Alfred Adler Remembered

Roy Ridgway

Just before he died of a heart attack during a lecture tour of Britain in 1937 I heard Alfred Adler, the inventor of that over-used term the 'inferiority complex', give a talk about his brand of psychology, which he called Individual Psychology, and about his theory that everybody had a guiding fiction, which had something to do with the will to power, and nothing much to do with sex.

An unprepossessing, tubby little man, he spoke with a deep voice, thick with German gutturals. As a teenager, just released from a sentence of penal servitude called school, I warmed to this strange, gnome-like foreigner because of his damning criti-

Roy Ridgway is managing director of International Integrated Health, which is currently running projects in Russia and Ukraine. He was formerly editor of Holistic Medicine.

cisms of teachers, his main complaint being their neglect of what he called 'soul training'. Teachers failed to understand children and their needs, he said, and corporal punishment, which was practised widely when I was a boy, he described as unnecessary cruelty. The first four years of life, he maintained, were the most crucial and were when a person's 'style of life' was established. He also talked about a child's position in the family having an important influence on the development of personality.

That lecture in Picton Hall, Liverpool, had a profound and lasting effect on me. It was not only his championship of the child that impressed me, but also that I felt he was right when he said most psychological problems could be cured by the cultivation of social interest. Today my best moments come in the midst of action — or in 'the action of Brahmin'. Going with the flow. Letting things happen naturally and spontaneously. And not doing anything for myself alone, but sharing, working with others and for others. That gives me most satisfaction and a sense of fulfilment.

Some of Adler's teachings, however, left me confused for many years, particularly his theory that everybody had a 'guiding fiction' — until the 1970s, in fact, when I read Rollo May, Erich Fromm, Paul Tillich, Abraham Maslow and others who described themselves as existentialist, humanistic or transpersonal psychologists.

The other day I came across my diary for the second half of 1977 and suddenly realised that everything I thought and felt in that year had begun as a seed of truth planted forty years previously, in 1937 in Picton Hall, Liverpool. It was in 1977 that I learnt about Eric Berne's 'script' and 'anti-script' and the games people play, and Sartre's 'original project.' Some of these theories seemed to echo the teachings of Adler. 'You can either live your life,' said Sartre, 'or tell a story.' For me personally 1977 was a time of crisis, when I saw myself for the first time as a kind of fictitious character, and I didn't like what I saw. I wasn't living my life — I was telling a story.

Now, in my old age, I am not bothered by the things that bothered me then. I think I can say that most of those problems, which were problems of identity, have been resolved in my mind; but I can still take myself back to 1977 and relive the anguish. This anguish was the loss of self, which was not, as I had hoped, the Buddhist Nirvana, but an existential hell.

I know now that you need the fiction. There's no way you can abandon it — you can change it, but to live in society you must, to some extent, go along with the collective illusion or, as some describe it, consensus reality. You must play society's games; you can help to change the rules, or you can modify the story and in retrospect re-order reality to create a new pattern or story. It is, however, no use playing these games unless you are also aware of that part of the mind that is uncontaminated by society or history. The important thing is to acknowledge the fiction.

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From my diary:

'Krishnamurti talks about love, about compassion. He doesn't preach; he doesn't give advice. He talks, as he says, without the "me" talking.

'Love depends on going below the surface and seeing the seed of life that is hidden there. Love is able to draw forth the seed from its hiding place, helping it to grow.

'Unah K said: "Your problem is a spiritual one of identity, rather than a straightforward one of a psychological hang-up. Meeting yourself rather than the person you think you are might be painful, so I suggest you should see a priest who would help more than a psychiatrist. You are fairly expert at defending yourself, so you need someone with eyes to see you and sufficient love to help you see yourself."'

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'I said to Dennis that I was going through a spiritual crisis.

'"Spiritual with a small s or a capital S?" Dennis asked.

'"I don't know what you mean," I said.

'"Well, Paul Tillich said spiritual with the small s was an awareness of a life force or cosmic energy moving through you and through all things. The large S was spiritual in the religious sense — faith in God."

