

A Printed Transcript of the Interview Daniel Briggs had with Kurt Adler, MD, PhD, the son of Alfred Adler, MD

The following is a transcript of the interview between Daniel A. Briggs and Kurt Adler held on Friday, November 5th, 1993 at the office of Kurt Adler, 30 East 60th Street, New York, New York.

Biographical Information

BRIGGS: How old are you Dr. Adler?

ADLER: 88.

BRIGGS: Do you still see patients?

ADLER: Yes.

BRIGGS: How often?

ADLER: Almost every day.

BRIGGS: What was the family religion of your father when he was a boy?

ADLER: I am sure he was Jewish, but he never practiced it. He became a protestant, evangelical.

BRIGGS: What type of clergyman married your father and mother?

ADLER: I have no idea. They were married in Russia.

BRIGGS: What was the family religion of your mother when she was a girl? If different, how did the marriage of your parent's affect her religious beliefs?

ADLER: Probably Jewish. My mother was not religious at all.

BRIGGS: Were there ever any disagreements between your parents concerning religion?

ADLER: Never. They were not religious.

BRIGGS: Did you ever go to church? If so, where and how often?

ADLER: In Vienna there was one protestant church. I was twice in that church. Once when I was baptized and the other time together with the gymnasium class for the 400th anniversary of Luther.

BRIGGS: What is the religious stance you take today?

ADLER: None.

BRIGGS: What is the religious stance your sister takes today?

ADLER: None.

BRIGGS: Did you ever talk about religion and God with your father?

ADLER: No.

BRIGGS: What were your father's ideas about God?

ADLER: My father wrote a book about individual psychology and religion.

BRIGGS: When did your father come to America?

ADLER: He came very early, but he never stayed. He stayed only in 1935, permanently. He came in the late 20's when he lectured at Columbia University as a guest lecturer at the new School on Social Research and the College of Medicine where he was asked to be the Chair of Medical Psychology.

BRIGGS: Did your father travel with a clergyman on some of his initial tours in America? If so, what type of clergyman and what type of relationship did they have?

ADLER: No, never.

BRIGGS: Who performed your father's funeral? Was it a religious funeral? Why or Why not? Did you attend the funeral?

ADLER: No. My father died in England on a lecture tour in Aberdeen, Scotland. Some friends of his, Phyllis Bottome, wrote his biography and about the funeral. We were in the U.S. when he died and it took us five to six days to go over by boat. He was buried by the time we got there.

BRIGGS: I understand that your father converted from Judaism to Protestantism. If this is true, what brought about some of the religious changes in your father's life?

ADLER: Yes, but then he exited from Protestantism also to be nothing, when it was allowed. Because in Austria it was not allowed to have no religion. But in 1918 when the monarchy was thrown out, he exited from Protestantism too and so did I at that time. I was thirteen years of age when it was permitted.

BRIGGS: What are your thoughts about Jesus Christ? Have you studied or thought much about his teachings and philosophies?

ADLER: I know the Bible pretty well, because I think it is a valuable source of knowledge about human beings. And he was one who preached social interest to people. He was against the rituals and the dogmatisms of any religion at that time- -with the Roman religion or the Jewish religion. And the people in power didn't like him so they crucified him.

BRIGGS: Have you experienced any religious changes during your lifetime, and if so, what have they been and what brought them about?

ADLER: No.

BRIGGS: Has your sister experienced any religious changes? If so, what have they been and what lead to those changes?

ADLER: No.

BRIGGS: Was your father disillusioned by his family's religious beliefs?

ADLER: The family didn't practice Judaism so he couldn't have.

BRIGGS: What was the political climate like when your father left Europe? And did this have a realistic affect on your father's religious changes? If so, explain?

ADLER: Not at all. The climate, of course, was a rising dictatorship, because parliament was abolished by Adolph even before the Nazis came. We left Europe three years before Hitler came to Vienna.

BRIGGS: What type of relationship did your father and Albert Einstein have?

ADLER: He visited him once. My father knew him very little. He may have visited him just once or twice. Then much later after my father died, my mother corresponded with Einstein about the fate of my sister, Valentina, who was in the Soviet Union. And Einstein found out that she had died in 1942. He told us about it. That is about it, except I was a student of physics in Vienna and Einstein came to visit our laboratory where I was.

