

## Alfred Adler—Creative Personality<sup>1</sup>

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Although I am a doctor of medicine, it is as a poet that I would like to speak about Alfred Adler on this occasion, because doctors of medicine have already said so much about him as a scientist and because the viewpoint of a poet permits better appraisal of the man as a creative personality; as one who has made something substantial that had not *been* before; and also as one who goes about his daily life continually expressing something creative in himself, as opposed to the destructive something. If Adler had destructiveness within him, he held it beautifully in control. Also I wish to indicate that by his example and his precepts, like all good teachers, he showed others that they could do as he did. And since he taught them, many have done so, which accounts for the persistence of Individual Psychology, his main creation.

Alfred Adler was born in Vienna in 1870. It is hard after so many years to recreate the scene on which he arrived, but we can at least remind ourselves that there was a financial panic in Austria in 1873; that Austria was struggling to expand politically and to consolidate herself with her neighbors (menaced by the German alliance led by Prussia, which wanted the same thing) and that Austria was, for the rest of the 19th century, repeatedly disturbed by riots of racial groups, students, anarchists, and industrial workers. Modern Americans are apt to think romantically about Vienna in the latter part of the 19th century, but when we look squarely at the light opera, Schlagobier's *Cafe Mozart*, and the reign of Franz Joseph, the scene turns out actually to have been infinitely complicated and full of the sort of stresses out of which progress comes and ideas grow. It is

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perfectly clear that the ideas in the air did not fall on barren soil when they reached young Alfred Adler.

When he was born, the public was not psychologically minded; psychology was not particularly dynamic and people had never heard of the concept of the "inferiority complex."

Alfred Adler remedied much of that state of affairs by helping (along with Freud and Jung) to bring about a kind of gentle revolution whereby people generally today are psychologically-minded, and psychology is generally dynamic. Adler's part in this is accomplished through one fact: Alfred Adler is, or was, a creative personality. He was not content to allow the *status quo* to remain as it was. He remolded it, adding new materials and his own intuition until we have Individual Psychology as it stands today.

Many years later, Adler wrote this about the creative processes: "Every great idea and every work of art owe their origin to the ceaseless workings of the human spirit that is ever creating afresh. Perhaps most people contribute a small share to these new creations; at the least they can accept them, preserve them, and turn them to account. It is here that the 'conditioned reflexes' may to a large extent have their part to play. For the creative artist they are only building material which his imagination uses to outstrip what has gone before. Artists and geniuses are without doubt the leaders of humanity, and they pay the penalty for their audacity, burning in their own flame which they kindled in childhood. '*I suffered—so I became a poet.*' Our improved vision, our better perception of color, form, and line we owe to the painters. Our more accurate hearing and, along with it, a finer modulation of our vocal organs we have acquired from the musicians. The poets have taught us to speak, feel, and think. The artist himself, in most cases violently spurred on in early childhood by suffering from all sorts of handicaps—poverty, abnormal sight, or hearing—and as a rule spoiled in some particular way, wrests himself free in his earliest childhood from his severe feelings of inferiority. Fiercely ambitious, he struggles with a too restricted reality in order to broaden it for himself and for others. He is the standard-bearer of an evolution that demands the surmounting of difficulties and raises above the average level the appointed child. Such a child usually suffers in a way suited for the attainment of a lofty goal."

Adler continues: "This oppressive but blessed variety of suffering, as we have long ago pointed out, is due to a more marked physical

liability to shock, a greater sensitiveness to the influence of external events. These variants very often prove to be inferiorities of the sensory organs in the person himself, or if not in him—since our means of research into the less important variants often fail us—in organ inferiorities inherited from his ancestors. It is in that quarter that we find the clearest traces of such constitutional inferiorities, which often lead to illnesses. They are minor variants which have also been a force behind the progress of humanity.”

We can scarcely detach Adler from the world as we know it today or imagine what modern thought would be like if he had never lived; for so much of our present-day thinking is or rests upon his creation. When we read what he says, we may sometimes think, “Everybody knows that.” Only when we stop and look back do we realize that everybody knows it because Adler taught it to everybody. This, one feels, is as he would have wished it. An inevitable liability of popularity is a certain amount of misconception, some over-simplification and a lack of universal appreciation of subtleties. Such a book as *Understanding Human Nature* seems to have been built primarily as a general outline acceptable to people without specialized training. It does not aim at nuances. If we say that each of Adler’s works is a gem with its own special characteristics, we may equate this work with a turquoise matrix—sturdy, attractive, wearable, productive and purchasable by almost everybody. It now sells in a pocket edition, paper bound, for thirty-five cents. This would make Alfred Adler very happy. For the cost of a few cigarettes the young man or woman can obtain the essence of his life’s philosophy, tinged also with a strong feeling of the man himself, expressed as he expressed everything, in his very own words.

