Life Offline: Stories of Connectedness in Faith Communities

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To cite this article: Trudi Newton & Karen Pratt (2019): Life Offline: Stories of Connectedness in Faith Communities, Transactional Analysis Journal, DOI: 10.1080/03621537.2019.1577339

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/03621537.2019.1577339

Published online: 08 Mar 2019.

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Trudi Newton and Karen Pratt

ABSTRACT
The authors share some history, both having been involved in traditional local churches in their home countries and then later in life adding transactional analysis to their frame of reference, ultimately feeding it back into their personal, communal, and professional lives. Both have maintained their church connections while moving into new fields. In this article they explore some of their personal, philosophical, and theological encounters with the aim of sharing these experiences and reflecting on what they say about faith communities and the everyday practical application of transactional analysis. Some of these thoughts are diagrammed as a way of prompting their further development.

KEYWORDS
Connectedness; faith; Christianity; spirituality; ubuntu; community; narrative; transformation; homonomy; transactional analysis

Introducing Our Connection
This story begins in Cape Town, South Africa, about 15 years ago. We met in a transactional analysis training group in its second year, Trudi as a visiting trainer, Karen as a member of the group. We discovered that we were both married to Anglican priests and decided that we would go together to the church service in Karen’s home parish on the Sunday morning before the training group began its working day.

The church was full with people of all ages from a colored township. The theme of the teaching was the HIV/AIDS epidemic in South Africa—not a rant against immorality, not a plea to the congregation to mend their ways, but a fact-based, information-giving discussion during which people shared their experiences and family stories to help and support one another in a concerned community. Sadly, although Karen was playing the organ for the singing, we had to leave before the service ended and return to our group, where we talked about cycles of development and the affirmations we need to develop a healthy life script.

We soon discovered that we had plenty in common. Both of us shared our transactional analysis knowledge with church groups; we had an interest in social action and in working with grassroots communities; neither of us had any formal theological training, although we both read a good deal in the field; and we were more interested in our own experiences in faith communities than in inter- or intrafaith debate.
But our church lives, although similar in many ways, had developed in very different contexts.

Karen’s Story

I (Karen) found that my life changed in many ways after the ending of apartheid in South Africa in 1994. Being a white, privileged South African, when my husband was informed that he would be working in a township parish, I remember feeling anxious. How could I connect with people who had so little when I had so much in terms of white privilege, opportunities, and possessions? A woman in a spirituality group to which I belonged at the time gave me good advice. She reminded me that what I had was not going to be important; it was who I was and how I shared that part of myself with parishioners that would be key. The framework of mutual OKness (Berne, 1964) and the cocreative transactional analysis described by Tudor and Summers (2014), which named we-ness as the key to shared work and development, were powerful for me. The values of both Christianity and transactional analysis gave me the courage to be present, authentic, and open to connecting with people from whom the apartheid system had deliberately engineered distance and mistrust. (At this point we were just 6 years into our democracy.)

One of the parishioners, with whom I still share a deep friendship 18 years later, always reminds me of how we met. Mary was part of the team of women sprucing up the church home before we moved in. She happened to be on her knees cleaning the shower when we were shown around our prospective new home. That could have perpetuated the previous paradigm of white privilege and black subservience, but in that moment, when I asked her name and told her mine, something different was sparked. Months later, it was Mary who was the first to sign up to be part of a centering prayer group that I initiated. And once again, it was Mary and a few curious parishioners who gathered in a corner of the church one Saturday as a colleague and I nervously shared some of the transactional analysis models that were so impacting us in our training.

The sense of OKness and a belief in others being able to think for themselves led both my husband and me to begin to break the stereotype of Parent-to-Child relating within the parish. Parishioners gradually began to trust this white family living within their community. Our openness to connect with them and their families led to 4 years of an extraordinary opportunity to live within a community that the apartheid system had never allowed. It had a richness of care and community spirit that we cherish to this day.

