

Re-education Through Counseling

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In the work of a child guidance center, the counselor sees many children whose parents have brought them for help in various problems. These children have already begun to form wrong attitudes toward life, manifested in various alibis and refusals to participate and in their determined retreat into their own private logic. The work of re-directing them through counseling is educational as distinguished from psychiatric treatment which is necessary with those who have become the victims of neurosis. The aim of the counseling is rather to prevent the development of neurosis. The counselor treats the problem situation and in so doing must consider every fact of the child's short life—all of his relationships in their totality. In such work, one cannot help regretting the fact that few children growing up have the benefit of psychological guidance, the more so since one hears from all sides of adjustment difficulties and delinquency in our youth. We know that a great number of children grow up into life and do find their way. But there are many who slip through childhood and adolescence into early adult life without finding a useful direction. Of these we seldom hear. They are at an age when they are expected to be adult; they are not a threat to the community,—their difficulties are measured only in terms of their own private suffering and the dismayed concern of their families. Their problems have gone beyond the small world of their homes; they are on the front line of life and are forced to cope with problems of living more complex than what is expected of children and which their parents can no longer help them solve.

Some of these troubled young adults eventually come or are brought to the counselor for help, and again the counseling is of an educational rather than a psychiatric nature just as in child guidance work. There is this difference, however; these young people must come alone for help,—they do not, in this new situation, have the cooperation of their parents. As is the case in the guidance of children, the present situation is considered as the product of the whole life of the person, and the present relationships are viewed in the light of the early ones.

It is from this point of view that the author reviews the re-education through counseling of three young women under twenty-five years of age, whose wrong attitudes toward life—formed from misconceptions in early childhood—had thrown them into confusion, with damage to their health, their happiness, and their usefulness.

These three young women are the grown-up counterparts of children seen time and time again in the child guidance centers: Anne, the unhappy dethroned little princess, who refused to grow up; Ruth, the "good" little girl whose anxiety to please made her fearful and withdrawn; Mary, who felt she could not be accepted and so became the angry, defiant little girl.

ANNE is twenty-three years old. She is an oldest child with a sister three and a half years younger. The mother seems to be a powerful, dominant person who probably has many difficulties herself. There appears to be a poor marital relationship between the parents. A few years ago the father had a breakdown; he was a very disturbed man, addicted to drinking. He recovered to a degree, however, is working again and drinks much less.

These parents were completely devoted to their first little child, Anne; they loved her a great deal, and Anne was extremely pampered during her first three and a half years. Today she is a beautiful girl, very attractive and intelligent, and although shy, she does not give the appearance of having difficulties. As a child she was lovely and appealing, and early pictures show that she was dressed beautifully by her mother who made a little princess of her. With the arrival of her sister, however, things changed for Anne. Her early recollections indicate that there was great competition between her and her sister and that she hated her sister. Anne always thought that she was dumb and her sister was smart, and with this misconception of her own abilities, she developed a pattern of life in which the longing to be "mamma's little girl"—the princess that she once was—was more powerful than the wish to develop. She became the dethroned oldest child who just did not want to grow up; she was a bed-wetter until her fifteenth year. She had scarcely any friends. In high school she was a fairly good student, but did not have the will to continue her education after graduation; the sister, however, went on to college. Anne took a commercial course and got a job as a secretary. She was conscientious in her

work but not really interested in it. At home she made a very minor contribution toward expenses; her parents asked very little of her and she kept her earnings for clothes and luxuries. She looked into the world as a child would, without feeling herself called upon to do anything or work toward being anything. She thought a great deal about pretty clothes, and did little at home but work to make herself beautiful. She read cheap magazines and dwelled a great deal on sex, of which she had romantic conceptions. She liked to walk in fashionable neighborhoods looking at the beautiful houses and day-dreaming of a wonderful prince who would take her and enthrone her in one of these splendid places. Finally she met a young man from a higher station in life who personified to her all she had dreamed of and expected would rightfully come to her. Her romance continued with this young man for about a year, when one day he informed her that he had married a young society woman. He continued to pay attention to Anne, however, and she continued seeing him in spite of his marriage; she felt that he gave her so much, he was so cultured, he was the glamorous man she had always waited for. But when her sister at about this time became engaged and began to make plans for an early marriage, Anne broke down completely. Her sister's success plus her own unhappy involvement with the young married man was too much for her and brought on the critical stage in which she came for help. She had stopped working, would not eat, grew thin, and resorted to all the attention-getting mechanisms one sees in dealing with young children. She had long crying spells, had a "blank" feeling, and suffered from dizziness. She went to a physician who recommended counseling.

