

From Fiction to Freedom: Our True Nature Beyond Life Script

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Abstract

This article brings together the teachings of nonduality (Advaita Vedanta) and the transactional analysis concept of *scripts*. The author describes how understanding and practicing the path of nonduality sheds light on the illusory nature of script narratives and leads to transcendence and freedom from them. The function and maintenance of life scripts is explored as is the essential nature of human beings beyond the stories that we create. A clinical example illustrates these ideas, and guidance is offered to therapists.

Guiding Fiction

Our life scripts are stories of our own creation. If we take these stories to be real (and we do), they inform our lives and potentially every waking moment. These “guiding fictions” (Adler, 1912/1921, p. 27) require us to play a part, speak certain lines, think certain thoughts, have certain feelings, and even create our own future realities from our ongoing fantasies.

However, these stories are not who we really are and seldom help us remember the source from which we spring. The teachings of *nonduality* have their origin in the understanding that we discover who we are by realizing what we are not. In this tradition, observation and inquiry into what we take to be true about ourselves reveals the illusory nature of the story and reminds us of our essence.

The vast majority of human beings live as though their narratives are the truth about their identities; they inhabit a state of forgetting. We forget our true nature, the infinite consciousness, the silent, spacious background to all our dramas.

Developmentally, these stories are crystallized when we learn language, although they have their origins in early attachment patterns, significant trauma, and other deeply influential

experiences dating back to infancy, birth, and even gestation. So, for example, the body and mind of an unwanted baby store these particular deep patterns in cellular memory, which then forms the protocol of the life script.

In addition, each human being is deeply influenced by ancestral archetypes carried in the collective unconscious (Jung, 1976/1968, pp. 181-185). We arrive in the world with myriad potential personas and with our primary script dramas waiting to be stimulated by the circumstances of our lives. Then, when we later acquire language and become interested in stories, we learn a system for categorizing and identifying with our own personal narratives and the original protocol (Cornell & Landaiche, 2006, p. 202).

Identity and Perspective

Such is the power of scripting that we become immersed in that guiding fiction and its associated life positions. Our lives are then seen from a certain perspective through the tinted glass of our personal dramas with our game dramas confirming our life positions (Berne, 1964, p. 50). For example, Alice, a client, tells me, “Almost every conversation with my mother ends up the same. I feel infantilized. It’s like she never really sees me. On my last visit—she lives on the other side of the world—she told me how to fill the kettle. I told her I was 49 and knew how to fill a kettle. We had a major row, and I was relieved when I left. I can never get it right or feel good enough.” As her therapist I say, “You seem to believe that if she were to change you could feel good enough.”

It follows that playing a part in our personal narratives leads to discrimination: One thing fits and another does not. Certain game invitations are accepted and others are not. We are intent on preserving our frames of reference (Schiff, Schiff, & Schiff, 1975) and do so by fitting the facts to our scripts, even if that involves distorting or discounting them (Mellor

& Schiff, 1975). The world (inner and outer) cannot then be seen as it is and is viewed via the expectations of the script. The personal story and script beliefs become overlaid onto the facts, for example, "She didn't call me. I'm unlovable." Such mind-made perspectives enable us to make sense of experience, place events into a frame of reference, maintain an identity, and give meaning to our lives.

Fiction and Reality

Eric Berne (1972, p. 362) suggested that we need "to close down the show and put a new one on the road" in order to release ourselves from our scripts. However, a script is still a script. So, for example, might not any new show within the context of a materialistic and highly individualistic culture spawn only a more benign version of the original fiction? The Dalai Lama (1999, p. 8) described the level of depression in the Western world as an epidemic. For all our wealth, prosperity, and success, we generally cannot achieve lasting happiness. The acquisition of certain objects or having certain experiences brings only a temporary state of contentment, joy, and/or peace. What pleasure we derive from these sources soon fades, prompting the search for the next thing, the next person, the next qualification, and so on.

From Berne's perspective, we would then be creating new stories. However, unless the fundamental fictions are understood, we may only create stories within stories, for example, the stories of therapy, the well treating the sick, the expert and the student, the wise and the ignorant, the trained and the untrained, the guru and the disciple.

