



Alfred Adler, the Man, Seen by a Student and Friend¹

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How intriguing, and how useful, is the memory of a first meeting apt to be! It reminds one of the significance attached generally to one's "early recollections" by Adlerian Psychology. My first contact with Dr. Adler was at the end of my senior year at Barnard College, in New York, in the spring of 1927. This was probably during his first lecture tour in the United States, a time when he was a most eagerly pursued bringer-of-light-from-Vienna. For me, a psychology major who was to have the good fortune of spending some time with my family in Vienna the following year, the thought of making contact with so famous a figure from there was most exciting. I was already planning to study at the University of Vienna, and my revered psychology professor at Barnard College, Harry L. Hollingworth, had encouraged me to do so and had also spoken well of Adler.

Adler's lectures in New York at that time (probably his first visit here) were always sold out, and it was by sheer luck that I obtained a ticket to one of them. The excitement of this occasion was beyond measure. I was fascinated by Adler's remarks, which, to my surprise, were wholly understandable, and at the same time fresh, essential, and positive. At the conclusion of the lecture, I mustered my courage to approach him regarding the possibility of studying with him in Vienna. I blurted out: "Dr. Adler, I am very anxious . . ." "Never be anxious!" was his gentle but immediate interruption. These characteristic "first words" were indeed the key to what, after several years of association, I came to recognize—and admire—as the outstanding characteristic of his relating to his fellow human beings. It was the naturally therapeutic way, in accordance with his own, "Adlerian" concepts. In his case, there tended to be no demarcation

between professional and spontaneous real-life encounters, no basic difference in attitude or understanding. He seemed to live and breathe his particular psychotherapy, and this seemed to me his outstanding characteristic, as I came to experience it, as student, co-worker, and friend.

To continue with early impressions, my second meeting was a few days after the first, when my father and I had an appointment to acquaint ourselves with what studying with Dr. Adler would entail. We were surprised to find him in a modest hotel, though quite genteel, and himself opening the door for us. But the most striking impression was the gesture with which he welcomed us. It, too, soon became understood as a symbol of his fellow-human-being attitude. He was short of stature, well-rounded but not heavy appearing—in fact, light and bouncy on his feet. His features were also chubby; his lips full, his eyes green, his hair gray and sparse. His voice had a very soft quality, and it was changeable. To return to his welcoming gesture, it consisted of opening his arms wide, bending from the waist, forward and down, while his eyes remained fixedly returning your glance, as he was saying, “Please!” It was a gesture movingly articulate, delighting us. I believe it could best be translated into the phrase, “Be my guest.” With the same gesture and word he excused himself to continue an interview in the next room. We were intrigued to find that the literature on his waiting-room table consisted of three Shakespearean plays!

When it was our turn to enter the inner room, Dr. Adler again announced this with a gracious be-my-guest gesture and a “Please!” as he did again at the conclusion of our conference. His response to our inquiries had given us assurance of admission to all of his lectures (extended also to my father, a layman), friendly recommendations to a hotel, and to a school for my young brother. We left the interview walking on air. I can still remember the exhilaration of the contact of that moment and the vivid anticipation of the future.

Another dimension of Adler’s characteristic approach had been evinced at this meeting. It was the equal concern and courtesy with which Adler had treated two very different individuals. This was to be manifested so many times again when we were in Vienna, as when my father was welcomed to Adler’s daily noon-hour open house for discussion and teaching. Physicians, academicians, writers, educators, social workers, criminologists—all were welcome. As well as I recall, they varied in number from some five to twenty persons. They met in Adler’s consulting room, in his family apartment, near the center of Vienna. Everyone was free to ask questions, to which Adler would readily reply. If there were no questions, he would refer back to a stack of those asked in previous sessions, or he would describe a case and its treatment. At the end of the hour, each participant placed about a dollar in a

plate on a table near the door. (The meetings were conducted in English, with Americans making up probably over half of those present.)

These sessions, dealing with theory and practical applications, allowing for individual differences in interests and levels of understanding, seemed to me a splendid learning experience. It was essentially what studying with Dr. Adler consisted of. In addition, one could attend the Monday evening sessions of the Individual Psychology Society, at which a paper was usually presented and discussed, and one could visit the various open counseling sessions conducted regularly in the schools and elsewhere.