The first step was the establishment of a relationship with Anne in which an effort was made to form a bridge between her and the outside world from which she was completely withdrawn. In the early counseling sessions Anne was almost incoherent; she wept and sobbed continually and the data of her life came very slowly and painfully. But at length she grew quieter, and began to respond to efforts to instil in her some confidence in herself. She began to understand her own childish concepts and values,—to remove the blindfold from her eyes so that she could see what she was doing to retain her childhood behavior and dependency. After about six weeks, she was able to resume her work.

Anne was ready now for the discussions concerning the more

constructive values of life. During this phase of the work Anne related dreams which showed a great deal of fear, even amounting to panic. Her father's breakdown had occurred when she was about fifteen or sixteen and it had disturbed her greatly. She felt she was like her father and feared that she would end in a mental institution. But as she understood herself better, her dreams became less disturbing.

After two or three months, she reported meeting a young man who was extremely intelligent and who treated her with a great deal of insight and understanding. There developed between John and Anne a good friendship, but when John wanted marriage, Anne became confused and frightened. She retreated again into childhood behavior, exhibiting childish attention-getting mechanisms. John found that it disturbed her greatly when he pressed her for response, and very wisely he gave up trying to press her into marriage. He has now moved to another city but they carry on a friendly correspondence. Anne feels toward him like a child toward a mother. She does not let herself get close to him because she does not feel herself to be enough of a woman. She is afraid that she is not really *able* to give. Actually she wants to be petted and pampered by him but is not *willing* to give of herself. She still wants to be the mamma's girl and puts him in the role of an adoring parent. Anne's mother has opposed marriage since the young man is of another nationality. This has deepened Anne's indecisiveness, not so much because she has her mother's false idea of prestige, but because, wanting to be mamma's little girl, she still must please mamma.

At present she is being helped in the direction of developing social interest through her participation in psychodrama. Here she has an opportunity to act out her childish difficulties at home, her dependency, her relationship with her parents, and to become better integrated with others. Here, too, she has made a friend of Ruth, who is twenty-four years old. For the first time in her life, Anne is taking steps into adult life; she is becoming interested in people. At the same time she finds herself less interested in the values of her former girl friends; she reported finding their conversation "silly."

During the counseling, Anne became more confident of herself and less burdened with childish inferiority. She still yields to and enjoys an indulgent home environment. The hardest step she has to take is to accept the idea of marriage and to see through and understand her difficulties as related to her mother and sister. She has been

awakened somewhat, however, as the following account of her experience in psychodrama will show.

In the early part of the work, she played only the role of spectator; she was very slow to warm up either to the group or to her own role. But as time went on she began to enter into the situation. She became more willing not only to work with others but to enact her relationship to her mother, to her sister, and to her boy friends. In the development of her roles she still plays the part of a child calling on her mother for help, and displays a limited concept of the responsibilities of home-making and baby-tending. Further work in psychodrama would indicate a need for roles in which she would enact the part of a grown daughter rather than a small daughter, and roles in which she would have opportunity to develop concepts of herself as an adequate wife.