However, it presented challenges to our two teenage children. On the one hand, there were many expansive experiences for them, such as our son delivering pizzas to areas where his black colleagues were scared to go and our daughter joining the parish wind band to play at charity Christmas parties over the festive season. But there were also harder moments of learning. For example, some white families allowed their daughters to come to a birthday party in the afternoon but not to sleep over “in a dangerous township.” That afforded our family rich moments of speaking about
prejudice and acceptance as we tried to mitigate the disappointment that her sleep-over party was not seen favorably by all her friend’s parents.

Trudi’s Story

My (Trudi) experience of faith settings was very different. For over 50 years, my life has been set within the traditional structures of Christianity in rural areas of the United Kingdom, although the element of challenge to established systems and the status quo has still been significant. As a clergy wife within the Anglican church, I did a good deal of pastoral work, spent 10 years as a social worker in an adoption organization, and ran all kinds of group work and youth work. I have also been involved in radical theological and political organizations in the United Kingdom.

Together with my husband, I spent some time as a graduate student at the World Council of Churches in Geneva and there encountered the radical Brazilian educator Paulo Freire (1984), who massively influenced my thinking about what I was doing and how I did it. However, I only learned to give voice to these ideas in an accessible way when I first encountered transactional analysis in the mid-1980s while writing diocesan adult education courses. I began to introduce transactional analysis concepts into course material, to build tutor training around transactional analysis models, and to share the ideas with young people, pastors, and diocesan staff. I still occasionally teach transactional analysis in church contexts. One thing I began to realize as my professional life expanded was that the community I lived in was an essential part of how I practiced. I was drawing on my own experience and bringing what I had learned into all the new contexts in which I worked.

We also spent several months in Eastern Europe soon after the dramatic events of 1989 (including the fall of the Berlin Wall) doing research on the impact of the World Council of Churches graduate program. We encountered something quite unexpected: For all their traditionalism, and in spite of 40 years of political oppression and material neglect, churches in Eastern Europe were important and significant to those involved and to many outside of them. They seemed to be saying “there is hope”: not an other-worldly hope, but a real hope of changing things by recognizing—and being—a genuine alternative. It was partly due to the stimulus and inspiration I found in this that I decided to initiate training in transactional analysis among educators in Russia and several other Eastern European countries. My husband and I and our home parishes also developed this contact through the churches, including an ecumenical twinning or partnership with a group of rural Baptist communities in Romania that engendered many friendships and visits.

Our Story

What you will notice about our stories is that they are about connections between people and communities rather than about psychological theory or theology, and during the last 15 years, we have continued to work together and in parallel.

In 2005, I (Karen) was invited to be part of a nongovernmental organization called AIDS Response (AR). In response to the challenge of HIV/AIDS in South Africa, AR had
created a Care for the Carers program that supports volunteer community workers who do home-based care for people within their communities. AR saw the need to provide psychosocial support for those workers, and under the guidance of Diane Salters and others, had created three phases of residential workshops spread across a year. The basis for the work was transactional analysis, Capacitar (Capacitar International, 2018), and Training for Transformation concepts based on the thinking of Paulo Freire (Hope, Timmel, & Hodzi, 1984). I was fortunate to work in this sector for 8 years, initially facilitating the Care for Carers workshops in various rural areas across South Africa and later training and mentoring new facilitators and writing training materials so that the work could be passed over to people within the local communities (Roeland, 2013).

Soon after Karen began this project, I (Trudi) also became involved in several ways. I ran some workshops for the AR team, helping them to look at the script of their organization, building on the work Karen and others had done with the community care leaders, and, in a different capacity, organized fund raising for AR back home in the United Kingdom. One event stands out: an exuberant Wellness Day in 2012 when carers from all over the Western Cape met to celebrate and launch a campaign to get their work officially recognized. A year later this resulted in a South African Care Workers Forum run by community care leaders and advocating for the establishment of community care work as a profession to ensure that women and girls can break the cycle of poverty and violence, build economic alternatives, and claim control over their bodies.

