

CASE INTERPRETATION 1)

Alfred Adler

Here is a case history from one of my students. I must say he is a very well taught student for he wrote a case history which appears to be a correct picture of a girl seven and a half

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years of age. "She was in the second grade of public school." Judging her in regard to her activity, we would say that at seven and a half

some children might be in the third grade. So we would not say that this is a very quick child unless there is some reason. I want to mention this because at the very first sentence of a history you have to think--you have to establish the whole situation in which the child can be seen.

1) Alfred Adler developed a unique technique for teaching how to understand a case history. Reading aloud a description of a person presented to him by a student, he stopped after each sentence to "interpret" the content. Adler frankly admitted that he used guessing in this procedure, thereby introducing into science a technique which up to then was considered the most "unscientific" approach to a problem. But Adler demonstrated that we can learn to "guess in the right direction." Adler opened our eyes to the underlying possibilities of small facts which remain insignificant unless we sense their wider implications.

The present article is one of the few yet unpublished papers left by Alfred Adler. It is a true reproduction of one of his famous demonstrations. Instead of adjusting it to a more literary style, we considered it our duty to leave it in its natural simplicity, which will vividly recall to all those who have heard Adler personally, the tone of his voice and the pattern of his speech, and will provide for those who never had a chance to meet him personally a glimpse of his unique and colorful personality.

---The Editor

We hear now: "She has missed a half year because of illness." Perhaps she is not slow, but still we would not say she is quick. "Tests in kindergarten have rated her with a relatively high I.Q." You see, the test examinations regarding I.Q.'s in kindergarten are not very valuable. Generally I would say the I.Q. always gives you the result of a development; it does not give you the capacity, or perhaps only if you interpret this I.Q., if you know some symptoms with which to interpret this I.Q. Therefore, we are not astonished to be informed that the I.Q. could be changed, probably not for the worse, but for the better.

Now, this child has a good I.Q. We are sure she is intelligent. "Her reading age has been rated as from nine to ten years." Now, we do not believe this to be remarkable. We know only that this child has been trained very well in reading.

"She is the eldest living child in the family." Now I am glad that I can show you an eldest child in its peculiarity. But: "She had a brother born five years previous to her birth, who died at the age of three." Therefore she had not been related to this brother at all. She had not known this brother, and so she is an eldest child.

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Now, we can use our experience at this point, when we are informed that an older brother died. How does this involve the family? This boy, three years of age, dies, and two years later another child comes. Now, we are sure that this other child was cared for very kindly, very thoroughly. This is human and obvious. If it were not so we would be very much surprised. In a family where the first child died the second child is always considered like a revelation, like a redemption. Now, this is such a child in such a position, and we can predict very much on this point. We can understand that this child had been pampered whether it was intentional or not.

But to avoid such a quick guess the writer of this case history gave me something additional. It must be noted. "During the time that this child was a baby until she was at least one and a half years old, her mother was supposed to have tuberculosis and her doctor ordered her to be with her baby only as much as was absolutely necessary for its care. She was not to

fondle or kiss the child. Since the mother was taking complete care of the home, this meant that this child was not fondled or pampered as much as the first child, and less than almost any normal baby." Now, you see, this seems to contradict our guess that this child had been pampered. But does it contradict it? Not at all! This is an only child, and even if the mother was not always with her and did not kiss or fondle her, this child, born after another child had died, was pampered. This is not a question of the number of kisses or of the extent of fondling; it is the whole atmosphere which has pampered this child, and the child does not question how many kisses she receives. This child feels pampered, no matter what the mother does.

The writer continues: "How can this be reconciled with every reaction of the typical pampered child which the case shows?" I believe we can reconcile it; but we do not yet know much about her.

"She has a sister who is now five years old." Now, this poor child was two and a half years old when another child came, and this is a test. We shall see what happened.

"She is at present in perfect physical health, robust, rosy, has a good appetite, sleeps well, has normal height and weight, is very attractive in looks and fortunately not yet self-conscious or conceited about her looks, in spite of the inevitable compliments made constantly to her face by foolish persons about her eyes and her long auburn curls." That this child has been impressed by this is true without question; that she does not show it is a point which must be considered. But

there is also no question ~~that~~ this child, knowing how attractive she is, was pampered the more.