RUTH is twenty-four years old and an only child. She has a very possessive mother. Information from Ruth and from her mother shows that the mother has a strong masculine protest and rules a soft, gentle, yet intelligent father. Mother was always pointing out to Ruth that father didn't achieve anything,—that he studied but did not work through to a finish; mother was constantly lamenting the hard struggle which this had caused. The parents wanted to do everything for their adorable little girl, who was pampered and over-protected. At the same time, Ruth's mother was very authoritative; Ruth was intimidated by her mother's anger, and became anxious to win her approval. During early childhood she suffered from attacks of asthma, but never temper tantrums. As she grew older, the parents, especially the mother, transferred to the child their thwarted ambitions, wanting her at all costs to achieve what neither of them were able to achieve in life: recognition, status, prestige in a profession. They dwelled on success in a career rather than what life could mean for her as a woman and mother and friend. In this forcing atmosphere, Ruth played the role of the sweet, docile little girl, and she is now an attractive young woman who smiles a great deal, but whose smile is like a mask behind which one can see a very distressed, fearful little girl. Ruth has been made intensely anxious in her wish to please her powerful, authoritative mother, so that she is now afraid of being unable to please anybody while desperately anxious to do so. The only achievement she

has known is in her profession, in which she does have a very responsible position for one so young. She is only now just beginning to make efforts to solve the other two tasks of life, love and social interest. Up to the age of twenty-four she had had no close friendships with men.

Ruth was a very tense young woman who felt herself completely isolated from her contemporaries. She never had fun, never went anywhere, and had a very wrong conception of her achievements and future. She never saw herself in the role of a woman, thinking of herself as in a man's role in which she competed with her father to win her mother's approval.

Ruth, like Anne, wept and sobbed in the early part of the counseling. At this time she had dreams of great violence against her parents. The good little girl who had to conform to her parents' wishes finally was able to see herself in real life and it was an upsetting experience. She got rid of her anger in crying spells during counseling. But even in these sessions, Ruth must be the good girl; she tried always to be an "honor student" and it was difficult to get her to see that this is not necessary and to admit certain of her shortcomings. Except in the dreams of violence against her parents, she had never expressed her anger. But she did not feel at ease at all except in her work. It took a long time to win her trust, and her first outburst of anger was directed against the counselor, whom she caricatured as a ridiculous figure in a dream. As time went on she became more able to speak up at her work where she was in charge of a group of girls, not letting them impose on her as she in her "goodness" had been allowing them to do. At home she did not need so much to appease her mother and began to act more independently. Her mother responded well to the counselor and became able to accept the new independence of Ruth; she is now even anxious to cooperate with her. The counseling has been in progress for four months. Ruth is working now to free herself from her need to please her mother and from her need to identify herself with her mother. She is also venturing, somewhat hesitantly and fearfully, on the third task of life, her relation with the other sex. For a few weeks she participated in psychodrama in an effort to work out her hostilities. Here she met Anne and found for the first time someone she does not need to appease. The bashful, retiring little girl found herself forming an adult relationship with another young woman who is striving to grow up.

In psychodrama, in roles in which she was herself, Ruth expressed

stereotyped patterns of approved social behavior. But in a tense scene, in which she was enacting the role of mother to Anne, she expressed deep anger. As Anne's mother she threatened Anne for going out with a young man of whom she, as the mother, disapproved. So it is possible for Ruth, in psychodrama, to release her anger in roles other than her own. It is hoped that through further role-playing in psychodrama Ruth will learn to understand her own feelings of anger and to relate herself to real life situations in a more constructive way.

