

Reflections On Fifty Years As An Adlerian
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I am thinking it would be accurate to say my life as an Adlerian began the day I first watched Dr. Rudolf Dreikurs, a protégé and colleague of Adler in Vienna, conduct a family counseling demonstration at a convention of the American Personnel and Guidance Association in Las Vegas in 1968.

I had just finished my doctorate and was employed as the Associate Director of the Counseling Bureau at the University of South Carolina.

In my graduate education no professor had ever conducted a live counseling demonstration. When watching Dreikurs, it became apparent that he was using some principles and techniques that I hadn't learned. I believed he helped this family understand the effect of their behavior and helped them take an enormous step forward. I knew I needed to know more about how Dreikurs was able to function so effectively.

At the end of the session, it was announced that anyone who wished could meet Dreikurs and his colleagues that evening at Caesar's Palace. I was looking forward to attending and afraid it would be so crowded I wouldn't be able to get in. When I arrived, I found there were 25 or 30 people there plus the Adlerians. I learned about the existence of summer workshops in Chicago and then and there was determined to study with this man.

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I remember so clearly flying to Columbia from the Las Vegas Conference with the vivid thought that this experience could give direction to my professional life.

The University supported my request to study with Dreikurs and soon I was in the class with the great man and about 26 others on the first day of the workshop. When it came my turn to say a few words about myself, I mentioned that I was involved in Counselor Education. Dreikurs interrupted me to say: "Counselor Education is bankrupt." I said well, we need to improve in some areas – and he again interrupted to say, "I said, Counselor Education is bankrupt." You could see, Dr. D was not one to beat around the bush. And you know what, he was completely accurate. I was soon to learn counselors could be of so much more help to young people and their families than counselor education realized at the time. I learned important principles and techniques every day, largely by seeing them put into practice in counseling demonstrations. In one such demonstration, a mother came in, sat down beside Dreikurs, and let out a sigh. Dreikurs put his hand up and said, "Don't say anything else." He went on to offer a remarkable description of the woman's life and her private logic: "I am feeling overworked and unappreciated. I feel like I lay down my life for my family, and yet nobody respects me, my children ignore me and act like I'm their servant." The mother's jaw dropped. She looked at Dr. D and broke into a broad smile – a version of the recognition reflex he often mentioned to us. He said, "You need to stop talking so much and when you do speak, mean what you say."

A dynamic session with the children followed which confirmed the effects of the Mother's behavior and revealed the goals of the behavior of the children. The participants in the class grew to respect Dr. D immensely.

So – I was excited about what I learned in Chicago and fortunately as a practitioner, I was able to begin to put the ideas into practice and to continue to read Dreikurs and Adler. In 1969 I returned to study with Dreikurs and shortly after I returned to South Carolina, I proposed and received a grant to begin presenting a summer institute devoted to Adlerian graduate study. We accepted thirty school counselors for the first program. In the Adlerian Summer Institutes that followed we offered three graduate courses each summer for eighteen years. We would have an introductory and advanced course in Columbia, and offered either an introductory or advanced course first at Coastal Carolina and subsequently at the College of Charleston. At one time we had as many as 104 students in the introductory workshop in Columbia.

I was fortunate to have psychologist Bob Powers come to work with me for a few days in each introductory course and psychologist Harold Mosak do the same for each advanced workshop. I gained a great deal by virtue of working alongside these masters for 18 summers.

I'd have to say we made a significant impact especially in the schools since first school counselors and then other school personnel by the hundreds participated in those courses through the years.

Now, an unintended side effect of the courses was that more and more professionals called upon me to come to their school or community to continue to spread Adlerian principles and techniques through workshops and graduate courses.

It was during this time that I began to realize that the State of South Carolina was not Columbia, or even Greenville or Charleston, but South Carolina was surely Hartsville and Bishopville, and Ninety-six and Goose Creek and Moncks Corner, and Harleyville and Summerville and Florence and on and on. I wonder

if there is anyone in the audience who studied with us in those summer workshops from 1970 to 1988?

