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In conversation with... **KEN MELLOR**

DR CELIA SIMPSON talks to Ken Mellor about his work, his early TA mentors, the evolving spiritual dimension of TA, his irrepressible humour and passion for life

I'd like to start with your early life Ken. What was life like for you as a child?

The second of twins, I was born in 1942 during the Second World War. My father was in the military and our older brother was born 13 months before us. Shortly after us, our younger brother arrived. As a child I was happy enough and we never really wanted for money. But I was aware throughout my childhood of a sense of the other kids getting really involved in playing, but that I just didn't get it. I felt disconnected and like an observer of what was going on. This might have been the result of being one of twins.

I was well cared for during my childhood. But when I was 13, which is developmentally a very dependent age, my parents went away for a year on an overseas trip. From a child development point of view, this was an atrocious thing to do. My twin brother and younger brother stayed with an aunt and uncle on a farm, while my older brother and I stayed at home with Mrs Fish, a mothercraft nurse whom we'd never previously met. She looked after us for a year.

It was only recently that I realised how significant that abandonment was. Without my family, I was left feeling even more at sea than before. In retrospect, I realise that I remained significantly disconnected after that. Perhaps this spurred me to create my own family – the international network of people we've had so much to do with over the last 30 years (the Awakening Network).

So family has been an important theme for you?

I had never thought of it that way until recently. But working deeply and intensely with people with severe disturbance and forming a close connection with many meditators for twenty or thirty years could have flowed from this early experience. In fact, I've found it profoundly satisfying to do the work I have. At the same time, I think the intensity of contact with people has also been to do with being one of twins. Twins have a bond that is very strong because they've been together since conception, a bond that leaves them open to linking up with others quite intensely, a process I call 'twinning'.

That's fascinating. You have clearly thought a lot about the impact of being a twin

Yes, I was going to write a book about it years ago, but I got busy with other things. My plan was to focus on the child development side and write it for parents: how to raise twins so they turn into autonomous individuals. I thought I'd also include hints on living with twins for brothers and sisters, and partners.

How did you get involved with TA?

I studied social work in 1967, graduating 1969. My job was to help immigrants settle in Australia. I was pretty much at sea with the work; and still wasn't comfortable socially, which is why I'd done social work in the first place. I'd also had a troubled time during my last social work placement with my supervisor. This prompted a

‘My understanding of what it means to be a whole person today is very different to how it was back then when Eric Berne infected me with the autonomy virus.’

fellow student to say, ‘You might like to read *Games People Play!*’ And this book was the first of a number of life-transforming experiences.

It was written in a style I could really understand with my mathematics, logic and philosophy background. The structure and patterns in what Eric Berne highlighted – ego states, transactions, games etc – gave me a way of understanding what was happening between people and within myself.

I loved Berne’s conceptual rigour and clarity of definition too – and still do. All of it was amazing! I wrote to Eric Berne in 1969 asking him for more titles to read and he replied with a very warm, helpful and generous letter. He suggested *TA in Psychotherapy*, *The Structure and Dynamics of Organisations and Groups*, and *Principles of Group Treatment*. He also suggested I could join the ITAA (which I did immediately), let me know of the existence of the TA Bulletins (I bought all back issues) and gave me the names of two TA people in Australia.

From the beginning, I was determined to learn as much as possible about this wonderful new system, even though I would have to teach myself. After very few years I was teaching TA at the university and having a wonderful time with all the students crowding out my lectures.

Eric Berne also gave an approach to theory. Not having learnt how to do my job during my social work training, I started to develop a system for understanding what social workers do. I used Berne’s Martian approach. As I sat in my office I thought, ‘OK I’m a man from Mars, what is going on here?’ The outcome, after 11 years, was a book called *Taking Charge* that was published in 1980. The core issues I explored related to tasks, how to set goals, and how to achieve them, all of which led to a basic framework for handling any job/task, for identifying

‘We realised how fundamental bodily balance is to the balance of our feelings, thinking and the ways we go about living.’

its key ingredients, and for locating how people were failing to achieve what they wanted to achieve. My general purpose was to identify the necessary conditions for both practitioners and clients to succeed with what they set out to do.

This approach was later to contribute to my work on discounting and is included in a book that is about to be published called *Inspiration, Meditation and Personal Wellbeing*. (Mellor 2011). The book is a collection of the basic things that Elizabeth, my wife, and I teach for integrating spirituality into everyday life – including eating regularly, and exercising and resting well!

