

A Conversation with the Berne Family

Moderator: Carol Solomon, PhD

5-6 pm Saturday 11 August 2007

Just before the San Francisco Conference Gala Dinner and Dance

Westin Hotel San Francisco Airport

Join us in an hour of conversation with two of Eric Berne's children: Janice McGee and Robin Way . They will share stories and answer questions about their father's life and work. This will be your opportunity to ask the questions that you've always wondered about, whether they be about the professional side of Berne's life or about more personal aspects of his life with his family.

When I recently visited Janice McGee and her husband, Bob, at their Carmel home, I was warmly welcomed with an immediate tour of the dwelling and stories of the Berne family's life there. Eric bought the house—an elegant and beautifully crafted cottage (constructed in 1888, it was the first house built in Carmel)—in 1947 and moved in with his wife Dorothy Berne and their three children, Roxanna, age 10, Robin age 9, and Janice, then 6. A few years later brother Rick was born followed by brother Terry. To create more space to accommodate the newcomers, Eric and Dorothy turned a little entryway into a tiny room just beside their bedroom; it was just big enough to accommodate a crib and a small chest of drawers. Today it exists as a tiny, sunny alcove for a simple writing desk.

Janice and Bob's openness with family stories captivated my attention that evening and again the next morning as we sat around the breakfast table talking and enjoying the view of the garden just coming alive after its winter hibernation. I asked Janice about her parents' social life. "I know your father was a very social person and loved bringing groups of people together. How did that work in your family? Was your mother equally social?" Yes, she said, both parents were equally social and enjoyed entertaining and having people to their home. Dinner was a sit-down affair with the entire family present for all of Janice's growing up years, and many meals included guests at the dinner table. But her parent's social circles and preferences were different; Dorothy preferred the artistic crowd while Eric preferred the intellectuals. Luckily, their love of entertaining and the overlap of artful and intelligent people made their social scene work well for all of them.

I also asked what the relationship was like between her parents. What was Eric like as a father? Who was the better parent? I loved hearing about Janice's closeness with her Dad—how he supported her and listened to her when her strict mother was cause for conflict during her teenage years. I then wondered what the family thought when Eric later married Torry.

There was so much more I wanted to know. Did Eric talk about transactional analysis to his family? Did he teach them TA and encourage them to use it? Did he pass on his script to them by encouraging them to write as his mother had encouraged him? Or was he able to support them and encourage them to pursue whatever their right livelihood might be?

And how did Eric's fame affect the children? Many famous people passed through the doors of their historic home, and the children were always encouraged to engage with the grown-up guests. Do any of these people stand out in the children's' minds? Do they remember Virginia Satir, Fritz Perls, or any others?

I wondered about how the children felt about those Sunday gatherings at Stuarts Beach, when Eric—with his remarkably long, skinny legs—ran up and down the beach to get his exercise. He was, no doubt, a rather amusing sight!

I hope you will join us in a stimulating and interesting conversation with the Berne family Saturday before the gala banquet at the San Francisco International Conference. Your questions and your curiosity will shape the content of our dialogue. We hope to see you there.

– Carol Solomon, Oakland, California, USA