Just as one of Adler's aims of therapy was to enrich the interpersonal relationships of his patients, one of his own immediate practical goals was to bring together the people with whom he came in contact. Doing this for others, of course, matched his own sociability. Thus, every evening, after consultations and his writing, he would visit the Cafe Siller, spending his time with followers, associates, and others who would gather there. As you may know, it was—and still may be—customary for every Viennese to have his, or sometimes her, favorite cafe house where he (or she) would visit regularly, often daily, to read the newspapers and meet with friends, in addition to enjoying coffee, and possibly a roll or cake or a light repast.

Adler sometimes described the ideal man as one who acted like a host at a party, introducing his guests to one another and seeing that they were enjoying themselves together. He was himself very hospitable, with the help of his wife and children, particularly in his country house, a short way from the city. Conversely, he expected others to be equally sociable. Thus, if he were invited anywhere, he would ask those who happened to be with him to come along. And so, if you were expecting Dr. Adler to be your guest, you would tend to open the door slowly, to be able to estimate how many unexpected others might be accompanying him. On the whole this did actually make the occasion all the merrier.

As a teacher he was equally open and generous, sharing freely of his knowledge and skills, as well as his time. And as a practitioner he was continuously interested in correcting and improving those with whom he happened to come in any contact. It was his way not to limit his psychotherapeutic responses to the professional appointment but to make every opportunity therapeutic. Needless to say, this gratuitous attention is a kind not often practiced in the social relations of professional people, though it could be greatly beneficial. For instance, I remember Dr. Adler pointing out to me that I did not meet another person's glances directly enough. He suggested that I watch how actors on the screen did this and that I practice it in front of a mirror—advice, though somewhat to my embarrassment, I nonetheless appreciated. Increasing the skills of another was ever on his mind. Every human contact had therapeutic possibilities.

Adler's relationships with others were an expression of his own key concept of social interest (community feeling), a genuine experiencing of commonality. When dealing with clients in the clinics or parents in the school counseling centers, he quite naturally spoke their dialect and easily made the dynamics of problem behavior understandable. To a man who complained of an Oedipus Complex, Adler once replied very gently, "Why don't you leave the poor old lady alone?" Once he asked a mother about her daughter's dreams. The woman replied, "Don't tell me, Doctor, you believe in that dream nonsense!" to which he replied, in the vernacular, "Do you think someone else does her dreaming for her?"

Adler's early practice had been mostly with poor people. (His first publication was a brief piece on the health of the tailor trade.) Nevertheless, though democratic and sociable, among his friends he numbered many aristocratic people: for example, his biographer, Phyllis Bottome, and her husband, Ernan Forbes-Dennis. Adler had a fine sense of humor, as one might expect, perhaps, in view of the therapist's ability to see things in different lights. Although a died-in-the-wool Viennese, he loved the rural countryside. He especially cherished the flowers which his gardener tended. He enjoyed music and sang with a fine tenor voice. One could truly say of him that he was at home in the world, enjoying its offerings as well as its challenges. He was interested in hearing any new joke that was going the rounds. One day he said to me, with a very thoughtful look, "It seems to me, you are in your second childhood." I was somewhat dismayed but managed to ask why he thought so. He replied, "I have just learned that someone calls you 'baby.' That is when your second childhood begins."

The academic resource of looking up the derivation of a term is particularly rewarding in the case of *therapeutic*. The original Greek word had many overtones: to heal, to tend (as in *attendant*); to wait upon; to maintain support; and, further, to serve; to treat someone carefully; to nurse, to educate or train; to be thoughtful. Not only does this seem an amazingly meaningful range of attitudes, but so many of them applied to the very specifics which I observed in Dr. Adler's approach, and it was particularly impressive to see how many were included in the characteristic "Be my guest" gesture, and were fulfilled in Adler's actions generally. On the other hand, the one aspect of the gesture which was not covered by the etymological listing for *therapeutic* was the unswerving glance, the steady, piercing eye (the very aspect which he had found undeveloped in me!). It obviously signified—and enabled—the ability to *look* into the other person, in other words, to *understand* him or her. The skilled therapist, as we conceive of him or her, is one who can *see into* the other person, perhaps *see with* the eyes of the other—as well as care for, attend to, and heal him or her.

Thus one might truly claim that to have known Alfred Adler, in any

capacity or relationship, for even a brief encounter, was to have been understood. But furthermore, as we have seen, it was to have been appreciated and encouraged—to have benefited from his quintessential therapeutic attitude.

Reference Note

1. This article was found among the author's posthumous papers.

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