During the late 1970s, we realised how fundamental bodily balance is to the balance of our feelings, thinking and the ways we go about living. Lots of time can be saved in therapy by helping people achieve this balance. This understanding contributed to an interesting exchange thirty years ago when I went to a TA conference in Toronto. I ran a workshop during which I said: ‘... there are a lot of approaches to do with the body that help to shortcut how much therapeutic work (using ego states etc) we need to do.’ At the end, a few people, seemingly uninterested in helping people more quickly said: ‘That’s all very well, Ken, but where’s the TA?’ Now, of course, dealing with the body is regarded very differently.

How did you begin your formal training?

I wrote to Jacqui Schiff in the US in 1972, asking if I could train with her. She said, ‘Yes come, you can stay and possibly work with the Cathexis Institute.’ Then she added, seemingly as an afterthought, ‘Will you send me some information about yourself?’ She’d said ‘Yes’ without information which was extraordinary. But, when I thought of the people she was working with at the time, I guessed she thought she could manage anybody!

And what was it like for you in the US?

Amazing! The TA scene there transformed me. Everyone was enthusiastic and committed. I learnt from first generation teachers like Jacqui, Bob and Mary Goulding, Stephen Karpman, Pam Levin and Claude Steiner; and from second generation TAers like Vann Joines, Graham Barnes and others. People like Richard Erskine and I were peers. Many of us were developing new theory or extending what was already in use. For example, I developed the discounting matrix using my work on tasks and options and exploring the linkages across the four types of discounting (stimuli, problems and options). Training and associating with such senior TA people during my time in the US was extraordinarily stimulating, exciting and effective. I still get great pleasure from remembering how enlivening and confirming it all was. I was already hooked on TA when I arrived, but the real deal was far better.

Also, Jacqui took me to a TA Summer Conference in Mexico within a few weeks of my arrival, where completely unexpectedly she invited me to take my CM exam (now the CTA) which I passed. So within about a month of arriving I was a CM. She then arranged to co-sponsor me with Bob and Mary Goulding in a PTM contract (now PTSTA). I passed these exams less than two years later. My accelerated progress was the result of the thoroughness of my approach to learning from the literature and my ability to use what I read.

What is your favourite TA concept?

Autonomy. Right near the end of *Games People Play*, Eric Berne started to talk about autonomy and how people live when they let go of script and games. This really caught my attention. I wanted this autonomy, whatever it was, so I could make the most of what I was learning in my life. My interest in autonomy and integrity started way back then. Autonomy encapsulated all the rest of TA for me, particularly in relation to the value of TA and other therapies.

I have also been deeply interested in intimacy and how this unfolds in life and therapeutic relationships.

Can you talk a little about your personal trajectory since those early days in TA?

I continued to explore the dynamics of human beings. By the end of the 1970s I'd investigated about 35 different psychological theories and practice models, and had integrated them with each other. I loved this process. I've always had the natural inclination to integrate all aspects of my learning. Being a co-recipient in 1980 of what was then known as The Eric Berne Memorial Scientific Award with Eric Schiff (now Sigmund) for our work on discounting and redefining was very significant. The aftermath, including people needing to learn my material on discounting for CTA exams, has been enormous. My material (I say 'my' because I did the discounting work, while Eric was the originator of many of the ideas on redefining) has been published in five languages other than English. This has given it very wide exposure. (Claude Steiner also won an Eric Berne Award in 1980.)

In 'Autonomy with Integrity' (Mellor 2008) you argue for widening our notion of context to include a transcendent dimension. Can you say a little about this?

After coming back to Australia in 1976, I started working with some very disturbed people and to balance this I also worked with 'normal' people who weren't struggling with survival issues. The work with the first group prompted me to explore how we communicate on subtle energetic levels. I describe this intense learning in *Urban Mystic* (Mellor 2010). Again, my twin-hood was significant in my understanding of these dimensions. However, by the late 1970s, I reached a natural end to

'I learnt that life was not a problem to be solved, as I had inadvertently been teaching people! I came to understand that there was much more to life than could be understood through a focus on harm and how to undo it.'

what I knew I could do therapeutically to help people (and myself) and began to search for something more. And I began exploring spirituality, which had been an underlying driving force from when I was about 13 years of age.

I then 'trained' in the late 1970s with a sequence of four Indian Gurus (Swami Muktananda, Swami Krishna Gautam, Thakur Balak Brahmachari and Mother Meera). Elizabeth, who had been a practising meditator for many years before this, shared all of this training with me. It involved intense contact over a period of thirty years. We became Masters of meditation, empowered separately by Krishna and Thakur to initiate and teach. All four were as significant in the way TA, Jacqui and Eric Berne had been in turning my life around, although these spiritual masters operated at a much deeper and all embracing level.