Generally, we create stories about health. We prize assertiveness, a healthy ego, clear boundaries, changing from "loser" to "winner," achieving goals, and so on. But are not these also the potential creation of another guiding fiction, part of an illusory search for enduring happiness within the world of objects, hollow victories in a new and seemingly different narrative, the same prison with newly painted walls and more comfortable furniture?

If we deeply inquire into our heart of hearts, we often realize that seeking enduring happiness

in this way is ultimately futile. We can then eventually remember that we do not need to search for or acquire anything because we are already fundamentally happy, peaceful, fulfilled, and loving. Even so, the process of remembering often seems to need us to search and grasp until we become exhausted and give up, for often only in the giving up is the background freedom revealed.

"Most of the time, we are content to waver between pleasant/pleasure and unpleasant/pain, having no inkling of that true joy of which pleasure is only a shadow" (Klein, 1978, p. 28). The implication of this perspective is that each time we look elsewhere for happiness, we take a step away from the source, from our very being. Each time we seek in this way we remain caught within a scripted fiction and ignore our fundamental reality. Immersed in the old show, we cannot perceive or be truly present with underlying reality as it is. Perhaps Berne (1968) had a glimpse of this when he wrote:

One of the most important things in life is to understand reality and to keep changing our images to correspond to it, for it is our images which determine our actions and feelings, and the more accurate they are the easier it will be for us to attain happiness and stay happy in an ever changing world. (p. 46)

Being Who We Truly Are

So, what if we were to close down the old show and this time simply leave a space? We might allow the emergence of the essential being that is present before and beyond the limitations of any story. Through the practice of contemplation and self-inquiry into the scripts with which we have previously identified, we can begin to discover who we truly are.

Whether we seem active in this process or not, our true nature has a way of calling for recognition. For example, I notice that the people who come through the door of our psychotherapy service in England are not so much "deciding" to close down their old show but, rather, have exhausted attempts to make it work. This is an entirely natural exhaustion rather than a failure and, in that sense, to be welcomed. The original creative solution, the script, has for

them become a problem. At these times, life confronts us with a level of discomfort that can prompt us to let go and stop striving. And, in retrospect, it is often obvious that such events can be understood as part of our search for our essential nature. T. S. Eliot (1936/1963) described it this way:

We shall not cease from exploration
and the end of all our exploring
will be to arrive where we started
and know the place for the first time
through the unknown, unremembered gate
when the last of earth to discover
is that which was the beginning. (p. 222)

Impasse Dissolution

A common reason that we find ourselves stuck and exhausted is that a script story usually contains impasses (Mellor, 1980) or double binds: “If I speak out, I’ll be rejected” or “If I’m independent someone else suffers” or “If I get close, I’ll get hurt.” The very nature of impasses or double binds is that we cannot win or release ourselves from inside them. For example, Alice, mentioned earlier says, “I try to let my mother’s comments wash over me, but that doesn’t seem to work. I feel as though I can’t win. It’s fight or flight. It’s just impossible.” And I respond, “Maybe the only way to ‘win’ is to accept fully that you cannot win.”

Both fight and flight involve a refusal and lead to lack of resolution. The impasse will knock on the door of our consciousness until we face and embrace what is caught in our systems. Once these impasses and their origins are experienced directly and fully, they are digested (Mellor, 2008, pp.194-179) and dissolve naturally. These origins are at the third-degree impasse level, the level at which the script protocol is created.

Mellor (1980, p. 215) described this as an organismic shift, a visceral realignment and redecision. Inherent in this process of impasse resolution is the activation of the observing presence that predates the impasse. In the full awareness and digestion of the bind is the potential realization that we are not our story or any conflict within it.

Freedom comes through our deep acceptance of our impasse and of the impossible dilemma

with which it confronted us, an acceptance that leads naturally to the realization that we are simultaneously both bound and not bound, an encompassing realization that lifts us out of the impasse and enables release.

We might imagine that these binds are the origins of Zen koans (Yamada, 2005), which are questions designed to confuse the mind’s usual attempts to solve a problem. For example, we might ask, “How is the prisoner already free?” This process helps the mind stop trying to solve problems of its own creation and allows a more global perspective to emerge, one that is ever-present beyond the binary options available in the bind.

