

A Clinic for Sick Marriages*

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The following article is a condensation of an interview with Dr. Alfred Adler in 1929. It is interesting both for its historical value and its relevance.

Editor

Recently I met a friend of mine who had just returned from a visit to Vienna. She said to me "Have you heard what Adler is doing? He has started a marriage clinic—only he calls it something else—to cure couples who can't agree. He says that as long as two people show the slightest desire to solve their problems there is a way to make their marriage happy. Go to the doctor and stay out of divorce court. Now what do you think of that?"

I thought a good deal; in fact I was fascinated. You may believe in the most liberal of divorce laws, as I do personally, because I don't think that the way to cure unhappiness is by repressing it. But this belief, however sensible it is, doesn't save us from a sinking feeling at times, as we wonder where it is all going to end. Still, I have never before heard of anyone who proposed doing anything about the marriage question except talk about it. Dr. Adler, I knew, was coming to New York soon to lecture, and I wanted to see him and find out more about his plan.

Sitting face to face with Dr. Adler, a few weeks later, I asked him about his marriage clinic. Dr. Adler described how, a year ago, a group of medical doctors and psychologists had formed a marriage advice center in Vienna. It was similar, in a way, to his famous psychological guidance bureau for problem children, which are being copied in several American cities.

The distraught couple tell their troubles to one of the doctors—separately. Each partner is asked to relate his life's story from his earliest recollections, telling without reserve everything which comes to mind, a process which may require a good many sessions. He also describes some of his dreams. On the basis of this recital the doctor asks questions, interprets, probes deeper into the unconscious memories. And there, far back in the past, he comes upon the childish motives of adult acts, of which the patient is unconscious.

"Unhappiness in marriage is merely a mistake, a defect in one's life pattern," Dr. Adler explained. "When two people quarrel, it is not for the

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reason which they themselves suppose. The true cause of the quarreling must be sought far back in the forgotten disturbances of childhood. It is the task of the marriage advisor to dig down to these poisonous roots and bring them up into the light of day, where they will do no more harm."

"And is it always successful?"

"I would not say always, no. But in many, many cases." And he explained that there are certain people who are really nervously sick; and other people who have chosen so grimly the way of selfishness that nothing can make them change.

But after all, we are concerned with the bulk of average, decent, well-meaning people, and any two of these, according to Dr. Adler, can get along. Only they must have help. It takes more than good intentions to overcome the mistaken habits of a lifetime.

One of the commonest causes of matrimonial disaster is the unfaithful husband. Dr. Adler told a story from his own practice of a lady who came to the clinic because she was afraid to go out alone. "She was intelligent, beautiful, young, and had been married one year. Her husband was good looking, intelligent and honest; he loved his wife and she loved him. I soon learned from her, however that he was showing attention to another young woman.

"'When we married we promised each other freedom,' she told me proudly. 'To us jealousy is degrading — we do not believe in claiming a property right. We are free thinkers,' she added.

"Infidelity is easier for men in most societies, and the husband had begun it. She had smiled and been serene, feeling only pride—or so she assured me, in her husband's charm for women. True to their code, she too had looked around. Suddenly her fears began. She developed agoraphobia. He had to accompany her everywhere. He was a prisoner! Desire to keep her husband, in an exceptionally high-strung girl, had produced the nervous symptoms.

"A more stable temperament would have reacted otherwise, but the end result would have been the same. The wife who believes she is a free thinker is deceiving herself.

"As for the husband," Dr. Adler continued, "The man who looks down on women, the man who treats them lightly, is in reality the man who is afraid of women. This man often avoids marriage.

"Now let us look into his mind. From literature, from the attitude of society he has drawn the idea that woman is an inferior being. From early childhood he has felt it his destiny, as a male, to be uppermost," Dr. Adler went on.

"Yet through his dreams, even now, walks the terrifying figure of a giant woman who towers above him, pursues him. She is a dim remembrance of his nursery days when he was actually small, and women—represented by his mother—was a giantess who ruled over him. So his unconscious thought runs as follows: 'As a child I subjected myself to this figure in love. Would it not be embarrassing if, instead of ruling her now as I ought, I found that she still ruled me? By marrying I should place myself in her power!'

"Confronted by this power of woman, the man of whom we speak resorts to flight—or depreciation. If he does not take to his heels, he becomes a Don Juan type, because he must belittle the female sex. If married, he continues his conquests, for what he wants is the sensation of transitory victory, entailing no obligation in return. To express this," Dr. Adler said, "I use a little mathematical formula: 'Two or more women are less than one.' "

The husband in question was a philanderer because he was lacking in confidence, though not consciously; he must always be proving his power with the opposite sex. So when he married he had resolved to be sure of his freedom. His wife was the older of two sisters, and all through her childhood had seen her parents prefer the younger; hence she had a cruel inferiority complex. She was flattered when such an attractive young man paid court to her, the less desirable one, and was therefore ready to subscribe to his extraordinary views of marriage. When the couple was confronted with the real reason for the foolishness they were able to settle their problems. They were intelligent, good-hearted young people, and experience has shown, even with something as serious as philandering or agoraphobia, a mutual desire to correct things accomplishes change with little ado.

In the example we have just considered, Dr. Adler is rather rough on a pet masculine vanity, the vanity of conquests. But he is equally abrupt with that favorite feminine modus of patting oneself on the back for an over-elaborate display of maternal devotion. Among women, except those unusually well equipped with common sense, the mushy mother is rather highly regarded. If she fusses over her off-spring until the child is ruined, and its bored father driven to heaven-knows-where for diversion, well—"I can't take time for that sort of thing myself," say the neighbors, "but she certainly is a devoted mother." From Dr. Adler, however, this martyred lady gets short shrift.