**Empathy and Connectedness**

*What have we discovered together about our TA-faith connection?*

- We only truly exist as human beings in relationship, and our human experience is the only data we have.
- Transactional analysis and faith share several things: a belief in every person’s intrinsic value, expressed as “I’m OK, You’re OK,” “love your neighbor as yourself,” and so on; a base in hope; and an unshakable belief in the possibility of change.
- Both religious faith and praxis and transactional analysis use explanatory models to capture human experience and relate it to the sense of potential we can perceive, but not quite grasp. “A man’s reach must exceed his grasp, or what’s a heaven for?” (Browning, 1855/2018).
- Transactional analysis is a language of the “outside.” It enables an engagement with we-ness and a shared responsibility for inviting new stories to emerge from within a relationship. Stories, storytelling, and scripts—of individuals, families, and cultures—are common to faith and TA.

Given that faith communities and TA have these points in common, transactional analysis is an ideal language with which to name, describe, and explain the everyday struggles and spiritual aspirations of faith communities.

In the rest of this article we will explore how these commonalities enabled us to bring our TA experience into our work in churches. The key ideas of *ego states* and *script* will be the focus.
Sharing Transactional Analysis in Churches

As we just articulated, transactional analysis shares with the Christian faith a belief in the intrinsic value of the individual and the possibility of change. This hope for the future shows up in many ways. The Trust and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa and the church communities of the old Eastern Soviet bloc are some we have witnessed.

Of course, not everyone subscribes to this idea of hope and change. For some, certainty and rules are more important, and such ideas are not welcome in some traditional church communities. For example, I (Karen) remember doing a clergy workshop in which we were discussing “I’m OK, you’re OK,” which sparked a fascinating debate among the clergy. Some believed we were all born OK (e.g., Fox, 2000), whereas others believed only God could be OK, that all of us mortals were miserable sinners, and definitely not OK!

Jesus’ command to “Love your neighbour as yourself” (Matt. 22:39 Revised English Bible) has also been interpreted as requiring self-effacing love for the other, forgetting about the fundamental aspect of loving oneself as well. This overemphasis on loving others often results in invitations to games. Rescuer roles are favored in the misunderstanding that this is what is called for if we want to be faithful, caring Christians. In fact, in my experience, transactional analysis offers practical frameworks for helping believers to live out Gospel teachings. Both understanding how the roles on the drama triangle (Karpman, 1968) are failed attempts at intimacy and facilitating a shift to the winner’s triangle (Choy, 1990) offer a wholesome framework for people wanting to live out Christian care in a sense of OKness and interdependence rather than in unhealthy symbiosis.

In using transactional analysis within church communities, the question is always, “How can we frame the various models to be accessible within a Christian context?” Knowing that meaning is cocreated in relationship (Fowlie & Sills, 2011, p. xxxi), and understanding that systems are not permanent fixtures but can—and often need to—evolve and change, are all a part of growing into autonomy and interdependence.

Three-Part Models

Looking back over many experiences of introducing TA concepts to church groups, we find that the simple ego state model often brings understanding and insight to familiar, ongoing dilemmas in congregations. Along with the recognition of attitudes and patterns of communication and the resulting potential for conflict resolution that we have seen, there is often a sense of relief in the group that such a straightforward idea for increasing awareness even exists.

There is also the possibility that the underlying authenticity of the ego state model connects with peoples’ institutional as well as personal experience. A number of TA writers have described the social and cultural origins of Parent, Adult, and Child (PAC) in aspects of social responsibility, reality assessment, and individual personal experience (Drego, 2006; Grégoire, 2004; Temple, 1999, 2004).

This idea of a social/cultural three-part structure—which we can relate to PAC—is found in writings on anthropology and the sociology of religions. For example, writing
about the development of religion in the Neolithic world, and proposing its neurological foundation, David Lewis-Williams, the South African archaeologist, distinguished three dimensions common to all religions: belief, practice, and experience. This way of seeing, he suggested, moves us toward a better understanding of religion in its social and cosmological contexts (Lewis-Williams & Pearce, 2009, p. 285).

From a different perspective—that of the modern (and often struggling) church—Gerard Hughes (1985), in his book God of Surprises, described a three-part model: the institutional, the questioning/rational, and the mystical. These may be aligned in a particular congregation or (perhaps more often) be in conflict as the tradition and values-holding institution (Parent) confronts the inquiring and challenging Adult, and sometimes nurtures, sometimes oppresses the more spiritual/numinous Child (see Table 1).