BRIGGS: Considering your father's concepts of early learning do you think that your grandfather's religion effected your father's theories, regardless of his rejecting or embracing parts or wholes of said belief system?

ADLER: No, I don't think my grandfather was very interested in those things. I knew very little about my grandfather's ideas. I was five or six years old when he died.

BRIGGS: What events brought your father and Sigmund Freud together? And what led to their eventual separation?

ADLER: What brought them originally together is not entirely known. There are two versions of this. 1) My father was very much impressed by Freud's book on dream interpretation and evidently spoke about it. While the whole academic scene was against it, my father praised it. For this reason it is possible that Freud learned about Alfred Adler, I don't know. 2) Another version was that my father was a very astute diagnostician and Freud had a stepbrother, supposedly, who suffered from pneumonia and his doctor couldn't do anything. My father then treated him and got him through. That is another version. I have no proof of that. And then Freud invited four people for his newly established Wednesday sessions and Adler was one of the four. Adler was always in this group that later developed into the Psychoanalytic Society. Adler was part of the group until 1911. He was at that time the president of the Psychoanalytic Society and also editor of the Psychoanalytic Journal. What separated them was, Adler was always promoting ego psychology while Freud promoted instinct psychology or libido psychology. Adler denies the premises of the libido instincts. And he wrote things in articles and spoke about it and eventually the difficulty became too great between them and the already large group in the psychoanalytic society. Eleven of them sided with Adler and the rest were simply against Adler. Adler saw, that as president, it was best to resign. Freud was very nasty about it. Adler never spoke bad about Freud, but Freud was very nasty and spoke very badly of Adler.

Adlerian Philosophical and Theoretical Information

BRIGGS: Did your father prescribe psychotropic drugs for any of his patients? If so, what was the purpose (psychotherapeutic, stabilizers, etc.) and under what psychological conditions?

ADLER: Hardly. At that time of course there were no anti-depressants. There were other drugs that were given by other psychiatrists, but Adler rarely did.

BRIGGS: What about yourself?

ADLER: As little as possible. I was four years in the Army and was Chief of Psychiatry and it was known that the least amount of drugs was used in my department. If I get a patient who is, for instance, schizophrenic and has delusions and all sorts of symptoms that make it difficult or prevent entirely communication between me and him, then in the beginning I will give him some psychotropic drugs to make him more accessible, but as soon as possible diminish it or even completely abolish it. There are some, however, that take small amounts constantly. Even rarer to give drugs in depressions. Usually only when people come already from other psychiatrist, I will give them anti-depressant drugs. I always try to diminish them gradually, and eventually eliminate them entirely.

BRIGGS: What theories of Freud would you recommend clergymen consider?

ADLER: (Adler laughs) I wouldn't.

BRIGGS: What Adlerian theories would you recommend clergymen consider who do not intend to practice professional counseling or psychotherapy?

ADLER: Read some of the books Adler wrote, *What Life Should Mean to You*, and many others.

BRIGGS: Why did your father perceive nervousness, irritability and hypersensitivity as frustrated feelings in an effort to manipulate others?

ADLER: I don't think my father or I would make a generalized statement about this because nervousness, and sensitivity and such are different in each individual and you can't categorize everyone as having the same thing. Therefore, you can't make a generalized statement.

BRIGGS: Is the only cure for anger to increase one's self reliance?

ADLER: No. There are two types of anger. One is justified anger and one is unjustified anger. It depends what type of anger you are talking about. Justified anger should be supported. Because if you have justified anger and suppress it, you become depressed. This is the basis of depression. But unjustified anger comes from something else.

BRIGGS: What about so called "Freudian Slips" in language are they extremely revealing?

ADLER: Very often.

BRIGGS: How do we explain the origins of Homosexuality? (Is it really an attempt to change the sex role or possibly a misdirected drive)?

ADLER: I am in great dissidence with the American Psychiatric Association, because I believe homosexuality is due not to one thing, but each homosexual has different reasons for being a homosexual. As a baby he may have had female figures that are so powerful that he may never live up to them and wants to avoid them. So he excludes females. Or maybe he may have had a very powerful father who showed him how powerful he must be and feels he could never live up to it, so he chooses not to be a man. This is just two reasons but there are many reasons why a person chooses to exclude women and be a homosexual. It is not inherited, it is not in the genes, it is developed from the environmental and family constitution. Sacharibe is another psychiatrist who agrees with me. Homosexuality cannot be treated if they do not want to be treated.