It came out when I urged him to tell me about another case.

"Several years ago," he said, "there came seeking my advice a young couple with a very old story. They had been married three years, and had been quite happy until the birth of a child, who was now one year old.

Since then their marriage had changed. The wife, an attractive, intelligent young woman was no longer interested in looking pretty, and she gave up the outdoor sports of which she had been so fond. If her husband wanted her to go out with him and have a good time, she would say, 'How can I leave the baby?' And she had become frigid toward her husband.

"Such an attitude on the wife's part has a bad effect on her partner. It makes him feel that he is at fault. To convince himself that this is not so, he falls into the habit, as this husband did, of going out with other women. Thus the breach is widened between him and his wife.

"The wife," Dr. Adler said, "was in love with her husband, but she had contradictions. As a girl she had fallen in love with a teacher of hers, although quite aware that on his part that would never be serious. The teacher had married, and persuading herself to forget him, she had married also.

"At that period of her life," Dr. Adler went on, "she had been doing some laboratory work in which she was much interested. Lately she had given it up. She did not feel strong enough to be wife, housekeeper, and scientist. Here we find the explanation of her case. She felt overburdened with her women's duties, and her frigidity was a revolt against her feminine role in life. At the same time the image of her former love came back to mingle with her dissatisfaction and reinforce it. 'It would have been different,' her thoughts whispered, 'if I had married him.' "

At this point we must turn in our discussion to the man who grows up with a deep rooted conviction of the inferiority of women. So far you have heard only half that story; here is the rest. Every woman born has had the same conviction stamped on her soul in early childhood, whether she knows it now or not. She has been told that boys can do things which she cannot; she has felt herself restricted when her brothers have gone free. "A lie in our culture," Dr. Adler calls this discrimination, and no one has done more to point out its stupid falsity than he.

As long as it lasts, however, it will arouse women to rebellion because no one can bear to go through life playing a hopelessly inferior role. Adler terms this rebellion the masculine protest. It takes varying shapes, some social and constructive, many which make trouble. Often it appears as a revolt against the most feminine thing, child-bearing, with its pains and burdens.

And what about our all too-loving mother, who makes maternity not only the first but the only duty of life? Surely there is no masculine protest here? Alas, alas! "By her over anxious maternal devotion" says Dr. Adler, "she shows us that in her heart she wants no more children. Day and night she fusses over the child, she wears herself out needlessly in its care—why? Because she wants to hear people say: 'What a blessing that she has only one!' "

The undervaluation of women—that to Dr. Adler, is a great stumbling block to marital accord. On the one hand, the man who undervalues women will always try to prove what cannot and should not be proved—that he is a superior being, entitled to special privileges. This is the basic reason for many quarrels and antagonisms. On the other hand, many a good and generous spouse, who is himself quite unvexed by ideas of masculine domination, has his life made miserable by his wife's masculine protest.

A girl brought up, let us say, in a household where the boys are preferred may grow to maturity despising women. Hence she may show an exaggerated tendency to be like a man, and will attempt to dominate her husband and children in order to overcome her feeling of inferiority. Again, the wife who sacrifices her husband's comfort to her inordinate social ambitions is seeking a field in which she can be supreme; the heartless coquette is proving to herself, in her own way, that after all she can conquer the dominant sex, the enemy. All these are in the wrong, for it is very bad to sharpen one's sense of superiority at the expense of someone else.

Dr. Adler told me that one of the first aims of a marriage advice center is to educate husbands and wives to come for guidance, early in their troubles, before that dreadful hatred sets in. He even wants young couples to come before they marry, and find out in advance whether or not they will be able to get along together. He admitted that when a married pair are once far gone in bitterness, the task of a psychiatrist is hard. But the fact that they seek his advice at all—that, he admitted is "a very, very good sign."

"Have you cured many people who were right on the brink of divorce?" I asked. "And will you tell me about your worst case?"

"Oh yes. This couple were about to divorce, and they came to me as a last resort. Before that the girl had threatened suicide.

"Her husband was a restaurant owner, and his business required his presence many hours of each day and night. She was jealous of his absences; when she visited the restaurant and saw him being polite to women guests, her silly jealousy increased, and if these guests came regularly she was sure it was to flirt with him. He, on the other hand, was irritated by her clinging to him and sensed a curtailment of his freedom.

"Such extreme jealous fears as this wife displays extend to a man's business. With men it is sometimes the same. The jealous partner is always afraid he or she is being undervalued, even when the mate is reading the newspaper."

The wife in this case, I learned had been pampered in childhood, and she wanted her husband to continue the indulgence—so her psychological

examination revealed. And that was why instinctively, she had chosen an older man. However, the husband or wife who tries to get rid of his inferiority complex by marrying a stronger partner is almost always doomed to disaster, as the stronger one will feel burdened by the demands of the weaker.

"One sees in such choices how strangely and variously people estimate strength," says Dr. Adler. "The partner thought superior may be older or younger, tall, muscular, or a Don Juan. In choosing him the weaker may be misled, because some of these may be concealing feelings of inferiority."

"Spoiled children," he said, "make bad domestic partners unless they are taken in hand by a competent advisor. In almost every case of unsuccessful marriages, some childhood pampering is revealed."

"The really successful husband or wife," Dr. Adler says, "is formed in the first four or five years of childhood. We must never forget that little mistakes made in those days can be corrected. But when they ask for marriage advice, the husband and wife must expect to help each other. Marriage is a task for two."