"She was a blue baby when born." This means that her circulatory apparatus did not function properly. "But later her heart seemed to be perfectly normal." However, this does not really mean that this functional condition is now cleared up.

"She is definitely right-handed, but very slow in her movements." This agrees with what we said in the beginning: she is not quick; she is slow. I do not know whether her right-handedness had been tested. If it was tested in the right way, by clasping the hands and crossing in this way the fingers of both hands to see which thumb is on top, then we can say she is really right-handed. "Rather poor coordination, and becomes very clumsy when she tries to hurry ~~with~~ activities as cutting out paper pictures, etc." Now, she is clumsy, and reading this, I would ask about left-handedness. But it says she is right-handed. Then she probably is slow, and is not trained.

"From early babyhood she presented her parents with problems of various types. During the first months of her infancy she exerted herself by sleeping all day and staying awake vociferously from 2 A.M. to 6 A.M. every night." This shows that she had been trained to be awake during the night. This can be done with every child. "This habit was not successfully broken until she was almost three months old, in spite of consistency in training." But this girl had been trained only after the symptom had originated. You see, she should have been trained

before; then it would not have happened. It is very interesting that he speaks of training alone, of using efforts and endeavors. This is not enough. These efforts and endeavors must also succeed--this is necessary. And we can be sure that persons who don't succeed are not trained sufficiently.

"Her degree of determination was phenomenal. At the early age of about five to eight months she showed many signs of nervousness in spite of being very quickly reared on regular schedule, and being a very brown and healthy looking baby." Now I should like to know what is meant by this "being nervous." I would not call crying easily being nervous before I knew more about the case.

"For instance, she would get a nervous tremor of the head if strangers with loud voices talked to her too near to her carriage." Now, she has a certain sensitiveness of the ears, and this would probably make her a very good musician. But we would not call this sensitiveness in the ears nervousness. There are children, and also grown persons, who are terrified by loud noises, and in nearly every city you find meetings to determine how to prevent noises, and there are so many other persons who do not care at all. This is due to the differences in the sensitiveness in the ears, and this child probably has such a sensitiveness. I should be interested to find out if this girl could not be made musical, although I do not believe that she is musical now.

"Certain sounds would make her turn white and sick." Now, this is the same sensitiveness. "As she grew older she began to show a constant resist-

ance to all discipline." Now this is to be expected as she grows older, but we must find out if discipline means what I would consider it means: to make her cooperating. She is an oldest child, in an atmosphere of kindness, pampering, etc., and this child now controls the whole family. "She resists even the mildest restrictions. Any physical restrictions always sent her into a rage."

On this point I want to say she has a certain degree of activity, but we must be very cautious. She has a certain amount of activity at home, but perhaps she does not have it outside the home. We must look.

"To be comfortably strapped into a high chair, to have her hand held, to be forbidden to touch anything--all were resisted." This child wants freedom and does not want others to control her. She wants to control others. This is her goal of superiority. She does not know that she is in the grip of this goal, but we have to know it.

"The same technique used successfully by the family with the other two children always resulted in a revolt by this girl." This is also very interesting. ~~The same mother succeeded~~ with the other children with the same method, but not with this child. We would say first, because she is an oldest child, and besides that, her situation was more intense because an older child had died previously.

"Before she could even talk she would do things that were forbidden, apparently for the fun of transgressing. The mother pretended not to see. The girl would grip or pull her dress, point at the forbidden object, shake

her head 'No, no,' then grab or knock it down or tear it." Now, "this is a girl who tyrannizes already at the time when she could not yet talk.

The mother made very intelligent and very great efforts to make the child cooperating. But this child had not had it explained to her; she does not know that she wants to control in all circumstances. Only if there is a favorable situation, if everybody submits, does she not show bad signs, because then she has what she wants.