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MARY, twenty-four years old, a late-born child, has a sister seventeen years older and a brother fourteen years older. Mary's mother, like the other mothers, was very dominating, showing little acceptance for men, and ruling the father. There is this point of similarity in the lives of these three young women: their mothers were towering figures who, in their desire to express their own power, impeded their daughters in their efforts to cope with the problem of growing up. Mary's recollections of childhood reveal that she had temper tantrums and was a "terror." She herself says she never felt accepted by her mother and that she hated her mother. Mary's parents during the course of years became more secure financially and tried to compensate with the **youngest child for their inability to do things for the two older children.** Mary took full advantage of this. She played the helpless baby at home in an effort to prove to herself that she was accepted by her mother, who waited on her hand and foot. There were violent arguments during the years. The mother could not understand this turbulent child, for the older sister had been the "good one" in the family, and she was held up constantly to Mary as a model in goodness and virtue. Mary's way out was to become the "bad," angry little girl. In late childhood she gave up the temper tantrums, but was always on the defensive, seeing the world as Adler has said, as "a land of enemies." She did, however, aim to be the intellectual of the family. She was the only one who studied, but she did not carry through in these efforts. She became discouraged and lived in her own shell, hostile towards the world and fighting whenever and however she could. She had hectic working relationships later with her associates on the job; she was difficult also with acquaintances and never allowed a friendship to grow. She was an utterly lonesome person and lacked spontaneity and joy. Anger was her supreme possession and it was very

hard in the counseling association to reach her. Mary would not or could not cry as did the others. Her relationship with the counselor was stormy: she fought constantly, arguing points, trying to come out on top. She put on a cold, stony front, which might have seemed to be arrogant and aloof had it not become evident that this was a mask covering panic and fear—fear of not being accepted by her fellow men. Only when Mary realized that she was accepted fully in spite of her shortcomings was she able to break through the wall which she had built up between her private world and the outside world.

Eventually she joined a group of girls working in psychodrama and began to make her first real friends. Later she met a young man who seemed to be much interested in her but who himself had a great many personality difficulties. He proposed to her and out of a desire to lead a mature life, Mary accepted without being really ready. Fortunately she recognized the mistake soon enough and broke her engagement.

The life with her parents at home continued to work against her growth; they gave her a great many material comforts and over-indulged her. She was never required to contribute anything, but at the same time they pressed her to get married, seemingly at any cost. This made it extremely hard for her to develop in the new direction. She began to see that she must break this tie. She did not feel ready for marriage but had achieved enough adulthood not to need the over-indulgence and protection of her parents. She finally moved into a co-operative home where there was considerable social activity among the young people in residence. She has gained a great deal of buoyancy and spontaneity, has begun to enjoy life, and has a much better relation with her co-workers. She now feels much more at ease with young men, since she no longer feels she must make conquests of them, and she is working towards acceptance of the other sex. Above all, she does not feel slighted and left out in life as she did before.

There was, in the first psychodrama sessions, a clear picture of her "role-conflict." On the one hand there was her private desire to be a little girl, and on the other hand, her cultural aim which was to be a sophisticate of the world. In one scene, she stood pigeon-toed, pouting and twirling a curl, and glared at her "mother" who was insisting that she drink a glass of orange juice at breakfast. She could think of no other way to close the scene than to run out angrily, screaming "Don't treat me as a child!" and slamming the door. In another scene in which

she envisioned herself as she might be ten years from now, she was an extremely successful, cultured writer of plays. She was living on a large estate which included a stable of horses. Men were in constant attendance upon her but were uniformly rejected by her. When the stable caught fire, she was helpless as a child and completely unable to think of anything to do. After considerable work in psychodrama she showed definite development in handling situations and began to enact her roles in a more useful fashion.

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These three cases demonstrate the similarity between the behavior of difficult children and that of maladjusted young people who are at an age when they should be grown up. The pattern of life in these cases is what it was when the individual was a child. The main difference is that the behavior is not as direct and overt as in the formative period. Anne, as a child, would perhaps have run to her mother and clung bodily to her when she was having difficulty with another child. Now, she asks her mother to make her sister stop wearing her clothes, rather than trying to handle the situation herself. Mary, as a child, might kick or pinch. Now she demonstrates arrogance and aloofness. Another point of difference is that in counseling young adults there is often missing the active cooperation of the families. In dealing with children the mothers enter actively into understanding the growing pattern of life of the child, and work every day with the child in all situations. Then, too, with the young child, the pattern of life is not so firmly established and so concealed. It is easier to deal with problems at an earlier age. But with acceptance and belief in the potentialities of the young adults, much can be done to help them to relate themselves to the grown-up world in which they find themselves and in which they should function.