It was in this period in the mid seventies that I found that the most enjoyable part of my work was the private practice I was doing in the evening and the consulting I would do on evenings and weekends. I'd joined the North American Society of Adlerian Psychology Executive Committee by 1972, first as membership chairperson, then treasurer and finally as president of NASAP in 1976. I was flying home from a meeting in Chicago in 1974 and feeling very busy, when the thought occurred to me. "Why don't I go back and resign my position at the University?" I did just that, I expanded my practice to full time, and the same year, seeing that there was a growing need for childcare and believing that no one could provide childcare better than Adlerians, I co-founded Adlerian Child Care Centers and Kindergartens with my dear wife, who agreed to resign her job as a primary school teacher to be the director of the first of what ultimately became eight full time and six after school centers in greater Columbia.

How is that? - both of us left our secure state jobs to follow our dreams.

In the late 70's as I began to present more at national Adlerian conferences, I became invited to teach outside of South Carolina, and across the US and Canada.

The next adventure was to be invited to join the faculty of the International Adlerian Summer Institute – known by its initials as ICASSI. I was a member of the ICASSI faculty for 37 years until I resigned this year due to my hearing loss. I no longer could catch all the verbal clues that I normally attend to in order to understand and help a client and help participants learn to attend to those clues. I want to note you probably realize demonstrations are done by Adlerians

because their theory gives them the confidence to know where they will be going – (he clues) and how they will get there, because we understand important factors that influence human behavior.

ICASSI has been one of the most valuable experiences in my professional and personal life. It resulted in me having as many good friends outside North America as I have within North America. Students in my classes began to invite me to teach in their countries. What an exceptional collection of experiences I had and fond memories I collected by teaching in Western and Eastern Europe, Asia, and Central and South America.

Some of the most heartwarming memories occurred when I was invited to teach in the former communist block shortly after the fall of communism.

Professionals in Romania and the Czech Republic, Slovakia, the Baltic countries and later Bulgaria, were so happy to be exposed to more progressive psychological ideas which were forbidden to be taught during communist rule.

A professor at Byrno University in the Czech Republic told me when he and a few colleagues wanted to talk about more progressive ideas, they would take a walk in the forest to sit down among the trees to discuss these forbidden ideas. Zoltan Ambrus, who was the first to invite me to Eastern Europe was a psychologist in St. George, Romania in Transylvania where Irina Cromer was an enthusiastic high school student 32 years ago. Her name was then Irina Buzatu and now she is a licensed Clinical Social Worker in South Carolina and the President of the South Carolina Society of Adlerian Psychology. Her story is amazing.

But going back to Zolton, he told me a colleague turned him in to the secret service alleging Zolton was saying things that showed he was not loyal to the Communist Party.

Another man I got to know was the husband of a local elementary school principal. He had a good job with the Forestry Department and, therefore, was required to be a member of the Communist Party and to study Russian. He told me with some pride, "I took Russian classes for 8 years and never learned a damn word."

In the Eastern European schools where we worked it was common for the principal to invite us to his office for a drink after the day's work. I also remember so many people in Eastern Europe smoked at that time. It was common to see the teachers standing in the hallways smoking while the children were changing classes.

Wherever I traveled I was treated with such kindness. Even though some people had very little materially, they shared whatever they had. In the early days I paid my own expenses to get to a country, but they treated me very well once I arrived. Usually I stayed in the home of the person who invited me. It was out of the question to go to a restaurant to eat, but I knew they were offering me the best of what they had. It was a terrific way to really get to know about the food and drink and customs and humor and history of a country. The countries made progress economically and even Eastern European countries could pay for my flight to Europe and eventually would give me an honorarium.

What a change during the most recent years when I've been teaching in Japan and China and South Korea. They were able to pay an honorarium, take me to the best restaurants and have me stay in the finest hotels.

I learned to eat some things in Asia that I had never seen on a table before, and Kathy, who was teaching with me in China brought a great deal of humor to our table when she unknowingly ate a pigeon's head that had been placed on the

table as a decoration. Later she said, “Well it was a piece I could handle with my chopsticks.”