Some people thought I went crazy at this time, as I seemed to give up TA – to drop out. But I hadn't. I was just concentrating on a vast new way of understanding human beings. I simply followed my well-established practice of investigating an area thoroughly by immersing myself in it fully. This was a conscious, voluntary act, not a sign of losing my marbles! Many people were also disappointed that I no longer ran TA-related workshops.

The result: I learnt that life was not a problem to be solved, as I had inadvertently been teaching people! I came to understand that there was much more to life than could be understood through a focus on harm and how to undo it.

'If we can embrace life then its very aliveness will do what needs to be done, without our using many of the procedural interventions we learn in our training. These are still helpful, however, for opening people up so a good dose of life can rush into them and do the fundamental healing!'

'Transactional Analysis isn't something dry that's only about three circles on a page with letters in them. This is a living dynamic representation of living dynamic people.'

Life is far more than anything I got from the theories I had studied. It is the 'field' and animating force that is in everything. I found out that it cannot be defined; it can only be experienced or known directly. The masters with whom we trained had this knowing and could 'lift us' directly into it. This was wonderful!

For me Life is now the underlying principle – it is fundamental. If we can embrace life then its very 'aliveness' will do what needs to be done, without our using many of the procedural interventions we learn in our training. These are still helpful, however, for opening people up so a good dose of life can rush into them and do the fundamental healing! In my article on autonomy and integrity I wanted to include these notions, also that the self is pure awareness and that each self is something vast. It is said, 'We are like a drops of the universal ocean that need to learn to let go of our "drop-ness" by becoming one with the ocean again.' The meditations presented in that article are designed to help draw people into these underlying dimensions.

I personally find the meditations of The Awakening Network (formerly Biame) to be an incredibly practical blend of psychological structures and spiritual imagination. I'm intrigued as to how you and Elizabeth created them.

These meditations arose out of a storm of insight prompted by the radical reworking of the foundations of my frame of reference, ie that life, union, love, oneness... are all fundamental and perpetually trying to assert themselves and draw every aspect of life into themselves.

I became intrigued by how we and others could open ourselves to these forces. I discovered, for example, that relaxation, equilibrium, balance, union etc. are inherent in everyone and all we need to do for them to take over is figure out how to release ourselves to them. I also discovered that it is far harder to maintain ourselves in states different from these – contraction, inhibition, congestion etc – than it is to open ourselves to our aliveness.

In relation to the meditations, the strategic thing was simply to arrive at sets of instructions which could help people to experience these fundamentals. For this I used a way to manage the power of the literal meaning of words, the value of NLP in communication, the gains

from internalising two-chair work, the profound influence of grounding in producing equilibrium under all circumstances and the importance of redecisions for changing course when we have opened ourselves to new futures.

Elizabeth's part in my meditations was to help with refining the instructions, expanding their applications and supporting my efforts to record and rerecord them.

What would you say to people just starting out in TA?

Well, I would tell them that I am still very excited about TA. TA isn't something dry that's only about three circles on a page with letters in them. This is a living dynamic representation of living dynamic people.

It is used at times to concentrate on things going wrong and how to solve related problems, of course, because it started with a focus on psychopathology. However, a main advantage of TA is in its precise and useful descriptions and how the model itself helps our understanding and our awakening.

TA is now vastly more developed and elaborate than it was in the early days, so there is a lot more to learn. All the same, I would also say, learn the basic concepts so well that you don't need to think about them; learn to use them and develop your own autonomy with them. Also avoid limiting yourself with what you are learning; be adventurous. Follow through on your new ideas, while honouring what has already been developed. Everyone else doesn't have to be wrong in order for you to be right.'

'Everyone else doesn't have to be wrong in order for you to be right.'

What principles do you think are most important in your work?

Persistence (for decades if necessary) always pays off. Options can always be expanded; all problems are solvable. Opening ourselves to Life is the most complete way of living; all else will follow naturally and be integrated with everything else by our doing this.

What plans do you and Elizabeth have for the future?

To stay active and creative. To keep writing. To take more holidays. To keep teaching and travelling. To keep encouraging others to live with 'autonomy and integrity'.

A last word?

Reach for the stars and take the risks involved in doing that. Honour yourself and others in the process. Keep your feet on the ground.

Thank you Ken it has been a great pleasure talking with you.

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