To continue: "When she went to a rhythm class, which she loved, she did excellently." This is a very promising child, and I am sure that if the activity of this child can be brought into the right direction she will accomplish very worthwhile things. Because she loved this rhythm class she excelled, and you see what it means to love such a class. It means to feel well, and to feel being in a favorable situation.

A very interesting incident occurred later. "One day driving home from the play school, the girl and a small boy friend were in the back seat of the car and her mother was in the front. The girl remarked brightly and happily, 'Do you know what I think?' Her mother, thinking herself addressed, replied over her shoulder as she drove, 'No, do tell me what,' to which the child gave a sudden scream, threw herself on the floor of the car and yelled all the way home. The mother continued to drive as if nothing had happened." You see, the mother uses a means which is worth while ~~sometimes~~ for a certain length of time--not to pay much attention to such things so that this child does not have the

feeling of being looked at too much, of arousing too much interest, too much attention. But that is not what we want. We want to have this child understand what we understand, that she was made controlling in the first month of her life. You see this, even if others believe it is not so. You see the movements, and the movements speak the truth. It is not what somebody believes or what this child thinks about it. Only the movements are important; and these movements mean: ruling. To be sure, this child has accomplished these ruling movements in a mistaken way, but she has accomplished them.

"Now the mother said, 'We are home now. Are you coming in? Of course, you can't come in while you are making this noise,' (because the child had been screaming until now) 'but you can stay out in the car if you like,' and when you get ready you can tell me why you feel the way you do.'" Now, what if this child did tell, we would see that she does not understand. We know why she feels this way--because she wants to control, and she will utilize everything to control the others.

"The child arose from the floor of the car and said, 'You answered me when I wasn't talking to you at all. I was talking to Teddy.'" You see, the majesty. We understand the child.

Other things are discussed. For instance: "Servant girls complained they could not stand the cunning with which the girl found their weak points and bore down on them without mercy." You see she has a whole guard around her like a majesty, and she rules and controls and is very severe with them.

"She had and has a genius for finding the Achilles' heel in everyone with whom she comes in contact, and aiming subtle poison into it." She is a very clever child, and if this cleverness could be used in good things, in a worthwhile way, she could be marvelous.

"After one is worn to the breaking point she senses it and pushes him over the edge. She has put every new nurse and servant through their paces, and leaves each one exhausted. One kind trained nurse, at the end of a day of saintly patience, sank into a chair beside the bed of the girl's mother, and said, 'Oh, Mrs. _____, what a cross you have to bear in this child.'" Now, this is not so. I would rather believe that this is a lovely child, a promising child. But she must have it explained to her; she must understand her style of life, and how it came to be what it is.

Now happens what always happens in a case like this. The second child goes ahead--the second child adapts herself to this situation, and finds a more favorable place. You see, she finds it easier to succeed, to be kind. She sees how her sister is always repulsed, reproached, and disliked, because it is not always easy to be kind and friendly to such a child. She sees how she is spanked sometimes by the father and also by the mother. So this second child, as is usual in such a case, is very amiable and so goes ahead.

But it is also not entirely sure that this second child is wholly on the right way, because perhaps she is learning now always to meet kindness, and favorable and amiable people. This is possible, and I have seen such cases where a second child, when grown up,

was always fighting, with everybody, ruling the other child, who now had become very kind and amiable. The second one had been shocked by the demands of the school and of later life and became very neurotic. This might not be true of this particular case, but I want to say that it is much more necessary to teach a child to cooperate than, for instance, to conquer the older sister by being kind and amiable.

Now we hear also that the little sister begins to fight the other child and wants her place, and is supported by her own kindness and her better manners. But because we understand the child I can make this brief.

The story continues: "In school she does not respond rightly and does not show any responsibility. The teacher had been working in cooperation with the mother. This last week improvement has been shown through a job of honor allotted to her. She takes the attendance slips each morning into the principal's office. She was not told to take them, but when the teacher has filled out the slips she puts them on the desk and the girl picks them up and takes them in to the principal." You see, she has a more prominent place, and she wants to be prominent. Therefore she does this.