Let me go back to the 1990s to the time when my dear friend, Roy Kern and I were invited to teach in the Baltic States of Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia. We created what we called a “gang of six.” They were six professionals who were willing to serve in an important way to help us spread the knowledge of Adlerian principles and techniques in their countries. They attended each workshop Roy and I offered in all three countries, and then when we returned for second and third visits, they played an increasingly visible role in helping to teach the workshops in their countries. We knew they were doing a great job when we determined they were telling our jokes in their native language. We taught in many small towns but also at Vilnius University, in Lithuania, Latvia University in Riga, and the University of Tartu in Estonia.

Shortly after the turn of the century Kathy and I were invited to consult and provide courses for several years at Stara Zagora University in Bulgaria. The project had a significant impact on the University. Again we made many friends, chief among them Zhanetta Stoykova, the University professor who invited us. One of the fond memories of our time in Bulgaria was being guests of honor to help lead the Annual Education Day Parade through the streets of Stara Zagora. Students of all ages marched in the parade along with teachers, administrators, university professors and Frank and Kathy Walton. What fun!

Wherever we were, we worked hard, but our hosts always saw to it that we had time to play and they all seemed to want to have a good time. Every meal and social gathering began with that countries type of flavored brandy. Usually it was plum brandy. in Romania, it was homemade Palinka. In several countries it was Slivovitz, and in Bulgaria it was Rakia. We learned to toast in many

languages, but I must say my favorite toast was in a small province of Friesland in the Netherlands. A long time ago Friesland was invaded by an army from the Lower Netherlands and Frieslanders repelled the invaders through they were significantly outnumbered. To this day the toast in English means “Look” – which meant “look what we did!” Isn’t that a great toast?

These are all fond memories but I want to take a little time to turn my attention to some of the important guidelines I have used to help my clients and to help my self in daily life.

The first is this: probably the closest we can come to a guarantee that we will live our lives in a world with harmony and peace is if we teach our children to develop a sense of concern for fellow human beings.

Of course, we need to teach them to move towards the problems that life presents, but to do it with the objective of solving problems in a way that is a help to ourselves, and to others who will be influenced.

Another important guidelines is this quote from Kurt Adler: “The most important thing we have to offer our clients is to help them understand what they are up to – what they are trying to accomplish.”

Of course, that message is of considerable value to each of us as we live our daily lives. I want to read a few lines I wrote some few years ago in a speech I gave to the Florida Adlerian Society titled, “How To Get Along With Oneself.”

If you want to get along with yourself, it is terribly important to understand yourself, to question your motives, to question what you’re up to. You can do it in a lighthearted way, you can chide yourself, joke with yourself, just don’t lie to yourself. Spot the disjunctive emotions and thoughts you experience – those are the emotions and thoughts that set us against others and are disrespectful

of ourselves. These emotions or thoughts include anger, resentment, blame, hurt, feeling sorry for ourselves, occupation with self-importance and other self-elevating thoughts, or restricting our behavior because of fear of falling short.

Replace these disjunctive emotions and thoughts with conjunctive emotions and thoughts – those that help us move towards fellow human beings. Catching yourself using disjunctive emotions and thoughts can bring a smile to your face and a warmth to your body. Simply say, “I’m not going to do that. My effort is going to be to help, . . . to lend a hand. I may not be perfect at it, but I’m really working at it.”

I also will read a related thought I wrote in a newsletter for the Uruguay Adlerian Society.

In a fight each person knows exactly what the other person should do, which is the most useless information he can have, because the other person is not going to agree. It is actually comical to picture one partner saying in the midst of a fight, “You know, that’s a good point, honey. I never thought about it that way.” So my point is, teach yourself to recognize when you are getting ready to fight and pull back. Recognize the courage and love of self and others you are manifesting at that moment. It is so valuable to learn to encourage yourself. If others are a source of encouragement to us, it is very nice, but that decision is out of our hands. If you learn to encourage yourself, you possess an endless supply of encouragement.

Another piece of information I want to share with you is useful when a client who is fearful or anxious raises the question, “But if this happens what would you do?” If that happens a mentally healthy answer is “something.” I’ll do something. I don’t know what I’ll do and I’m certainly not going to spend time worrying about it. But if it happens, I’ll do something.”