With these insights alongside the classic ego state (PAC) model, we can see a picture of peoples’ encounter with the tensions and frustrations as well as the joys and connections played out in church communities. Although we are thinking here about church groups—the communities we know most intimately—we think this model can also be applied to other religious cultures.

One group of clergy that I (Trudi) worked with met together for more than 6 years to “talk TA.” When asked what it was that they found most useful, their responses included raising awareness of personal motivation and process; naming and accepting this; a language in which to express it; plus options for interpersonal problem solving and finding the means to change, empower, and take responsibility. They found the most useful model, by far, to be ego states.

Informing and reinforcing individual relationships are the “ego states” of the church: the Parent institution, with its emphasis on history, tradition, established values, and a definition of the identity of the organization while also showing care, support, and strength (for many people this “is” the church); the Child, “mystical” part of warmth and creativity, which can bring life and renewal to the church (probably the nearest to “spirituality”); and the Adult, the “questioning” part in Hughes’s analysis, which is responsive, contextual, and problem-solving—the aspect of the church that can examine and adjust the teaching and values of the parent institution and enable the whole organization to move on. However, the cultural script of the organization can sometimes result in the pressure of tradition and history oppressing both the questioning of “what’s going on here?” and the struggle for spiritual self-expression. (Newton, 2004, p. 4)

True human connectedness involves all ego states, both of individuals and societies. We learn to see what is going on and how we can redescribe and do it differently. In a discussion about relational ethics, Carlo Moiso (as cited in Cornell, 2006, p. 113) made an important distinction: Morality, for instance, in perceptions of right and
wrong, is part of the social Parent—it is “constant, and by this constancy ... gives us a sense of consistency”; ethics, on the other hand “is the parental function of the integrating Adult because it changes constantly” and therefore recognizes and works with the knowledge that what is right in one situation may not be right in another. We need the solidity of the social Parent and the responsiveness of the integrating Adult both in individuals and in institutions.

So, the church needs all of its ego states: structure, nurture, questioning, cooperation, and liberation. Perhaps we also need a new model to image social interdependence in the same way that recent models reflect new thinking about script. A community-based diagram shows one way to explore this (Figure 1).

Heath and Heath (2017) used a novel diagram of ego states to describe the healthy relationship in couples. They described holding the tension between autonomy and homonomy (Angyal as cited in Salters, 2011) within the couple and each individual in relationship with others. The intersecting parts of the two Parent ego states represent the new and always emerging shared, cocreated culture and stories; the intersecting parts of the two Child ego states represent the shared history of intimate and authentic experiences; and the relationship is always grounded by the Adult-to-Adult cocreative relationship: dynamic and present centered but unique and separate. This offers a framework for considering how, within a relationship of we-ness, people can honor the life-giving aspects of their individual scripts as well as cocreate new stories that carry the energy of the collective hopes and dreams for the future (Figure 2).

The Place of Stories

Stories are often the basis of religious understanding. I (Trudi) remember hearing a Roman Catholic priest say that the foundation of Christianity is to meet together, tell the story, and share a meal. Faith and TA share an understanding that stories convey essential convictions. And just as transactional analysts (in whatever field they work) aim to offer clients the opportunity to change script beliefs, so religious stories can be changed and are often about change too.

A current and adept storyteller is Philip Pullman. In the trilogy His Dark Materials, Pullman (1995, 1997, 2000) explored the underlying meaning of religion (mainly

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**Figure 1.** Interaction in a Healthy Faith Community (adapted from Newton, 2004, p. 4).
Christianity) while criticizing the political structures it has created—that is, he has searched for new narratives while confronting the outcomes of the old ones—and producing brilliant, engrossing stories out of the conflict. More recently, in his essays on storytelling (Pullman, 2017), he conceded that in the past, religion gave us a much-needed sense that we are connected to the universe, and we still need that sense. He wrote, “This connectedness to things is what we mean by meaning. The meaning of one thing is its connection to another; the meaning of our lives is their connection with something other than ourselves” (p. 444). This meaning and connection, he suggested, have a moral and social dimension:

We’re connected in a moral way to one another, to other human beings. We have responsibilities to them and they to us. We’re not isolated units of self-interest in a world where there is no such thing as society; we cannot live so. (p. 455)