As we fully welcome and embrace our impasses and let go of attempts to work them out, the struggle we have been engaged in dissolves, and the space behind the conflict is revealed to us.

The Essence of Our Being

At the heart of transactional analysis theory and practice is the assertion that everyone is OK. We might take this a bit further and say that our essential nature was present before the limitations of ego states and script manifested and that the source of our being is fundamentally loving and peaceful, open and free. With this understanding, we can recognize that what may seem not OK about us is part of a fiction and in so doing remember our true nature.

This is also relevant to therapy. Often embedded in the need to change (and in the therapist’s acceptance of such a contract) is the underlying belief that we are not good enough. With this perspective on the work, “making progress” becomes a stepping away from our essence, and the perfect being that we are is likely to be even more obscured behind the illusion that it needs to improve or change.

Attachment to the Story

“The dream is not your problem. Your problem is you like one part of the dream and not another. When you have seen the dream as a dream you have done all that needs to be done” (Sri Nisargadatta Maharaj as cited in Carse, 2006, p. 91).

Eric Berne highlighted our “hunger” for structure (Berne, 1964, pp. 15-19). This underpins

a theory in which human beings cling to repeating patterns and defenses long after they are redundant and despite their often tragic consequences. Berne (p. 34) added that this structure, and what he called *stricture*, can go together. We can easily see how structure could become stricture. A pattern for managing ourselves and the world, developed in infancy, may have protected us back then, even saved our lives, but it becomes a rigid reaction that significantly limits our options in the here and now. In other words, the very patterns we devised to keep us safe, to provide us with an identity, and even to help to make us seem successful, can become prisons of their own.

So we might imagine that to lose the stricture would be attractive because the freedom revealed is our true home, beyond suffering. However, the significant loss of structure is a great challenge to most of us. This is especially so when it means letting go of, for example, who we have thought ourselves to be, the many ways we have defended and protected our “selves,” or the unraveling of the very fabric of what we think life is. The structures that we have established and maintained with our scripts provide a certain confidence and predictability, and their loss stimulates fear and resistance (Mellor, 2011, pp.103-104). At the same time, through our scripts the future can be “known,” an appealing thought in contrast to the possibility of being confronted with an empty space, a potentially frightening void in which anything may happen.

The Role of the Body

These structures and strictures are also carried and stored in our bodies: in our ego states (Berne, 1968) or, as Tolle (2009) described it, in the *pain body*. In this way, script is anchored in and maintained by physical memory, both individual and collective. In other words, every trauma and our reactions to it are stored in the cells of the body and are potentially stimulated in each present moment, constricting our capacity to embrace that moment in its full freedom.

When script is stored in cellular memory, the body's natural balance, ease, and inherent relaxation is also disturbed. The body's storing of memory in this way has been observed in the

experiences of many organ transplant recipients, some of whom began to have urges, impulses, and perceptions that were unfamiliar to them but were common for the donors of the organs (Lipton, 2008, p. 162). One explanation for this is that transferring some of the donors' cells to the recipients' bodies creates this phenomenon.

As well as being a storehouse of memories, the body has its own ways of restoring its balance, ease, and health. It can naturally digest the remnants of the past so that our freedom is revealed in the present (Mellor, 2008, pp. 193-194). By simply observing (seeing, listening, sensing, tasting, and smelling) bodily sensations and the immediate physical environment, our tensions and contractedness dissolve effortlessly and allow naturalness to emerge (Mellor, 2011, pp. 171-173). With our histories no longer reactivated in physical tension and contraction, we are free to open to each moment with a peaceful, relaxed presence. This practice of pure noticing is similar to mindfulness meditation and its emphasis on physical awareness and acceptance (Žvelc, Černetič, & Košak, 2011, p. 241).