Again speaking poetically, *The Case of Miss R* seems to me to have an opalescent quality. The most extraordinary thing about this book is that its interest depends entirely on the interpretation of emotions and on Adler’s literary skill, which causes each person in the story to emerge as a real entity. We feel that we would know them if we met them on the street. So deep and infectious is Adler’s sympathy for the human race in general and for Miss R. in particular that we find her, when interpreted by him, a tremendously interesting and even rather appealing person, in spite of her long list of inconvenient symptoms. Alfred Adler liked people; he was never immured behind his own prejudices. So far as I know, he never had any prejudices.

Alfred Adler was the personification, the human embodiment of the open mind and the open heart. The literary device of using Miss R's own written story interspersed with Adler's comments on the material is an extremely effective one. His little essays rounding out his ideas are welcome and illuminating and so closely knit with the rest of the material that it is only when one stops for breath that one realizes they are really excursions into the abstract. Adler uses his "asides" as platters for his juiciest intellectual meat, in much the same way that Bernard Shaw uses the prefaces of his plays. If Adler had not been what he was, he could easily have been a fine novelist. He had the same feeling for humankind that Tolstoy had, but what a great loss it would have been not to have had him as a doctor. Whether or not we agree with all of Adler's interpretations, we cannot but recognize that his relation to the patient is wholesome, constructive and level-headed in a completely calm and friendly way. The interpretations are shrewd. When Miss R. complains, "But I wanted to become healthy," Adler comments, with his usual shrewdness, "That wish is proof that she is sick—therefore we advise that she renounce the wish."

The pearl of his collection, I believe, is *Social Interest: A Challenge To Mankind*. It is luminous, mellow and has depths still only dimly seen. Adler is true to his own conviction that truth is to be found in motion rather than in form (or "moulded movement"); so in the farther reaches he suggests but does not insist. This is the part of the true philosopher and of the scientist as well. He frequently says things like this: "Up to now my experience has taught me—." His sweep of recognition of cosmic realities would be almost overpowering except for the fact that he offers it to us in such a reassuring way. Adler's prose here leaves behind its coffee-house coziness and takes on a swing like the surge of empire. In this book we survey, too, Adler's practical, dignified, pervasive philosophy, as he had developed it by the end of his life. He kept working on it as a living creation; and it was such a yeasty dough that it is still rising.

Adler's general principles are too well known for me to presume to outline them here, but I think that several of the ideas underlying his approach are so well expressed by him as to bear repeating. He says, "Psychic life is a complex of aggressive and security-finding activities whose final purpose is to guarantee continued existence on earth for the organism and to continue his development," and "Our

sole recourse is to assume the logic of our group life as it exists on this planet as though it were an ultimate absolute truth."

And he lays the cornerstone of the doctor-patient relationship in this way: "Transforming a human being demands optimism and patience and especially the exclusion of personal vanity since the individual to be transformed is not in duty bound to be the object of another's vanity."

Adler has his own epigrammatical style, unlike any other I have ever encountered. Always, he can speak better for himself than we can speak for him. He says, for instance: "The neurotic makes large use of whipped-up emotions." His use of words in explaining neurosis is pat and fitting. He describes it as "the exploiting of the experience of shock for the protection of the threatened nimbus." Concerning the "yes, but," phrase, he says further, "In the 'yes' there is the recognition of social feeling; in the 'but' the retreat and the means of securing it." I feel that no one else has given us such a simple, satisfying and dynamic description of this deeply ambivalent attitude so common to many human beings.

Oscar Wilde, also a master of epigram, said many things that sound clever in the same way, but they were never so profound as Adler's "It is often the most disastrous thing in the world to be right; wrong can spring from it." Or "The task of memory is to devour and digest impressions" or "Man knows more than he understands" or "Everything can be something else as well." Adler's use of simile and metaphor is a positive delight. He says, for example, "In the interpretation of a dream, one should only go so far as to let the patient understand that, like Penelope, he unravels during the night what he has woven during the day." And "Her sickness is a danger sign which says 'take care' and she was shown how she was a prisoner within the cage of her own unconscious behavior"; and "They walk as though under pressure, bent over, so that nobody can mistake the heavy load under which they move. They remind us of those Karyatids who supported Greek temples, and spent their whole life holding up porticos." And "Rules of Communal life are just as self-explanatory as rules of climate." And "Time is the chief enemy of the neurotic" and "She gathers reasons like a bee honey in order to shirk" and "The ghost (seen by a psychotic patient who felt himself a failure) was the savior of his self-esteem."

Adler's way of putting things in general has a characteristic pungency and pithiness. About sleep he says, "Even the dreamer often knows that he is dreaming and the person asleep, be he ever so far withdrawn from reality, seldom falls out of bed." And "But sleep is no brother to death." He says, too, "In his attempt to combat the symptom, the patient assumes the right to produce it, and arguing according to his own private logic becomes at the same time judge, complainant, and defendant." Also, "We have seen people who give the impression of competing with themselves in the degree of sorrow they can show." And "Neurotics look on suffering as an entity in itself" and "It has the same effect on me whether a poisonous snake is actually approaching my foot or whether I merely believe it is a poisonous snake." "We receive and act according to a reflected (subjective) idea of the world." And—my favorite of them all—"Character is a social trait. It would make very little difference what sort of character Robinson Crusoe had."

