

New Trends & Adlerian Psychology

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There has been, in recent years, a good deal of bleakness and darkness on our national scene, not unlike, perhaps, the time of the depression of the thirties. And those who wish to despair can find plenty of reason for doing so--and every day more.

Adlerians do not console anyone by playing down the difficulties or by minimizing the material, intellectual, or moral darkness which surrounds us. The difference is only--but in this little word "only" lies a whole world of difference--that Adlerians have a greater understanding and a better grasp of the main lines of human development and behavior; and they have a valid theory for the laws that regulate human growth and activity. Those who have arrived at such knowledge will know (in spite of all the temporary darkness) from whence we have come and where we are going in the course of evolution. Those who have arrived at such knowledge will find the world changing, but they will see purposeful development where others see only blind and senseless confusion surrounding them. Indeed, where others in the philosophy of despair weep for the collapse of the old world and its destruction, Adlerians watch with eager anticipation the birthpangs of a new world, and they try to mitigate the pains of labor.

Combatting authoritarianism was particularly difficult for students in universities, because the authorities made use of the intellectuals who were in their employ. John P. Spiegel, the recent president of the American Psychiatric Association, wrote the following in a paper entitled "Campus Conflict And Professorial Egos":

In my view, what needs to be changed is the pyramidal structuring of power in our bureaucracies, and in our communities--a stratification that arranges persons and groups in positions of inferiority and superiority. Such a change, I believe, cannot be brought about without a simultaneous change in values such that individualistic achievement can no longer be used to disguise or dilute the destructive impact of authoritarianism and elitism in a self-advertised democracy. (1969:50)

Many of the students did not have the courage, nor, in fact, did they have the knowledge to defy the authoritarian, intellectual professors on their ground; instead, they defied intellect, itself, by invoking the authority of feelings. Yet, where knowledge is concerned, there is no hope in personal authority, however sublime, nor in personal feelings, however intense. The authoritarian Know-it-alls are as feeble as the deep-feeling Know-nothings. Both can be a nuisance, and

both may develop into a menace when the social pressure is significant. You have seen the example in Charleston, West Virginia.¹ The fact remains, however, that verification by fiat or by feeling is no verification at all. Consequently, authoritarians and mystics are in a state of ignorance, spotted possibly by some random knowledge.

If such a state of ignorance seems comfortable to them, it can seem so, I should think, only to people who fail to recognize that they are in such a state. Ignorance, no doubt, makes ignorance more tolerable. Yet, people who want to know things and are aware of their lack of knowledge will never content themselves so easily; they will seek, rather, the standards and methods of knowing, and they will turn to the problems at hand. It is true that the acquisition of knowledge in the area of human relations and behavior is difficult; and we understand why so many people who are in this field abandon the search for truth and knowledge, preferring the never-never land of feeling and sensing alone. Indeed, when some felt that their own feeling and sensing was not enough, they tried to increase it by "consciousness-expanding" drugs. As a result of this failure to pursue knowledge, we have a diverse assortment of encounter groups, nude groups, touch groups, sniff groups, embrace groups, Esalen groups and many others; the underlying assumption of these group approaches is that theory is trifling and that practice is the panacea.

The effort to relate theory to practice has produced in the history of human endeavors many theories and many practices. There has been the theory that theory is not necessary; theologians call it "justification by works," and philosophers call it "pragmatism." There has also been the theory that practice is not necessary; theologians call it "justification by faith," and some philosophers call it "philosophy." The absurdity of these two extremes is not meant to cast scorn upon human nature as such. On the contrary, human nature supplies the norm by comparison with which extremes are extremes. It is a commentary, however, on the type of national social scene we have now in which the difficulty of joining theory with practice arouses a sort of desperation: it is an arduous task, today, to maintain hope in the future, and arduous tasks take too long for the impatient. The philosopher Whitehead remarked: "To give up trying to solve problems, because they are difficult, is treason to mankind." I can only agree.

Adler maintained that there cannot be one truth or set of principles for theory and another for practice. It is when we can successfully act upon our theories that we know them to be true; that is, the success of practice hinges upon the truth of our theories. Adler's position should not be confused with pragmatism: attempts to see a pragmatist in Adler are based on a misunderstanding of his philosophical stance or on superficial similarities with pragmatism.² Adler did not argue that truth is whatever works in practice: this is quite clear. He argued, rather, that what is true will work in practice; it works,

¹Dr. Adler is referring to the Kanawha County Book Protest, which received national attention when two schools were bombed, and one person was needlessly shot. (Editor's notation)

because it is true. If Adlerian Psychology is as it claims, a scientific theory, then it must be allowed to share the generally recognized characteristics of scientific theories and views (namely, that it stakes no claim to finality or completeness, but continues to modify, reformulate, and rearrange its generalizations and recommendations as new experiences, circumstances, and problems are presented). I dare say that Adlerians generally fulfill these criteria for a scientific theory. We do add and modify; we do rearrange and reformulate according to the new conditions and problems with which we are confronted. Certainly, we could do more, but we do quite a bit.

The main trend today seems to veer toward prevention. Adlerian Psychology has always been concerned with prevention and has always been in the forefront of this area. Many years ago in Vienna, Adler adopted the motto "teach the teachers" (because he felt that teachers could be more easily trained than parents in preventative, child-rearing practices); Adler established thirty four Children's Consultation Centers in the city of Vienna. In this country, however, Dreikurs demonstrated that the parents, themselves, could be trained, and the tremendous impetus he gave to the development of parent study groups and family education centers has already made an enormous impact, occupying the major efforts of many Adlerian groups and societies.

So powerful has this impact been in many places that it stimulated many rival groups to undertake the establishment of parent study groups and family education centers, such as those proposed by Ginot (1965) and his followers, and by Gordon (1970), and others. Some of them are doing fairly good work, although they do not have the theoretical basis we have; their appearance should be a stimulus to us to do more work in this direction.

Another trend in Adlerian Psychology is the new impetus that Sadie Dreikurs has given to Art Therapy, a modality used comparatively little by Adlerians, but more frequently used by the Jungians. There are other innovations which are constantly being tested: some will develop, and some will fade away. Yet, in general, I believe we can say that our typical Adlerian optimism is fully justified as regards the state of Adlerian Psychology, combining, as it does, a valid and alive theory with a highly productive and fruit-bearing practice.

REFERENCES

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