Even the most traumatic experiences can be digested in this way, which can lead to a deep acceptance of life's most difficult challenges. When caused by highly traumatic experiences, seemingly overpowering feelings, images, and memories can arise in the present, and our inclination is, understandably, to resist or avoid such intensity. Noticing and accepting the associated feelings and thoughts can take practice and guidance. Many people who learn to embrace fully what happened to them often describe being reminded that they are not these memories and of their fundamental being and the essence of who they are. They discover that this essence is infinite and unchanging and, in relation to their trauma, that, like at the end of a horror movie, no blood is left on the screen. Welwood (1996) described it this way:

This quality of pure presence often opens up spontaneous clearings in the experiential stream, without any strategy or intention to create change. . . . Wanting our experience to change usually contains a subtle resistance to what is. . . . At some point even the slightest desire for change or

improvement can interfere with the deeper letting go. (p.18)

The empty void with which this process confronts us does not, initially, seem appealing to most of us. We are attached to our stories, especially their predictability. We are familiar with and attached to our feeling of being in the driver's seat. We do not see that this too is both an illusion and a prison. To embrace the void and allow life to be as it is, without any attempt to manage or control, would be truly not to know, even, perhaps, to lose all sense of identity.

For example, Alice tells me, "I went away with a friend last weekend, and she made us late for what was already to be a 2-hour car journey. It was pouring with rain and I thought, 'I don't want to be doing this!' I struggled with my thoughts and feelings for quite some time until I realized that I was trying to make things other than they were. So I allowed myself to fully welcome the present moment. My resistance dissolved, the conversation changed, and even the sky became clear. We had a lovely, peaceful weekend."

Many of us suffer under the illusion that we can control our lives, that we can become the authors of our destinies and "put a new show on the road." We tend to ignore the fact that we do not know what will happen next, what life will bring us. We prefer to remain attached to the story, the drama, the hope, the search, the promise of a better place.

The Separate Individual

Another illusion, a cousin of the illusion of control, is that each of us is a separate individual, a being capable of independent decisions and autonomy. This is rather like looking at a tree and seeing it as an independent entity, separate from the earth, air, light, rain, insects, and space around it. Each time we breathe in we are reminded of our dependence on oxygen. Without the space around our bodies there would be no body. As Mother Nature is more and more insistently reminding us, we depend on our Earth for life and, in our grandiosity, we too easily forget this, at the same time forgetting our true nature. As Wilber (1991) wrote, "We need to be willing seemingly to lose all, perhaps even to lose who we are, in order to

find that in doing so we gain everything" (pp. 102-103).

Ironically then, true freedom comes as we realize that we are not free, not separate, not independent, and that, in fact, there is no such thing as an individual. Freedom comes as we realize that the scripted self is a fiction and that letting go of its attempts to impose its will and instead surrendering to life, true self, and infinite consciousness is the ultimate liberation. This is not to say that individuals have no distinctive appearances, fragrances, and melodies. We can be distinguished in the same way that a daffodil can be distinguished from a rose, but this does not mean we are separate. We simply have distinctive qualities and an identical source.

Awareness and Letting Go

As long as you remember that a story is just a story, then you don't have to believe it. You can be surprised by it, or entertained by it. You can react to it, and experience how it affects you emotionally. But gradually you come to see clearly that you in your essence are not the story. You are the awareness that precedes the story. That awareness—that which you truly are—is reality. In that realization is freedom. (Bernie, 2010, p. 30)

We all have the potential to fall into the trap of accepting that the story is who we are and thus losing contact with the underlying reality. Just as the program is not the computer, our scripts are not the truth of who we are. Who we are is enduring, whereas script is not. Once we perceive the script for what it is—a contracted substitute for what is real—our enduring reality emerges. From this perspective, as soon as the story is observed, it can never be the same. The light of awareness shining on the script narrative exposes it for what it is, and another deeper reality is revealed. This awareness is encouraged by our embracing and welcoming our stories and their physical manifestations, the very act of which results in loosening our attachment to them.

In transactional analysis therapy we can provide a space for curiosity, observation, deep listening, and reflection. We can also pay close attention to the origins of the script story, its

manifestations, and its reinforcements. By practicing ongoing deep acceptance of our own contracted responses, our own stories, and those of our clients, we help both ourselves and our clients to open up to a field of spacious acceptance.

Through deep self-inquiry, we can also become interested in who is observing, in awareness itself, and in background consciousness as distinct from the foreground drama. We can begin to realize that our consciousness is like a vast cloudless sky through which float the clouds of experience, events, thoughts, memories, relationships, and our personal stories. The clouds need the sky, but the sky does not need the clouds.