Now in this way, this feeling prominent brings about a certain improvement. And the question arises: is it really feeling for the job and responsibility, or is it the dramatic role of the important person? Now I believe it is the latter. The writer of this story is more inclined to believe that this child behaves in an infantilistic way. I cannot say so. In a certain way everybody behaves like

an infant, because as we have learned, the style of life is born in the early part of an individual's life and recurs always throughout the whole life, so that we are right in saying that the child is father of the man. But I do not see infantilistic trends in the case of this child. These trends would mean, for instance, to lean on the mother and to ask about everything from the mother, and to talk baby talk, and such things. She does not do such things as far as we can see. She wants to rule; and we are not astonished, as we know that she ruled also in infancy.

"She had scarlet fever, which developed into many complications, severe glandular trouble with severe pain, and finally double mastoiditis. She was desperately ill and in great pain for a long time." Now we find out something about the ears. As we said, she has sensitive ears.

"Relatives, neighbors, even servants, have preached corporal punishment." We could have been sure that this was recommended.

Even the writer of this story says at last that the child is gifted. "She has a delightful sense of humor; she is a born actress, and an avid and appreciative reader."

Then he also asks what should be done. Now, if somebody, I do not know who, but if somebody is able to win this child and to convince her of what we have seen now, something could be done. But I do not mean that empty phrases and words should be used. For instance, it would not be enough to tell her, "After your sister was born you were ruling, when a little child."

But you should let her tell everything she wants to tell and what she wants to do. For instance, you should ask her, "What do you want to be when you are grown up?" In this way you can start, and you can prove that she is always looking for a ruling role, where she can rule others. Now, what would she say? Perhaps she would say she would like to be a teacher, because small girls always believe that a teacher is such a ruling person. Or she would say she would like to be something similar. And you can explain it. You can ask her, "Why do you want to be a teacher?" She would tell you and then you could explain to her the things she has said without understanding what they mean.

Then you can ask her about dreams. And then speak to her about the relation of children in the family, how it upsets a child if she wants to keep her place and is confronted with a rival.

And even if this child would refuse the first time, she could not get rid of the influences of this new experience at last, because she would like to prove that you are wrong. Now, how can she prove that you are wrong, that she is not always ruling, that she does not always want to be superior to everybody? How can she prove it? You see, you have the child as if in a trap. **Either** she agrees with you--then she will change--or she does not agree with you--then she will prove that you are wrong and will behave better. But this is possible only if you have won this child, if she cooperates with you, if she listens to you, and if you are friendly and can convince the child.

Now, this must be done in this

case, and it would really be a very worthwhile task. I am sure that you can succeed.

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I want to give you another case history of a problem child, a girl eight years of age. She cries and loses her temper over the slightest things. This seems to be a little similar to the other case because this girl makes herself very important, always being the center of the stage, even in little things. "This gives evidence of a lack of courage and self-confidence," the writer says. I do not know from what reasons this was concluded, but I am sure the writer is correct, because crying and losing the temper always indicate a person who has a feeling of inferiority. And it means using some scheme for being stronger, crying, for instance. I have always called this the "water power." Or such a person uses temper outbursts to conquer another person. You see, it does not mean cooperation and being sure of oneself. It means using tricky methods. This child has an inferiority complex which can be seen in this crying and in the temper outbursts.

"Although doing very well in school, frets about being late." You see, the school plays an important part in the life of the family. Because she is in school the whole family is irritated.

"She has apparent fear and shows evidence of an overconscientious observance of every school regulation." Now you see she makes the school so important that the whole family suffers from it. This is really not the task of the school, but this girl uti-

lizes the school to irritate and control the family. Therefore, this is no cooperation, and we would also not say that this is the right kind of conscientiousness.

She also uses her conscientious behavior for ruling the family directly. This can be done. There are persons who always prove their good conscientiousness to irritate others. They always try to tell the truth to the others to annoy them. They say, "How pale you are! Are you sick?" etc. They tell the truth for the purpose of irritating others. And so it is with this child.

