

TWO LETTERS TO A PATIENT

ALFRED ADLER

INTRODUCTORY COMMENT

In a search for biographical material on Alfred Adler, I turned to Dozent Dr. Karl Nowotny who has since died. He told me that he had been close to Dr. Adler and his family, but that he had no documents. One anecdote which he told me was that it took quite a long time to persuade Adler to move the lectures of the Individual Psychology Association from a coffeehouse to a lecture hall at the University. I was particularly interested in this, because I myself have had several opportunities to observe the coffeehouse meetings.

During one of my friendly conversations with Dr. Nowotny about our observations, a lady who collected autographs was present. She told us how, by chance, she came into possession of autographs of Adler. She was acquainted with an heir of a lady who had been a patient of Adler, and succeeded in preventing the destruction of Adler's letters to this patient. In these letters Adler gave advice and interpretations. When others and I pointed out to the autograph collector the importance of these letters beyond the autographs, she kindly placed photocopies of the letters at my disposal. She did not want her name to be mentioned.

To this I should like to add that the patient was the wife and mother-in-law of generals, and was a very influential person during World War I. Today her family is still highly respected. It is unlikely that with other patients Adler would have had the time and taken the trouble to advise them by letter. These letters in which Adler counseled the general's wife who was not too severely sick, should therefore be something unique which should be recorded in the history of psychotherapy.—H. A. BECKH-WIDMANSTETTER, M.D., Ph.D., *Vienna*.

ORIGINALS

Sehr geehrte gnädige Frau!

Also wieder einmal recht traurig! Aber warum? Gibt's wieder einen Grund, sich abzuschliessen, die Welt und ihre Schönheit und damit auch ihre Menschen klein zu machen? Also sagen Sie sich nur

ruhig, was Sie wünschen, ohne Bangen, und wenn es schwer hält, durchzudringen, so kämpfen Sie lieber dafür, und sollte es unmöglich sein, so bedenken Sie, nicht alle Wünsche können in Erfüllung gehen.

Vielleicht aber lässt sich Manches schlichten, wenn Sie nur mehr Lebensmut gewinnen, keine Gefahren wittern oder an die Wand malen. Es wird schon alles gehen!

Von all dem durchdrungen

grüsst Sie

Ihr ergebener

10. IX. 1911

Dr. Adler

Dr. Alfred Adler
Nervenarzt
Wien, I. Dominikanerbastei 10

Sehr geehrte gnädige Frau!

Schauen Sie! Wenn ich auf diesem Blatt Papier bis hierher schreiben will, so muss ich so viele Worte nehmen als nötig sind, um den Raum auszufüllen. Und wenn Sie, um Ihren, wahrscheinlich berechtigten Willen (keine Kinderpflege, keine vermehrten Ausgaben, keine neuen Enkel!!! Bauch, Koliken) durchzusetzen, nicht direkt mit Worten oder Handlungen vorgehen wollen, nichts destoweniger aber doch Ihr Ziel erreichen wollen, so müssen Sie aus sich das Bild einer müden, kranken Frau machen, die alle Zeit und alles Geld für sich braucht. Dies muss so deutlich werden, dass es sich jedem aufdrängt. Und die Koliken, die Stuhlverstopfung etc. eignen sich ja sehr gut dazu. Kurz, Sie müssen, wie ich oben, so vieles hinein konstruieren, *damit* Sie an Ihr unerlässliches Ziel kommen. Oder mit anderen Worten: Ihr Ziel,— sich nicht schädigen, nichts einzubüssen,—ist so stark, dass es die geeigneten Krankheitssymptome erzwingt. Hätten Sie dieses Ziel nicht, so hätten Sie auch keine Koliken. Soweit ich dies aus der Ferne beurteilen kann. Oder: Solange Sie Symptome haben, sieht man, welches Ziel Sie verfolgen. —

Herzliche Grüsse

Ihr ergebener

Adler

22. II. 1913

TRANSLATIONS

My dear Madam:

So you are again very sad! But why? Is there again a reason to seclude yourself, and thereby to belittle the world and its beauty and thereby also its human beings? Well then, tell yourself calmly, without fear, what it is that you wish; and if it is difficult to prevail, you should still better fight for it; and if it should be impossible, remember that not all wishes can be fulfilled.

But perhaps quite a bit can be smoothed out if you only gain more courage to live, do not suspect any dangers, nor paint them on the wall. Everything will be alright!

Fully convinced of all this, I send you my greetings.

Yours sincerely,

Dr. Adler

September 10, 1911

Dr. Alfred Adler
Neuropsychiatrist
Vienna I, Dominikanerbastei 10

My dear Madam:

Look! If I want to write on this piece of paper till here — then I must use as many words as necessary to fill out the space. And so it is with you, in carrying out your probably justified will (not to look after children, no increased expenditures, no new grandchildren!!! stomach, colic). If you don't want to proceed directly with words or acts, but want to reach your goal just the same, you must make out of yourself the picture of a tired, sick woman who needs all the time and all the money for herself. This must become so clear that it impresses itself on everyone. And the colic, the constipation, etc., are, after all, very appropriate for that. In short, you must, as I did above, build so much into the situation, *in order to* arrive at your indispensable goal. Or, in other words, your goal—not to hurt yourself, not to suffer any loss—is so strong that it enforces the appropriate symptoms of illness. If you did not have this goal, you would also have no colic. This is as far as I can judge from a distance. Or, as long as you have symptoms, one sees which goal you are pursuing.

Cordial greetings,

Yours sincerely,

Adler

February 22, 1913

DISCUSSION

The interest of these two letters is threefold: First, they show that Adler also had patients from the highest circles of Viennese society. This does not contradict the fact that, according to the computations of Izydor Wasserman (6), Adler must have had approximately 26% upper-class patients, 38% middle class, and 36% lower class. We may recall an exchange a few years ago between Wasserman (5) and Ansbacher (2) about the meaning of these statistics. Wasserman contended that the difference between Freud's Psychoanalysis and Adler's Individual Psychology derived from the fact that most of Freud's patients belonged to the wealthy upper class (74%), and the bulk of Adler's patients to the middle and lower classes (74%). Ansbacher replied that both, psychological theories and the choice of patients, derived from the personalities of Freud and Adler.

Second, it is noteworthy that Adler wrote to a "Frau General," the address he used in a postcard written to the same patient before the first letter, in exactly the same manner which he would have used with anyone else. For him, obviously, there was not one psychotherapy for the rich and another for the poor. Politely, but firmly, he gave the Frau General the same explanation of her illness as can be found in any of his published works.

Third, letters of Adler are very scarce. We do not know of any published letters except those which have been reproduced in Phyllis Bottome's and Hertha Orgler's biographies (3, pp. 84 & 111; 4, facing p. 204) and in the diary of Lou Andreas-Salomé (1, pp. 33, 35 & 160-161). Nevertheless, Adler is known to have written many letters, of which many are likely to have been destroyed. There has been no organized attempt to find and preserve Adler's letters, as has been done with Freud's and Jung's. One hopes that the publication of the above two letters will draw attention to the pressing need to collect all the extant correspondence of Alfred Adler.—HENRI F. ELLENBERGER, M.D., *University of Montreal*.

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