Awareness Beyond Ego

So, as we observe our own ego states, transactions, script, and so on, and we realize that essentially we are not these, we can become curious about the observer itself as well as about pure awareness and presence. This presence, “I-am-here-and-now” (Mellor, 2008), is not a state. It is certainly not an ego state as Berne defined it. Presence is free of consistent patterns; in fact, it is empty of these patterns, open to the next moment without expectation or memory. Free of consistent patterns, we are then open to infinite possibilities and potential. When representing this, we cannot confine the infinite within a circle (Mellor, 1990). In addition, “Adult” in our transactional analysis stacked-circle ego state diagram is, from this perspective, more accurately described as “Awareness” (see Figure 1).

Awareness has no boundary and is beyond space and time. This background consciousness is rather like an infinite blank canvas on which we project our lives and worlds. Our ego states and our scripts are the stories and events we project there. Again, these projections need the canvas but the canvas has no need of the projections. We can find that we no longer need our stories and our ego states dissolve into awareness.

For example, Alice described this dissolving as follows: “I have just visited my mother again, and she said the same thing to me about filling the kettle. I was about to react when I thought, ‘Who or what am I defending?’ As I

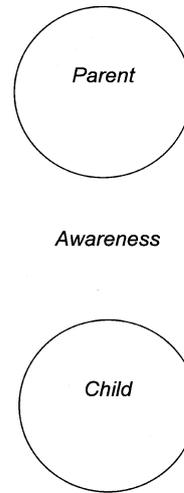


Figure 1
Awareness

noticed this, my resistance fell away. I felt open to mum in a way that was new. Years of struggle dissolved and we had a lovely exchange. When I returned home I missed her and our being together.” We can also discover that letting go is a secondary process that occurs without effort after realizing there is nothing to grasp. Events are then welcomed as prompts to let go. Welcoming everything becomes the antidote to the contractions created by the discriminatory nature of script.

This letting go is a form of death, the death of the ego. Rainer Maria Rilke (1907/1981) conveyed this well in his poem “The Swan”:

This clumsy living that moves lumbering
as if in ropes through what is not done
reminds us of the awkward way the swan
walks.

And to die, which is a letting go
of the ground we stand on and cling to
every day
is like the swan when he nervously lets
himself down

into the water, which receives him gaily
and which flows joyfully under
and after him. (p. 105)

The value, therefore, of the reflective space that therapy can often provide is to help clients realize how much of our world is a construction of the mind. As soon as the “prisoners” realize that their prison walls are of their own creation and by definition are not the limits of their being, they have found psychological freedom. They could not see the prison unless part of their consciousness was beyond it. As Jean Klein (1978) wrote, “If our mouths were made of salt we could not taste the salt” (p. 41).

For example, Nelson Mandela was physically imprisoned for many years, but it is clear that his mind and spirit were never incarcerated. Even in the darkest times, when our prison walls are at their thickest, the inherent light and space remain constant. We can perhaps hear this also in the words of a 27-year-old Jewish woman writing in the midst of the Holocaust: “It is in these moments—and I’m so grateful for them—that all personal ambition drops away from me, that my thirst for knowledge and understanding comes to rest, and a small piece of eternity descends upon me with a sweeping wing beat” (Hillesum, 1983, p. 61). Rather than contracting with fear and hatred, Hillesum described a deep acceptance of her Nazi oppressors. She found compassion and union in the most potentially divided of times. She realized that life’s purpose is the expression of what we are: love.

Conclusion: Therapy Without a Therapist

“In order to be a psychiatrist you must completely forget you are psychiatrist” (Mantel, 2007). The word *persona* comes from the Latin *persona* (“mask; character”), sometimes said to derive from *personare* (“to sound through”). We might, in this way, think of our bodies and minds as an instrument, like a bamboo flute, through which the music plays. We can also see this as the life force, as *physis* (Berne, 1968) flowing through us. This can be helpful, since as therapists we may tend to confuse ourselves with the music, forgetting we are simply the instrument. A major contribution for us as therapists (or teachers, for example) is to clear and empty our instruments so as to allow the music of pure awareness to play and to manifest in a oneness of presence with our clients. As Neil

Young said, “I just followed the music” (Cooper & Whalley, 2011).