BRIGGS: Do you feel that your father's description of Social Interest, i.e., the ability to participate; the willingness to contribute and the desire to belong, as an innate human potentiality tends to give social interest 'instinctual-like' qualities?

ADLER: My father didn't believe that instincts were very strong in the human being if they existed at all. He believes instincts are determining and are a pitiful and poor way to lead humans through life. Only a goal directed person can find his way.

BRIGGS: With the amount of prostitution related to substance abuse would your father's concepts of the prostitutes of his day be more correlated to the upper crust call girls or escort services of today?

ADLER: I cannot see my father supporting any kind of prostitution. But, for many, drugs are a wonderful medium to make every problem vanish. Thus, prostitution helps some get money to get drugs, to help them erase their problems.

BRIGGS: Is this a self-defeating cycle?

ADLER: Yes.

BRIGGS: How does social interest differ from conformity and super ego?

ADLER: Adler said you should never try to adjust a person to the existing society. You should always show him he should strive for a better society than we have. We can always and should always improve society. And therefore there is never a conformity. But you have to live according to the rules so you don't get in trouble and be made impotent to improve society.

BRIGGS: What is the difference between conformity and cooperation?

ADLER: Conformity means to bend one's beliefs whereas cooperation does not force you to bend or change your beliefs but work with society towards changing society more closely aligned with one's beliefs.

BRIGGS: What was your father referring to by his term "Counterfeit Common-Sense" (i.e., "Private Logic")?

ADLER: Common sense is sense we have in common with other people. Private logic is what we do not have in common with others and no one can agree with it.

BRIGGS: What is detrimental in making comparisons?

ADLER: It is very wrong to compare oneself with another person.

BRIGGS: Is this some of the problems of peer pressures?

ADLER: Yes.

BRIGGS: How can we steer children away from peer pressure?

ADLER: Help them with self confidence.

BRIGGS: What are your views, and your father's, about home schooling?

ADLER: Home schooling is much too narrow as a rule. And private school is usually too privileged.

BRIGGS: How valid was your father's concept of the "Coefficient of Safety" in children? And does it carry over into adulthood? If so, how is it portrayed in the adult?

ADLER: I don't know what that is.

BRIGGS: Is rewarding a child ever useful? If so, when?

ADLER: My father is against reward and punishment. A child should be encouraged to be useful and helpful; to be part of the whole, a respected part. Only affectionate teaching helps the child.

BRIGGS: Your father felt that the SCHOOL was the 'only institution capable of effecting change' - is this still valid or has the present day family structure taken its place?

ADLER: No. He was saying that the mistakes that parents made in upbringing their children could be improved by teachers in school, only if they knew the way.

BRIGGS: What is your opinion of Jung's comment that today's gods and demons have merely got new names -pills, alcohol, tobacco, food and above all neurosis?

ADLER: I didn't know Jung was saying that. In general, I am not very fond of Jung. Not only because of his analysis, but also because he always sounded a little bit mystic.

BRIGGS: Would you agree with your father's theory that--- "the fear of defeat itself arranges the emotions"? (and through them our actions?)

ADLER: The fear of defeat is always reacted to emotionally. The thinking about defeat causes the emotions, and then the emotions lead to the action.

BRIGGS: Why do people try to impress other people?

ADLER: Because they wish to be highly regarded, which they are not usually entitled to.

BRIGGS: Alfred Adler was said to be " ... a past master of the art of pauses"; How important is this technique of working with silence in psychotherapy?

ADLER: I don't think Adler was silent in therapy. That is a Freudian idea. We are only active in psychotherapy. All my patients sit up. I only let them lie down if they ask to, usually because

they learn this from others. But, an equal relationship is very important and one gets the most out of it by sitting up and by both patient and therapist communicating.

BRIGGS: Could you reiterate Adler's idea of "gemeinschaftsgefühl?"

