simple advice: Don’t aim straight away for an award-winning article, just put one foot—sorry, one word—before the other and move ahead. And start over again as often as necessary! Good advice and a well-deserved award—congratulations, France!
Until recently, personality disorder has been one of the most stigmatized of mental health conditions: “No mental disorder carries a greater stigma than the diagnosis ‘Personality Disorder’, and those diagnosed can feel labelled by professionals as well as by society. . . . Many professionals did not understand the diagnosis, and often equated it with untreatability” (National Institute for Mental Health in England, 2003, p. 20).

Although there have been important efforts in the United Kingdom (where I live and work) to break the cycle of rejection experienced by individuals with personality disorders, women prisoners with this diagnosis are still seen as manipulative, attention-seeking time wasters who self-harm, threaten suicide, and generally make life difficult for those caring for them. I initially became involved with individuals with personality disorders when I began working with Emergence, which is a service-user-led organization supporting all people affected by personality disorder. It is hard for women in prison to access Emergence because they have no Internet access, although Emergence does work with ex offenders, who can be part of the training team if they are at a place in their journey where they are resilient enough.

More recently, I have been working with the Knowledge and Understanding Framework for Personality Disorder (KUF) team, a National Health Service and Ministry of Justice-sponsored effort to support people to work more effectively with those who have personality disorder. Part of my work with the KUF has involved running 3-day Awareness Training sessions. These provide students with the knowledge and understanding required to work more effectively with service users with a diagnosis of personality disorder. The key purpose of the KUF is to improve the quality of service-user experience by developing practitioner attitudes, skills, and behaviors. The students can be anyone who works with people with personality disorder, including consulting psychiatrists, psychologists, mental health nurses, prison officers, probation staff, and police. Although I seldom mention transactional analysis directly, I draw heavily on my TA understanding and training to reach both professionals and service users. By 2016, around 40,000 people had completed the 3-day Awareness Training, and the demand for bespoke training such as the Listener Training is growing.

As part of the Women’s Personality Disorder Offender Strategy, a specific workforce development framework (KUF) was designed to meet the needs of all staff who may come in contact with offenders with per-
Personality disorder. It includes a variety of levels of learning, from awareness building to MSc-level modules. Increasingly, the KUF is being tailored to meet the needs of particular staff groups, for example, staff working with women offenders and/or young adults, prison staff, peer supporters, and probation receptionists. The Department of Health and National Offender Management Service took a strategic approach to managing women offenders who are likely to have personality disorder, have committed a more serious offence, and are at high risk of reoffending. The aims of the strategy are to reduce recidivism, improve the women’s psychological health and well-being, and develop the workforce.

Who Are the Listeners/Peer Supporters?
Following the tragic death in 1991 of a 15-year-old boy who committed suicide while in prison, a peer-support befriending scheme was established through which prisoners take on the role of peer supporters and are trained by the Samaritans (a UK-based national helpline) with the aim of preventing further such suicides. By 2010, 123 Samaritan branches supported 158 prisons across the UK, and about 1,500 new peer supporters and Listeners took over 90,000 calls (Samaritans, 2011).

Based on focus-group feedback from female prisoners, a 1-day Listener Training was designed that covers topics such as what is and is not a personality disorder, how personality disorder develops using a bio-psycho-social model and attachment theory, and how interpersonal dynamics and difficulties (e.g., acting out, splitting, breaking boundaries, etc.) can be handled. The course ends by introducing a reflective model and concludes with a discussion about how the women can take care of themselves as Listeners. The women felt valued because the prison had offered them training and had invested time and resources in them and were enthusiastic about what they had learned. Evaluation of the training identified several key themes.

Understanding the Roots of Behavior
This was a particularly powerful theme. The women asked many relevant questions and gained understanding of the importance of seeing the person in personality disorder. Several participants commented on learning that personality disorders are linked to attachment and relationships: “People’s problems and rules for living were created in childhood, and I am not expected to solve those problems.” Learning that acting out is often a communication that cannot be verbalized allows Listeners to more easily view troublesome behaviors as a way of communicating. This helps them shift from feeling angry and frustrated when listening to understanding that it is a person’s powerful way of communicating her vulnerability.