"If something she needs is not in its accustomed place she cries, 'I can't find it,' before she even begins to look." You see how she makes trouble with everything, always. And also her pedantic mood, her pedantic characteristics, show the social relationship between herself and others. To be pedantic means to irritate the others, because you cannot be pedantic without giving others a job; the others have to comply carefully. As for instance, many persons insist, "I want only my quiet." But you cannot give them quiet without taking up a job for them. This desire means ruling others. And so it is in the case of this girl.

"Health history is good, and tonsils were removed last spring." This is this American idea that with the tonsils all evils can be removed.

"She has a sister, five years of age, and a brother, two years of age." She is the eldest and was also dethroned when she was three years old.

"She was a fine baby. Talked and

walked at one and a half years. Clothed herself at three. Went to nursery school at three and kindergarten at four and a half. Now she goes to school. The younger sister does not go to school." Therefore we can understand why she utilizes the school. She does it in order to arrive at her former favorable position of being the first. She does not want to be put back; she does not want her place to be made of less importance.

"She was always very well, happy, and self-sufficient until about five ..." (Now we will look for the reason; she is eight now, and when she was three this other child came) "...when her sister began to attract a good deal of attention." We do not know why. The sister was two years old at this time. Anyway, this is said. I do not know if it is said as we would say it; that the sister began to attract attention when the mother became pregnant and that this child as a consequence felt neglected and wanted to regain her old favorable place.

"Parents made conscious efforts to give her as little cause for jealousy as possible." You see again these "efforts." But they do not succeed. Why? Because this child had been pampered before. She had not been taught cooperation. If she had been taught cooperation she would cooperate with her sister. But they wanted only to train her in regard to jealousy and not to change her style of life. "And they also wanted to avoid the sense of loss of importance. But guests praised the baby sister and overlooked her." That this child, our patient, felt it much more than the parents felt it, is obvious.

"Once the kindergarten teacher

reported that she came in and, finding that she was a little late, burst out in loud cries." Now, this is too much, to be too late and to cry also. One of these would be enough, either being late or crying. But she does not have enough of it if she is only too late; she wants to make trouble, she wants to use the water power, to get away with it, to be favored, to be consoled, etc.

"Since then she has cried several other times in school because she had been successful in crying when something went wrong or was not clear. Does not seem to have enough courage or assurance to ask teacher to explain." I do not agree with this idea. I believe much more that she prefers to cry instead of having it explained.

"Condition has not improved. Frequently she appears stubborn and sulky, although at times she is very happy and cooperative." We know what these times are. These are the times when she feels appreciated, when she feels she is in the first place. Then she cooperates.

"Is extremely fond of reading, swimming, and hiking." Now, these are active signs; therefore in a certain way we could say this is an active child. And this is an easy case to treat. She is only encouraged in her way by her environment. The environment gives her too much chance to develop in this particular way. But this girl had been a fine baby. She cooperated when she was a baby. She dressed herself alone, and now she can swim at eight years of age, which is mostly a sign of an active child. Children who

are not active usually have trouble in learning to swim.

"Her continual whining and crying have discouraged the parents, who frequently find themselves scolding her." You see, this is what I always explained. At last such a child is right in feeling put back, because when she causes worry she is scolded. It is only since her sister came. You see, this is her meaning; and this meaning rules her completely. It is always how we interpret, what our opinion tells us, that decides our behavior. We do not behave according to the truth, not according to the real cause; but only what we mean, what our opinion is of the truth, is important.

"They scold her although they realize that this is no cure." Certainly. But we see that all the efforts which the parents have made would produce different results if the child knew what she wants to achieve, namely, to feel superior, to weaken the others. If the girl knew that she uses temper tantrums, crying (the water power), making a fuss in school, in order to suppress others, to get away with everything, to be in the center of the stage, wittingly or not, she would look for other ways, she would not be the same any more, she would be changed. She would change because every time when she would have a temper tantrum or when she would cry (for she would cry also after having the cause explained to her) her crying would be accompanied by the thought, "People probably believe I am crying now in order to be the center of the stage," and this would not fit very well into her striving for superiority.