Human Beings as Narrative Creatures

In his rich and extraordinary book Religion in Human Evolution, anthropologist Robert Bellah (2011) suggested that empathy, as the key emergent capacity that defined the beginning of humanity, led directly to the ability and desire to tell stories in order to explain the world to ourselves (p. 34). Through empathy we develop the ability to understand others, to accept and share feelings, and so to attach and bond. This invites sharing both attention and intention, which is lived out in shared cooperation and play. The blending of bonding and play leads to the creation of rituals to express emergent meaning, both social and religious. In humanity’s early history, these were interconnected. From the myths and stories embedded in the rituals, we derive concepts and ideas about who we are and how we relate. In this way, meaning is cocreated and shared through our joint social and cultural narratives.

The social systems that we generate as a result may become normalized and accepted as inevitable features of our everyday lives, which Bellah called online. Or, conversely, we may challenge this normality by staying aware of the offline (although always present) possibilities of empathy, bonding, relationship, playfulness, art, story, and so on. By so doing we can continually create new meanings in the present.
Figure 3 illustrates this idea. As human beings we are absolutely grounded in our social relationships; all our learning and experience grows out of these, so we are both part of creating our cultural narratives and subject to them.

Changing the Narrative

In South Africa, the structures of apartheid were created out of the narratives of colonialism, hegemony, racism, separation, and so on, which served the purposes of a powerful settler population. As things began to change in the 1980s, this narrative was challenged not only by those who had always disputed and defied it but also in wider public debate and political confrontation. After 1994, something new and significant seemed to develop in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) with the aim of changing from the old dominant narrative to a new kind of society. This process, led by Archbishop Desmond Tutu, inspired the world and enabled a relatively peaceful transition to democracy, although years later people realize that there is still much work to do in terms of apology and reparation for past injustices in more tangible ways.

That is the national cultural perspective in South Africa. There are innumerable personal instances of new perspectives as things began to change. For example, I (Karen) reflect on those early days of holding the tension between being a clergy wife with some stereotypical expectations of what I should do as well as being a professional person involved in transactional analysis work outside the home. It was the acceptance and sense of OKness from a small group of the parishioners that empowered me to break the expected role of what I should be doing. The importance of that empathy and connection empowered both me and the parishioners who chose to take time to know and understand me, to build deep relationships, and to grow, both in our uniqueness and our interconnectedness. I remember feeling guilty at times that—just as I was developing my professional identity both locally and internationally and as my children were becoming more independent as young adults—women in the parish inevitably found themselves thrust into yet another cycle of child care: looking after grandchildren so that their children could continue their working lives. There was huge learning about different cultural practices and, especially within this community, a sense of the importance of the collective taking
precedence over the individual. The later writings of transactional analysis authors such as Salters (2011) and Newton (2007) gave me a framework for understanding how individuals within a community can hold the tension between autonomy and homonomy.

This is especially alive within the African tradition of ubuntu, a word that can be translated as “I am because you are.”

Some … [may find] this concept too symbiotic; but in many African cultures this idea is fundamental—community is valued more than individuality. Ubuntu implies that “a person is a person through other people.” Ubuntu has its roots in humanist African philosophy, in which the idea of community is one of the building blocks of society. Ubuntu is that nebulous concept of a common humanity, oneness: “humanity: you and me both” (Ifejika, 2006, para. 2). Archbishop Desmond Tutu says that a person with ubuntu is “open and available to others, affirming of others … has a proper self-assurance. The ubuntu this person possesses comes from being part of a greater whole” (para. 4). (Newton, 2007, pp. 201–202)

Ubuntu is, and is even more than, connectedness.

Enabling New Stories to Emerge

So what helps us confront the structures we encounter in our own contexts and return to the offline narrative of connection and meaning? Let us go back to those narrative explanatory models. Freud (1930/1994), in Civilisation and Its Discontents, wrote about the sense of connectedness that some of his colleagues said they experience (he meant Jung), a feeling of being part of a whole beyond oneself (p. 1). Although rather wistfully noting this occurrence, which he said he did not experience, Freud offered a neurological elucidation. But Lewis-Williams (Lewis-Williams & Pearce, 2009) and Bellah (2011), in their very different ways and contexts, showed us that socioneurological explanations can resonate not only with scientific theory (another set of narratives) but with our own lived experience. They can give us a positive take on how we came to be where we are, formed by the stories we hear and tell.

