

Comparative Study of Two First Recollections

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Adler used to say, "We are not at the mercy of our memories; we select them." He always emphasized the fact that it is the life-style that molds the memories. In his opinion people who have had the same type of experience in their childhood remember it in various ways according to their different life-styles. To prove the correctness of this conception we ought to carry out experiments in which we expose children to the same situation, and after ten to twenty years make tests to find out in what form they remember the original situations. This is unfortunately impossible, for we do know from observation that individuals who have had the same kind of experiences do not keep them as childhood memories, as they merely recall what seems important to *them*. This is why we have to rely on early memories discovered by chance, which show us that different people recall similar events in different form. Here are two such observations.

(1) Recollection of B. T.: "I was visiting some acquaintances with my sister. Suddenly a big dog jumped on me. I cried, and no one could calm me. My sister took me home to my mother. The doctor was fetched, and I was ill for some time. The dog played an important role in my life. I said to my father, 'Go away, you are a bad dog.' I was then three years old."

(2) Recollection of J. R.: "When I was about five years old, I had been friendly for some time with a black Newfoundland dog, then on probation as a watch dog at Herne Hill. After one of our long summer journeys my first thought on getting home was to go to see Lion. My mother confided me to the care of our one man servant, Thomas, and gave him strict orders that I was not to be allowed within reach of the dog's chain. To make sure of this, Thomas carried me in his arms. Lion was at his dinner and took no notice of either of us, on which I besought leave to pat him. Foolish Thomas stooped toward him that I might, when the dog instantly flew at me and bit a piece clean out of the corner of my lip on the left side. I was brought up the back stairs, bleeding fast, but not a whit frightened, except lest Lion be sent away. Lion indeed had to go; but not Thomas. My

mother was sure he was sorry, and, I think, blamed herself most. The bitten side of the (then really pretty) mouth was spoiled for evermore, but the wound, drawn close, healed quickly. The last use I made of my movable lips before Doctor Aveline drew them into ordered silence for a while was to observe, 'Mama, though I can't speak, I can play on the fiddle.' But the house was of another opinion and I never attained any proficiency upon this instrument worthy of my genius. Not the slightest diminution of my love of dogs, nor the slightest nervousness in managing them was induced by the accident." (John Ruskin, *Praeterita*, George Allen.)

In proceeding to interpret the two recollections, I shall limit myself only to that which appears to me essential for our present problem. B. T.'s recollection gives the following picture: Here is a youth who remembers the sad consequences the incident with the dog had for him; he was ill for a considerable time afterwards. His attention is focused on the hostility of life. The fact that the dog jumped at him holds a warning for him: "Don't leave home; danger lurks without. Security is where mother is." His crying proves that he is a spoiled child who has trained himself to reach his goal through weakness.

We find the same attitude in his second recollection. "I had been out with other boys and wanted to go home by myself. I lost my way and therefore cried. Then a woman came and showed me the way home." Again the movement in the same direction—home to mother. His recollections show a frightened, passive, and negative attitude. Does this interpretation conform with his life-style?

B. T., 17 years old, was the youngest son of a very poor family. His sister was two years older; his brother, a well known writer, was six years older than himself. His physician consulted me because his teachers thought he might be mentally deficient. He was extremely backward, had failed to move up in form several times, and was threatened with dismissal from school as a dunce. He was extremely unpopular with his teachers. They called him "Mephisto," as he was "the spirit that always said 'no'." He was on bad terms with his father and elder brother, but was his mother's favorite. She pampered him. He liked to sit at home by the fireside and do nothing, and he led an isolated life. He disparaged the accomplishments of others. At the beginning of the treatment he said, "Well, who was Shakespeare after all!" He told me that he would commit suicide if he were dismissed from school. His mother told me that he had been a weak child, very often ill, and therefore she had always done everything for him. Even

before the experience with the dog he had been a timid child, always clinging to his mother. It was possible to cure him by the methods of Individual Psychology. He lost his apparently inborn stupidity. Later he won a scholarship at a teacher's college and is now an excellent teacher.

Thus we find in B. T.'s life-style before the treatment the same attitude as was revealed in his first childhood-recollection.

The interpretation of J. R.'s recollection, on the other hand, shows an entirely different life-style. J. R. also remembers an experience with a dog. He does not experience the dog-bite as a hostile act, but pleads for the dog, although the dog's bite left a scar on his "then pretty mouth" forever. He does not recall pains or tears, but emphasizes the rapid healing. His mental attitude is a positive one, and is also shown by the remark which he made to console his mother, "Mama, though I can't speak, I can play on the fiddle." He makes "foolish" Thomas responsible for the accident against the strict command of his mother. We may conclude from this that he attached great importance to common sense. The emotional content of the recollection indicates a life-style full of courage and a positive attitude. This interpretation gains in strength by his second memory, which, summarized, runs as follows: He was alone in the same stable where he had been bitten. He went headforemost into a large water-tub. He used the small watering-pot he had in his hand to give himself a good thrust up from the bottom and caught hold of the opposite edge of the tub with his left hand.

Courage, independence, and activity are even more striking here. From both these memories we may infer a courageous life-style. As a matter of fact, J. R. is the famous Englishman, John Ruskin, who was professor of fine arts at Oxford, and who published books on painting, architecture, social reforms, ethics, education, political economy, and other subjects. As John Ruskin's great achievements tell us a great deal about his positive life-style, I shall give only a few details of his life. We learn that his parents brought him up to be independent, and impressed on him that he must not attach too much importance to himself and to his troubles, but have interest in others and achieve something useful. John Ruskin was himself a great champion of courage. Thus he says in one of his most popular works, *Sesame and Lilies*, when discussing the education of girls, "Teach them also that courage and truth are the pillars of their being." His biography conforms with his early memories and shows the life-style

of an active man. When we compare these completely different personalities, we find that though they both remember a similar experience, the recollection of the neurotic B. T. reveals lack of courage and lack of social interest, exclusion of all living creatures with exception of his mother and a tendency to see the hostile side of life, a passive and negative attitude, all corresponding to his life-style. In John Ruskin's recollection, on the other hand, we find courage, independence, and active and positive attitude corresponding to his life-style. We see that two persons can remember similar events in quite different ways. I should, however, like to draw still another conclusion from these memories. The experience with the dog has the effect of a trauma, with a resulting neurosis on the anxious, spoiled child. In the case of John Ruskin, the shock—an unexpected dog-bite—is a much stronger one when considered objectively, and yet it has no injurious effect on his mental development and is not experienced by him as a trauma. It is clearly evident that the external event is of minor importance. It is the life-style which molds the experience.

The two recollections of incidents with dogs show clearly the immense importance of the life-style and provide proof for the correctness of Adler's conception that: (1) The life-style decides whether an event is experienced as a trauma or not; (2) The life-style molds the childhood memories.