ADLER: This is badly translated into English as social interest. It means to feel oneself as belonging to mankind, to the community. It is a community feeling, a feeling of benevolence and goodwill toward other people--friendship as against hostility. It means social interest, community interest, community feeling, and feeling oneself as part of it, not an outsider. Not saying "here am I, and over there are the others", but "here are we".

BRIGGS: Do you feel that your father was more a philosopher than a scientist or physician?

ADLER: I think you have to be both in order to be good. I try to be both.

BRIGGS Is there a similarity between what is called a conscience and what is mythically known as the unconscious?

ADLER: Adler never accepted the noun "unconscious", because it is closely associated with Freud's theory of the id, the ego, and the super ego, all fighting each other. Adler believed that everything worked together towards superiority.

BRIGGS: Would your father agree that love is the best virtue and binds all other good virtues in perfect unity?

ADLER: Well, do you think that one can live on love alone? It is not enough. We need love, work, and friendship.

BRIGGS: Would your father be in general agreement with the Theocentric Philosophy that there is one tri-directional life task--to love, 1) God, 2) all others, and 3) self, and that by accomplishing this human kind can live peacefully and successful?

ADLER: My father said there are three life tasks, work, friendship, and love. So, you see, he left God out. My father said that most religions have always preached "love thy neighbor", but unfortunately most religions do it out of morality or something like that. But he wanted to prove scientifically that this was necessary for mankind.

BRIGGS: What were Adler's views on exorcism?

ADLER: He never believed in it. Does anyone anymore? I thought that ended in the middle ages.

BRIGGS: What did Alfred Adler believe about the human soul?

ADLER: It is interesting that most scientists and most physicians don't use the term soul, but Adler did. He considered it the spiritual attitude towards people, towards mankind, of love, towards everything.

BRIGGS: What were Alfred Adler's views on eternal life?

ADLER: He believed that anything positive that the human being does, remains eternally, either they are structures or invested into other people, and that is eternal life. Nothing as soul or body.

BRIGGS: Do you feel suicide is an act of revenge against another individual, society, social interest or all of these?

ADLER: Terrible mistakes are being made by researchers of suicide, because they lump all suicides together. But what you have just said about revenge is true about suicide in depression. There are many other suicides. If a psychotic believes he can fly and goes on the twenty-second floor on a building and jumps out and waves his hands and dies, this isn't really suicide, it is false belief. And if kamikaze in Japan commits suicide, that is entirely different. And if an old age person, because of enormous pain he gets, and commits suicide, this is not a revenge against somebody. But in depression, this is usually always a revenge against somebody.

BRIGGS: Is there ever justification for suicide in your estimation, such as in cases of terminal illness?

ADLER: Justification from what point of view? There is no justification in the case of depression. But I cannot say that for all suicides. Therefore, regarding your earlier question about drugs, I don't give drugs for depression or for suicide depression, especially not in suicide depression. Because I explain to the patient that they will not be looked up to as having done something wonderful but hopefully everybody will see his selfishness in it and his anger and fury against the one he wants to hurt. And this is how suicide is being made practically impossible for people. I have treated hundreds of suicidal depression and have never had a suicide or even a suicide attempt. But most psychiatrists tell me that they had all these suicide patients that commit suicide. They don't understand the right approach to suicide with depression.

BRIGGS: What do you think Adler's views would be on groups like the "T.V. MINISTRIES"?

ADLER: My father never actually practised group therapy. And especially because he felt patients would not reveal things in front of others. But you asked something entirely different. My father didn't experience T.V.

BRIGGS: Did Adler believe that belief in God obscures or distorts reality?

ADLER: I cannot tell you what my father believed, but I can tell you what I believe. I believe that very often the belief in God is a fabulous excuse. I believe its a terrible handicap people have.

BRIGGS: If your father did not believe in "out of body experiences" how would he account for all the acclaimed experiences and what would he make of it?

ADLER: Sure, people say creatures come from outer space and abduct them. People will do all sorts of things and say all sort of things which have no reality basis.

BRIGGS: How would Adler account for the "glossalalia" experience acclaimed by millions?

ADLER: I have only heard of schizophrenics. I don't think my father or I have ever heard of it. He would probably immediately call it mystical and he would be against it, but would work with it.