The Importance of Boundaries
Through discussions, the women received permission to hold their boundaries, that they did not have to be responsive immediately as Listeners, that it was OK to say no to listening if they were not on the rota for that day. Learning was demonstrated by the quote “we need to be consistent with boundaries.”

Understanding the Past in the Present
In the evaluation, one of the women shared that “it was helpful to understand that if as a baby and young child a person isn’t validated for being rather than doing, they struggle with their sense of self and identity.” During the training, we asked the women to use a case study (of Jasmine), which involved reading Jasmine’s story and identifying her early life experiences as well as her beliefs about self, others, and the world. Next they identified her rules for living and the impact of her experience and beliefs on her current relationships. We used language that the women could immediately relate to rather than introducing transactional analysis terms, but essentially they were looking at how script develops and is maintained until the person gains awareness and makes changes. After we looked developmentally at how a personality disorder evolves, some of the women felt more compassionate toward and patient with those to whom they were listening as well as more willing to consider reasons other than manipulation for behaviors such as self-harming.

The women do not directly teach others about personality disorders, but they do model a new way of being in relationship based on the containment skills they have learned. The women can, for example, model the use of less discriminatory language when describing someone with personality disorder and communicate that some problems may be due to difficulty in learning how to be in relationships because of early attachment patterns.

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Celebration at Asha Counselling and Training Services in Coimbatore in October 2015 for Onam, which marks the coming of spring in the state of Kerala. People celebrate with patterns of flowers called pookalam, shown here in the foreground, which have great mythological significance. This festival is celebrated by all Keralites irrespective of religion, caste, and so on. Since Kerala is a neighboring state to Coimbatore, and Saru is a Malayalee, the trainers and trainees at Asha celebrated the festival with a special lunch. Those shown in the photo are trainers and some trainees of Asha (from left standing): C. Suriyaprakash, I. A. Mohanraj, P. K. Saru, K. Raguraman, and Viji Mohanraj; (from left sitting): V. Priya, R. V. Hema, Dr. K. V. Jayashree, K. Arulmozhi, K. Kousalya, and Sharda Jayaraman.

Tony White traveled to Singapore in March 2016 to do four workshops. These included an all-day redecision therapy group, a supervision group for trainees, a supervision group for clinical therapy supervisors, and a workshop on “Suicide Through the Transactional Analysis Lens.” These were convened by the Executive Counselling and Training Academy and the Singapore Transactional Analysis Association.

Tony White and Jessica Leong (seated in front) with Singapore redecision therapy group in March 2016

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Although it is too early to evaluate the long-term effects of working with prisoners in this way, being part of the national team for 6 years and delivering the Awareness Training and also BSc Modules, I have been surprised and encouraged to see a significant shift in understanding and attitudes among those who have participated.

References


International Transactional Analysis Association
Call for ITAA Board Nominations

The following position is open for nominations. Deadline: 31 May 2016.

Regional Trustee (nomination and election only by members of the region):

- European region (2017-2019)

Nominations require the name and consent signature of the nominee (it may be yourself), the name of the person making the nomination, and the name of the person seconding the nomination. To be eligible for nomination, trustees may not have already served two consecutive terms of office in any position on the board. Position statements (charters) that describe the function and selection criteria for each of the officer positions are available from ITAA Secretary Mandy Lacy at mandy@lacyconsulting.net. nominees are encouraged to read and understand these before accepting nomination.

Send nominations to ITAA Nominations Chair Sumithra Sharatkumar at sumithrask@gmail.com.

If you have not already submitted a Consent to Use of Electronic Transmissions so that you are eligible to vote electronically in case of a ballot, we urge you to do so immediately by visiting here.

EXAM CALENDAR

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*For CTA and TST deadlines see the EATA Handbook or contact the EATA Supervising Examiner.

TAJ Theme Issues

“The Sense & Nonsense of Research in the Human Sciences”
Coeditors: Bill Cornell and Mark Widdowson
Deadline: 1 July 2016

“Gender, Sexuality, & Identity”
Coeditors: Brad McLean and Bill Cornell
Deadline: 1 January 2017

For more information about IBOC exams, see www.itaaworld.org. For further information on COC exams, see www.eatanews.org/examinations/.