Life itself becomes the therapist to us and our clients, and we learn to open to the music of life, which encourages us to embrace, digest, and release ourselves from all manifestations of script. There are many practices that can support this understanding. For example, Mellor (2008) has developed a range of profound yet simple practices. These help reveal “autonomy with integrity,” pure awareness, and clarity beyond our contractions and stories. This combination of understanding and practice leads to an “absence of therapist” and openness and freedom of relating and transacting that is uninterrupted by personality.

We may, of course, be a particular type or shape of instrument so that the music flows through us and is enhanced by our own qualities. These personal vibrations, as most therapists know, often have a deep resonance with the clients who come through our doors. They have commonly been shaped by similar experiences and share script issues like those we have struggled with or are currently facing. From this perspective, we can view therapy as two beings meeting in search of their true nature, facing and clearing the blocks in their instruments and opening to the music. The embracing of the mirrored experience and the cultivation of a field of acceptance by the therapist becomes a huge contribution to the work. As Jung (1953/1971) wrote, “An analyst can help his patient just so far as he himself has gone and no further” (p. 90).

In this way, then, transactions can be viewed as potential pointers to a deeper reality. Like two waves bumping into each other on the surface of the ocean, we remind each other that we are not two but one. As droplets we are made of the same water, and with like attracting like, are seeking who we truly are in our wholeness. From this perspective, we can welcome all transactions without discrimination as reminders of the source of our being and as mirrors to the disavowed aspects of ourselves. Crossed and ulterior transactions are not then evidence of pathology to be analyzed and changed, often leaving us with a sense of something faulty, but a manifestation of perfection expressing itself.

The therapeutic process then becomes like a realization of what we are not (i.e., scripts, ego states, personalities, etc.) in order to reveal what we truly are. There is an oft-quoted exchange that is attributed to sculptor Michelangelo that can be paraphrased as follows: When a sculptor was asked, "How did you sculpt the horse?" he replied, "The horse was already there. I simply took away the bits that weren't horse."

This demands of the therapist a willingness to engage in a form of rigorous self-inquiry, a painstakingly robust process of chipping away at what is "not horse." This can be greatly enhanced by the sort of deep inquiry that can form part of personal therapy and supervision and, when undertaken in groups, can be even more robust and exposing. We need to persist with this exposure to release ego, to be chipped away, and to surrender to the sculptor's chisel. "In this way of working, our usefulness as therapists to others runs out at the point at which our courage to face ourselves in the midst of the relationships with them runs out" (Mellor, 2007, p. 176). Our responsibility is to inquire deeply into the source of our motivations to help others and our desire to become therapists. We come to notice the fine detail of this in our bodies and minds within transactions and in our countertransference. Our clients then become great teachers and unconscious supervisors (Casement, 1985, p. 10).

In the background of the examples that run through this article, I as the therapist continually observed and welcomed my own responses. I understood that we need to be intimately familiar with what is "not horse" in our own personal histories. We then notice and accept the resonances with our own stories and inhabit the still presence that is beyond any story, thereby inviting our clients into this shared space. We are absent as therapist and present as beings. No role of therapist is enacted, and a deeper universal presence is revealed. This self-inquiry becomes an entirely mutual endeavor, and the realization of "what we are not" allows the illusion of separateness to dissolve and true union to be experienced.

It is, of course, impossible to convey via transcripts and descriptions of content the space between the words. We can only hope to commu-

nicate from the silence and that our words reflect this infinite background that is known, although often only dimly remembered, to all beings. It is a profound inquiry into our true nature, withdrawing our attention from form and rediscovering formlessness.

When we deeply inquire in this way into who is there, we will find no one and discover that ultimately the person is a creation of the mind and the script. We also discover that in the background there is simply awareness, the witness, infinite being beyond the individual, a pure presence that is completely open to this moment with no memory, no story—no one there. We then allow silence and space to contribute to the healing. What we say emanates more from the silence itself and less from ego or script, less from any desire to help or be therapeutic. Continually freeing ourselves from desire, we sit in stillness and equanimity. In so doing, we invite our clients into their own stillness.

Resting in this awareness, we can perhaps remember that love and freedom exist before and beyond script and are the essence of who we truly are.

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