BRIGGS: How is it that Adler would be against reductionism yet be a reductionist himself regarding religious philosophy?

ADLER: He opposed Freud's downing of religion, and people's belief in God. He didn't believe in God. He didn't find it necessary. But he never and I never, in my treatment of religious people, will tear their beliefs down. And this is how I know many religions. Except, the Eastern ones I don't know. I've never had any dealings with any Eastern patients. I work with what they have. But very often I have to show them that what they do and what they think is against their religion. This I can show them very often.

BRIGGS: Is Substance Abuse a social illness eating away at our basic values?

ADLER: Yes.

BRIGGS: In our society, what can we do with people who have been sentenced for several murders (i.e., serial murderers, etc.)? If they could be rehabilitated, should they be allowed back into society?

ADLER: They can probably be rehabilitated, but it takes a very long time; because there are too many benefits for not changing, but sometimes it is possible.

BRIGGS: Isn't life without parole just a degree of "revenge"?

ADLER: No. It is a protection of society.

BRIGGS: How do you suggest that we treat the "sexual rapist", i.e., someone who repeatedly rapes and is convicted; and released? What about "serial rapists"?

ADLER: I think they can be treated, but they have a problem with their maleness. So long as they overcome this and will not harm anyone anymore, they could be released.

BRIGGS: How could one tell if the patient is cured?

ADLER: One cannot tell, but a therapist could tell, or should be able to tell.

BRIGGS: Should we classify Hitler's mass slaughter of the Jews in Europe as a crime by an insane individual or a crime by a whole nation, (coward) or (collective guilt)?

ADLER: Hitler gave the German people, in a forced way, a feeling of superiority, which they felt they needed after their defeat in the first World War. For many Germans it gave them a feeling of superiority.

BRIGGS: Was Hitler insane?

ADLER: No, I don't think he was insane, but felt an enormous inferiority feeling because of several personal failures in his life. When he came to power he exploited this feeling of greatness in all sorts of ways until he was finally defeated.

BRIGGS: If there is no such thing as a "Cure" for severe mental illness such as schizophrenia, how do we as therapists know when to terminate treatment?

ADLER: Who said there was no cure? My father cured schizophrenics with pure psychotherapy before psychotropic drugs ever came along, and so do I.

BRIGGS: Do they always maintain schizophrenic tendencies or characteristics?

ADLER: There is usually something remaining that reminds you of schizophrenia, but they become social human beings. They can get married and so on.

BRIGGS: Do you agree with your father that practitioners should not call themselves psychologists who according to their scientific training utilize mechanistic devices, i.e., testing, and does not treat the soul?

ADLER: Who said that? It's just a different kind of work they do, that's all.

BRIGGS: Can other forms of therapy such as Behavioral Modification provide empathy and understanding?

ADLER: Only if the patient is more intelligent than the therapist.

BRIGGS: How would Alfred Adler have felt about the SPECIALIZATIONS WITHIN THE FIELD of psychotherapy, like music, recreational, occupational therapy, etc. for helping a patient overcome his/her difficulties?

ADLER: He would probably consider this an advantageous adjunct but does not go to the basis of the problem.

BRIGGS: Is there any form of therapy that you would suggest a patient avoid?

ADLER: Yes, many.

BRIGGS: Could you name a few?

ADLER: You name a few. There are off-shoots that are terrible, for example, scream therapy and many others of that sort.

BRIGGS: How do early recollections give the therapist any information on family constellation? sexual attitude? etc.

ADLER: Early recollections give the therapist an enormous insight into the patient's present problems and attitudes and lifestyles. Early recollections do not necessarily show what happened then, because it may not have happened. But when the patient remembers something from his childhood for such a long time, there must be an important reason for remembering it. And, therefore, points to the present difficulty, to the present lifestyle of the patient. Family constellation is a separate question. All it shows is the sibling rivalry and attitudes.

BRIGGS: If Alfred Adler's Individual Psychology were the primary treatment modality used today, how could it (individual therapy) hope to compete with group psychotherapy due to the cost differential between the two methods (of Individual and group treatment)?

ADLER: It is true that group therapy can be very cheap, cheaper than individual psychotherapy. But as I told you in the beginning, I do not believe that individuals will really open their minds in a group. That is my opinion. Others have different opinions.