Adler shows his delightful (and never mean) sense of humor when he remarks, "When we now leave rightly the ground of absolute certitude, on which so many psychologists bustle about—"; his use of anecdote helps to make his books pleasant reading and brings his philosophy into high relief. Speaking of a false imitation of social interest, Adler tells the following story:

"An old lady, while attempting to board a street car, slipped and fell into the snow. She could not arise and a number of people hurried past her without noticing her plight until a man stepped to her side and helped her up. In this moment another man who had been hidden somewhere jumped to her side and greeted her chivalrous savior with these words, 'Thank God! I have found a decent man. I have been standing here for five minutes, waiting to see whether someone would help the old lady up. You are the first one to do it.'"

In this way, he used words as well as actions to effect bonds between himself and other people. He points out in *Understanding Human Nature* the obverse side of this idea that a talent for speech and languages depends on secure contact with people. He also says regretfully, "Hate and cruelty may sometimes exist in an artist who ought to stand close to humanity, if he wishes to create valid art." I believe this implied criticism could well apply to many artists practising today in all departments of artistic activity. Adler says that "imagina-

tion is reproduced perception; another evidence of the creative faculty of the soul. The product of imagination is not only the repetition of a perception which in itself is a product of the creative power of the soul, but it is an entirely new and unique product built upon the basis of perception, just as the perception was created on the basis of physical sensations." About imagination he also says "Imagination, by rousing expectant feelings and emotions, has the same effect as the opening of the throttle of a motor car; the activity is increased."

Adler seems to feel that creativeness is linked to the kind of freedom that ideally exists in children, and indeed his own great strength seems to lie in his child-like power of directness to which is added his adult power to generalize and to evaluate. About children he says "One must not forget that children are initially not as stupid as many adults have unfortunately become." And his great gem: "Children are the victims of their incessant mothers and their infrequent fathers." He will live in that sentence. And, "The value thus assigned to rules—the stronger emphasis laid on flexibility and on empathy with shades of difference—has every time strengthened my conviction with regard to free creative power of the individual in his earliest childhood, and his restricted power in later life, when the child has already adopted a fixed law of movement for his life."

Adler recognizes that even early in life one may look forward to an ultimate rather than an immediate social contribution. He says for example, "Solitary occupation should be encouraged in so far as it allows an outlook on future social enrichment. Owing to the nature of certain activities, they can only be exercised and carried out at a distance from other persons; but this by no means detracts from their communal character." And, "Sometimes the path narrows with advance. This is justified in the case of artists who are concentrating on broader contribution."

Adler seems to believe that the second basis and the final spur to creativeness (as indeed to any progress) is the feeling of inferiority. On this subject, he says that the un-do-gooders are useful, too, because they spur on constructive people. "They contribute to the creative feeling of inferiority." This, I believe, is the heart of his conviction.

After having discussed the disadvantages with which humans (compared to other animals) are endowed, he goes on to say, "Who can seriously doubt that the human individual treated by nature in

such a step-motherly fashion has been provided with the blessing of a strong feeling of inferiority that urges him toward a plus situation, toward security and conquest?"

So much for one of the main points Adler makes about creativeness in general and its partial origin in the cornerstone of his thinking; organic inferiority and human compensation.

How can one think of Adlerian psychology in a broad way, historically considered? I will tell you how I think of it:

If you go out from Cairo to Ghizeh, you will see one of the most remarkable sights of the ancient—or modern—world. First you will cross the Nile; then you will see a vast area of desert sand. Then you will see the ruins of the Sphinx and finally you will see three great pyramids, one built by Cheops, one by Chephren and one by Menkaura. These are all symbols to me; to me the Nile means the flow of time; the desert means human ignorance and waste; and the Sphinx means the problems of mankind. The three pyramids near it, to me represent the dynamic psychological structures built of words, in all the waste of sand, by Adler, Freud and Jung. Just as the pyramids were built thousands of years ago, so were these three great structures created toward the end of the 19th century and the beginning of this 20th century. We are still building all of them and I believe that Adler's structure will last as long as Cheops, although its form may change somewhat to meet the needs of the times, the language, and the ideology of people in the future, which Cheops' unyielding structure never did. Let us hope, at any rate, that Adler's will, and that his followers will labor together toward that goal, and see to it that the pyramid itself never becomes the tomb of the builder.

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*"Everything can be something else as well. The uniqueness of the individual cannot be expressed in a short formula, and general rules—even those laid down by Individual Psychology—should be nothing more than an aid to a preliminary illumination of a field of vision on which the single individual can be found,—or missed."*

ALFRED ADLER, *Social Interest*, pp. 11-12.