'"The problem is somewhere in between," I said.

'I told him about a mandala I had come across recently consisting of a circle surrounding a series of diminishing triangles. Looking at it gave me a feeling of going into myself — in and in until there was just the void.

'"Have you had any mystical experiences?" Dennis asked.

'I told him about a dream I'd had about removing a loose tooth which had been bothering me and how relieved I was when it finally came away. It was huge, like a rock that was black and crumbly in parts. When I woke up an image came to me of a rock being lashed by mountainous waves. The rock was a defence against the encroachment of the sea. The sea was soul-force, which had broken down my defences in a very positive way to give a sense of relief.

'At about that time I became aware of what the Buddhist psychologist calls "dualistic fixation" — the subject/object split. I and the world are not split in two. I am the world. I am everything I see and feel.

'I had another dream of walking down the steps of a cathedral — like the steps of Liverpool Cathedral where I worshipped as a young man. The last step was a long, long drop and I was stuck there. I couldn't quite abandon God.'

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'At times when I am troubled I say to myself "Leave it to your Buddha nature". But then I find myself fighting my Buddha nature and my breathing goes wrong. I try to do the breathing myself. *It* doesn't breathe. *I* breathe. "I" is an image and an image can't breathe.'

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'James and I were screaming "*Yes! No! Yes! No!*" at each other for several minutes and then suddenly we collapsed into each other's arms.

'"I appreciate you, Roy, you're so warm," James said. "You're a great big, warm-hearted person. A great big heart!"'

'I felt I was being praised for a performance rather than the person I was.'

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'I said I felt sad — very sad. "People think I'm a jolly person, but I'm really very sad." At that moment I thought of the words of Byron, "And if I laugh, 'tis that I may not weep."

'I felt tears well up. I felt a yearning for something. I wanted to be happy, but I wasn't. I looked round at all the faces in the group and felt a terrible sadness.

'"Now I'm trembling," I said.

'"Stay with the feeling," James said.

'I showed everyone my hands which were trembling. I didn't try to stop the trembling. But it did stop. And suddenly I felt incredibly relaxed.

'At lunch time Briar said, "I feel I know you better now, Roy. I've never seen you looking sad before, but then I've never really believed in the hearty, jovial person you seem to be . . ."

'"Look," I said, "the only reason why I said anything this morning was to encourage the others. I'm sad, happy, aggressive, jealous, mean, compassionate, loving, bitter, angry — everything!"

'Briar walked away.'

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'If you go down and down until you can't go any further and you feel you're at the bottom of a pit, and you stay with this feeling and don't try to do anything about it, something remarkable happens. You suddenly explode into life.

'Fritz Perls explains this. The awareness of the now, he says, is all that is needed to solve all neurotic difficulties. When you reach the bottom and there's nothing you can do to help yourself and you become aware of the impasse, the impasse collapses and you find yourself through it.

'This tallies with what Krishnamurti has often said, that you go on creating more and more problems by trying to fight pain or fear or any kind of distress, and that the only way to deal with distress is to become aware of it — in other words, staying with it and not separating yourself from what you feel. The concept of the self as something apart from what you feel is a fallacy. You are what you feel. When you accept that — when you accept the fear, the distress, the despair and so on and don't try fighting it, you suddenly find you are through it — and, as Fritz says, you explode into life.'

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People talked a lot about authenticity in the 1970s. There was the authentic self, which most intelligent, sensitive people wanted for themselves, and the more common pleasure-loving, ego-centric, escapist phoney self, trapped in the past. And there was an authentic way of speaking and writing — telling it like it is — which produced some very moving prose and poetry.

The truth is like a seed that when planted grows of its own accord. It has a life of its own. You see it, you recognise it and that's all you need do. Your life becomes an expression of that truth. I realise now that Adler planted a seed in my mind all those years ago in Picton Hall, Liverpool, that has gone on growing throughout my life. The guiding fiction is necessary in order to live in society and avoid the madhouse, but the energy comes from the seed of life below the surface.