BRIGGS: How have industrialization and modernization and growing complexity of the field of Individual Psychology changed psychiatry?

ADLER: Psychiatry has gone through various phases. At one time drug therapy was the thing and psychotherapy was disregarded. Once drug therapy was developed things changed and psychotherapy became very important again. In recent years, drug therapy seems to be very important and psychotherapy forgotten. Today the trend is to do drug therapy. Psychiatrists

today are not geared toward psychotherapy, as a rule. It is much easier to prescribe drugs. It doesn't take much time, but you can still charge the same thing.

BRIGGS: There is no psychological condition that doesn't effect the physical and there is no physical condition that doesn't effect the psychological. And if the drug prescribed takes away the physical condition, the patient takes courage and believes they are better. And, therefore, they are better psychologically, occasionally. And when they have the problem again, they have a tendency to want to go back to drug therapy because it is what they thought worked for them?

ADLER: Yes.

BRIGGS: Can psychotherapy survive as a viable treatment modality in a world that seeks technological solutions to human problems?

ADLER: Yes. As I said, things go up and down and psychotherapy will go up again.

BRIGGS: What are some differences between counseling and psychotherapy?

ADLER: Counseling is advice giving and advising is not part of psychotherapy, to the contrary. The patient should be told that they will not be given advice, but that you will work with the patient to help them gain insight, to see their own mistaken goals, and allow the patient to make choices, what they will or will not do about it.

BRIGGS: Would you elaborate on your father's criterion for mental health being correlated to "... the degree of social interest in as much as it determines the fate, the failure, or the possibility for happiness of a person"?

ADLER: Sometimes, maybe this is exaggerated, my father would say that as soon as a patient forms interrelationships with others, that he did not before, he is on the way to being cured. Or, he would say, when the patient develops social interest, being one with people, he is already cured.

BRIGGS: And this determines happiness?

ADLER: Yes.

BRIGGS: Why is Alfred Adler credited with being the first European Psychiatrist to use "group methods"? (Dreikurs)

ADLER: No! But he did treat children in front of parents, teachers, and students.

BRIGGS: Like a fish-bowl technique?

ADLER: Yes.

BRIGGS: Would you agree with Dreikurs that " ... the advent of group psychotherapy has certainly improved psychiatric effectiveness ... "?

ADLER: No (with a smile).

BRIGGS: Is the "fear of castration" related to the "Masculine Protest"?

ADLER: Yes. I guess. Because they both relate to a man not feeling manly.

BRIGGS: What do you feel your father meant when he said "Freud seems to have known much more than he understood ... "?

ADLER: (Laughs) Well, if he said that he may have meant that Freud had a lot of good ideas but he didn't really understand how things affected the patient, how the patient reacted to it, and what the patient made of it. He didn't really understand. And he didn't!

BRIGGS: Is Harry Stack Sullivan's "Syntactic Mode" of thought similar to your father's concept of common sense?

ADLER: I don't know what that is.

BRIGGS: Does Harry Stack Sullivan's "Paratoxic Distortion" describing the individual's proclivity to distort his perception of others resemble Adler's "Bias Apperceptions"?

ADLER: I don't know what that is.

BRIGGS: What technological advances do you foresee that could expand people's knowledge of Individual Psychology?

ADLER: I don't know what current technology is the best to spread Adler's ideas.

BRIGGS: Since Adler had an objection to a rigid dependency on statistics in psychology, what would he feel about the numerous articles in the Journal of Individual Psychology using statistics to support his theory?

ADLER: Yes, Adler didn't agree with statistics per se. Each individual must be tested and it is good for statistics but is not good for the individual, because every individual is different.

BRIGGS: How do we help psychotherapist prevent "Burnout" on the job?

ADLER: What is that? I can tell you. Many psychiatrists really don't like their work and they will be burnt out.

BRIGGS: Will problems in social interest be related to the gap between technological advances and cultural adjustment or will they remain primarily a psychological disturbance?

ADLER: I don't know.

BRIGGS: Is there anything that you would like to add?

ADLER: No. I think you did a pretty good job. You covered a lot of material.

BRIGGS: Is there anything that you would like to say to Apostolic clergymen?

ADLER: No. I think you should tell them. You would do it better than I could.