Staying within the cognitive dimension can sometimes lead us to become stuck in rationalizing and creating theories about how people with different beliefs or experiences can connect, and it often divides more than unites. In interfaith dialogue in South Africa, people at the levels of policy making and theology often remain separate in their thinking. It is only when ordinary congregants of all the faiths share experiences of silence, prayer, and worship that real points of OKness and connection are experienced. A powerful expression of this happens each year on 16 December, a national holiday called the Day of Reconciliation. On that day, faith communities walk through the city to visit the cathedral, a synagogue, and a mosque. At each site, leaders of a different faith group give short addresses. The deep sense of connectedness, however, comes mostly through the unexpected, informal conversations with people from different faith traditions that happen to be walking alongside each other at various stages of the journey around the city.

I (Karen) have found that Pearl Drego’s (1996) model of the cultural shadow has helped me to conceptualize how we can live into the Christian and transactional analysis values of respect and interconnectedness. In my thinking,
Gerard Hughes’s (1985) description of the aspects of church that are resonant with the ego states combines well with this model. The ability, in present-centered awareness in Adult, to make sense of connection and equality is often not enough. But when we drop into the mystical and experiential realms that Hughes speaks of—and Drego describes as the cultural shadow in the Child—authentic connection and a new story can begin to emerge.

It seems, paradoxically, that often a new story emerges from that Child connection where language is not the most important vehicle. The potential for making new meaning arises from that offline dimension of communities that Bellah described. In the township parish, for example, it was in the sharing of a meditative practice in silence—in the presence at a graveside as the clods of sand were thrown onto the coffin of the deceased family member, in the joining of celebrations of marriage and birthdays—that real connections were forged. These went beyond theory and the cognitive realm. They were forged within shared vulnerabilities and the profound experience of life and death, a shared Christian spirituality of promise and hope, of always moving toward becoming more of who we are created to be. The models of transactional analysis that I was living and beginning to teach in the parish gave a hands-on scaffolding on which people could build a new understanding of themselves and expand their integrating Adult (Tudor, 2003). They began to experience OKness as an underlying attitude and to practice transactions as in the OK-OK communication box (Pratt & Mbaligontsi, 2014).

Conclusion

When we acknowledge that religion derives from our human nature, and that creating explanations and telling stories are part of being human, we can take charge of the metaphors we choose to describe our world and our experience of it. We are not bound by the narratives of the past, although we can learn from them, critique, value, reject, or change them. Becoming transactional designers (Tudor & Summers, 2014) means we continually revisit the offline world of connectedness, cooperation, and intentionality to decide how we want to change the online world.

In August 2018, I (Karen) attended the TA Conference put on by the ITAA and the South Asian Association of Transactional Analysts. Having the unique experience of being there during the monsoon floods in Kerala, the sense of the value of the offline depth of connection and interdependence was powerfully tangible and served as the supportive container for people to navigate through high emotions and practical decisions around safe travel back to their homes. Adrienne Lee, in her keynote address, invited us to consider the importance of homonomy rather than just the original emphasis on autonomy that has been key to transactional analysis thinking in the past. A moving moment at the end of the keynote was when we each shared the namaste greeting with another person, and each one said to the other, “I am you in another form.”

Can this approach, impacted by transactional analysis and diverse spiritual teachings, be the key to a shift from a dualistic mindset of subject and object and focusing
on what separates people and ideas to a nondual lived experience that unites people and truly views the other as me in another form?

In today’s world of global communication and pressure to achieve more and more online (in Bellah’s sense), the metaphors of transactional analysis help to make real the offline dimension of our Christian values and beliefs—not in some idealized future after earthly life has ended but in our day-by-day growing interdependence with others.

Disclosure statement
The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding
The author received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Notes on Contributors

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The authors wish to thank Briony Nichols (personal communication, 21 March 2018) for the stimulus to develop Figure 3.
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