A shorter version of that guideline is this, “When life presents a problem, I know I’ve got a good person to rely on . . . and that person is me.”

In recent years its become popular to say: “What is, is” as if that’s a truism that is mentally healthy. Of course, it’s not true – what is, is exactly what we make of it!

Perhaps the most beautiful quality of being a human being is that we absolutely choose our attitude towards every experience we face. Isn’t it wonderful that we have that freedom?

Do you recall seeing George Burns play God in the Movie “Oh God?” Someone asks God “What is the meaning of life?” God replies, “The meaning of life is exactly – no more and no less than we make of it.” Up until then I had not realized God was an Adlerian.

If you truly want to understand a child or yourself well, observe how you behave in an extremely challenging situation. In such situations, important elements of our life style become recognizable.

Many people rise to the occasion in a reasonable and a cooperative manner, but others become paralyzed or run away or cry or try to find someone to blame.

Some people go into adulthood or beyond without actually having been faced with an extremely difficult problem.

This reminds me a little of the five year old who had never talked. One day at breakfast he blurted out – “Hey this toast is cold.” His parents were thrilled. Johnny, why did you wait so long to talk? “Well, up till now, everything has been okay.”

So my recommendation to young people in love is try to have an opportunity to see your partner in a potentially very stressful situation before you say your vows.

Among the many ways in which Dr. Dreikurs impacted my thinking was his interest in using “two points on a line” to hypothesize the direction of a client’s lifestyle. Dr. D stayed alert for two independent and seemingly contrary (even contradictory!) pieces of information, knowing that the principle of holism helps us understand how they are – in fact — connected. It occurred to me that while these (seemingly) contrary pieces of information are rather rare, much more commonly, the use of any two points can allow for the helpful formulation of a hypotheses.

For example, a therapist can focus upon the client’s presenting problem as one point on the line, then use the state of inferiority revealed in the client’s most memorable observation as a second point. (Many of you know The Most Memorable Observation is an important conclusion drawn from the client’s observation of life in his family during his early adolescence and it reveals a state of inferiority the client guards against). This allows the therapist to hypothesize as follows: “Isn’t it reasonable that someone experiencing this sort of presenting problem would get themselves in difficulty by virtue of the thinking manifested in their Most Memorable Observation?” This conclusion represents an important aspect of the thinking the client uses to approach life’s problems.

My experience is that it is a pleasure to be around other Adlerians. Adlerians tend to live according to the principles they believe and that makes for a kind and good humored and even fun filled existence. I surely have shared good times with many in this room and for that matter, around the world. It delights

me to share this fun filled remembrance of Dr. Dreikurs told by one of his colleagues, Bronia Gruenwald in the Turner and Pew biography of Dr. D., The Courage To be Imperfect:

He loved parties. Everything he did was with zest and full dedication, just like in his work. When he was at a party, he enjoyed himself like a child, laughing, enthusiastically playing all those part games, and especially his favorite, “Napoleon In The Ice Box. He also loved to dance. Of course, he danced the waltz and fox trot, not the modern dancesw, but he loved to go out dancing, and he was extremely graceful. We used to have beautiful parties. He would play piano, and we would sing, and we’d dance and play games until late into the night.

The final thought I have to share with you today is to ask you to remember that Adler advised therapists to act as if each session is the last. And Dreikrus criticized therapist who spent a lot of time gathering information, but not using it. He called is “factophilina” love of gathering facts.

Yes, spend some time in the first session gathering data, but then stop, and with the help of the client form hypotheses about what the information means to the belief system of the client and then relate it to the presenting problem. Such a practice is encouraging to the client. It helps with his self-understanding, it gives him something to work on in daily life and it gives him confidence in the therapist.

Well Friends, those are the experiences and thoughts I wanted to share with you today. It’s been a great ride.

I hope you found something you will take with you, and that through this conference, and in other ways, you will help us keep spreading the knowledge and use of the principles that are so dear to us.

THANK YOU