

There are not notes, but
the eye is the key

SIGNIFICANCE OF EARLY RECOLLECTIONS

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THE discovery of the significance of early recollections is one of the most important findings of Individual Psychology. It has demonstrated the *purposiveness* in the choice of what is longest remembered, though the memory itself is quite conscious or the recollection is easily brought out upon inquiry. Rightly understood, these conscious memories give us glimpses of depths just as profound as do those which are more or less suddenly recalled during treatment.

We do not, of course, believe that all early recollections are correct records of actual facts. Many are even fancied, and most perhaps are changed or distorted at a time later than that in which the events are supposed to have occurred; but this does not diminish their significance. What is altered or imagined is also expressive of the patient's goal, and although there is a difference between the work of fantasy and that of memory, we can safely make use of both by relating them to our knowledge of other factors. Their worth and meaning, however, cannot be rightly estimated until we relate them to the total style of life of the individual in question, and recognize their unity with his main line of striving towards a goal of superiority.

In recollections dating from the first four or five years we find chiefly frag-

ments of the prototype of the individual's life-style, or useful hints as to why his life-plan was elaborated into its own particular form. Here also we may gather the surest indications of self-training to overcome the deficiencies felt in the early environment or organic difficulties. In many cases, signs of the person's degree of activity, of his courage and social feeling are also evident in the early recollections. Owing to the great number of spoiled children who come under treatment, we find that the mother is rarely absent from the earliest remembrance; indeed, if the life-style is one of a pampered child, the guess that the patient will recall something about his mother is usually correct. If the mother does not appear in the early recollections that, too, may have a certain significance; it may, for one thing, indicate a feeling of having been neglected by her. However, he will never have understood the meaning of his early remembrances. In answer to my question he may, for instance, simply say, "I was sitting in a room playing with a toy, and my mother was sitting close to me." He regards a recollection as if it were a thing by itself and as if it had no significance; he never thinks of its coherence in the whole structure of his psychic life. Unfortunately many psychologists do the same.

To estimate its meaning we have to relate the early pattern of perception to all we can discover of the individual's present attitude, until we find how the one clearly mirrors the other. In the example just given we begin to see this correlation when we learn that the patient suffers from anxiety when alone. The interest in being connected with the mother may appear even in the form of fictitious remembrances, as in the case of the patient who said to me, "You will not believe me, but I can remember being born, and my mother holding me in her arms."

Very often the earliest memory of a spoiled child refers to its dispossession by the birth of a younger brother or sister. These recollections which record the feeling of being dispossessed vary from slight and innocent reminiscences, such as, "I recollect when my younger sister was born," to instances highly significant of the particular attitude of the patient. A woman once told me, "I remember having to watch my younger sister, who was lying on a table. She was restless and threw off the coverlets. I wanted to adjust them and I pulled them away from her, whereupon she fell and was hurt." This woman was forty-five when she came to me; at school, in marriage, and throughout life she had felt herself disregarded, just as in her first childhood when she had felt herself dethroned. A similar attitude, even more expressive of suspicion and mistrust, was expressed by a man who said, "I was going to market with my mother and little brother. Suddenly it began to rain, and my mother took me

up in her arms, and then remembering that I was the elder, she put me down and took up my younger brother." Successful as he was in his life, this man distrusted everybody, especially women.

A student thirty years of age came to me in trouble because he could not face his examinations. He was in such a state of strain that he could neither sleep nor concentrate. The symptoms indicate his lack of preparation and of courage, and his age shows the distance at which he stood from the solution of the problem of occupation. He had no friends and had never fallen in love, because of his lack of social adjustment; and his sexuality was expressed in masturbation and nocturnal emissions. His earliest memory was of lying in a cot, looking round at the wallpaper and curtains. This recollection reflects the isolation of his later life, and also his interest in visual activity. He was astigmatic, and was striving to compensate for this organic deficiency. We must remember, however, that any function which is strongly developed but which is not also related to a fair degree of social interest may disturb the harmony of life. For instance, to watch is really a worthwhile activity, but when the patient barricades himself against all other activities and wants only to gratify his eyes all day, it is possible for watching to become a compulsion-neurosis. Some people are interested primarily in seeing. But there are only a few positions in which interest in seeing is the chief one to be employed. Even those positions cannot be found by a person who is socially maladjusted. This patient, as we

have seen, had not been a real fellow man to anyone, so that he had found no use for his peculiar interest.

The earliest remembrances not infrequently disclose an interest in movement, such as: traveling, running, motoring, or jumping. So far as we can see this is often characteristic of individuals who encounter difficulties when they find it necessary to begin work in sedentary occupations. I found this in the case of a man of twenty-five, the oldest son of a very religious family, who was brought to me because of misbehavior. He was disobedient, idle, and a liar, and he had contracted debts and stolen. His sister, three years younger than himself, was a familiar type—striving, capable, and well-educated, an easy winner in the race with him. His misconduct began with his adolescence, and I am aware that many psychologists would ascribe it to some sort of emotional "flare-up" caused by the growth of the sexual glands—a theory which might seem all the more plausible in this case because of the existence of premature and mischievous sexual relations, as is found in many other similar cases. But we ask: Why should the perfectly natural period of puberty be the cause of a crisis and of a moral disaster in this case but not in another—not in the sister's case, for example? We answer: Because the sister was in a more favorable position. The brother's situation was one which we know, from experience of very many cases, to be one of special danger. Furthermore, when we go more deeply into the history of this case, we find that he wanted always

to be first, in every situation, and that adolescence did not create any change in this young man's style of life. Before that time the boy had gradually been losing hope of being "first" in a life of social usefulness, and the more hopeless he grew there, the more he had wandered into the easier ways of useless compensation.

This young man's earliest remembrance gives a clear hint of his great interest in motor activity and in movement in general. It was: "I was running round the whole day in a kiddy car." After treatment, when he was improved, he was taken back into his father's office, but he did not find the sedentary life there to his liking. He finally adapted himself to life as a traveling salesman.

Many first remembrances are concerned with situations of danger, and they are usually told by persons with whom the use of fears is an important factor in the style of life. A married woman once came to ask me why she was terrified whenever she passed a pharmacy. Some years previously she had spent a long time in a sanatorium undergoing treatment for tuberculosis, and a few months before I saw her a specialist had pronounced her cured, entirely healthy, and fit to have children. Shortly after this plenary absolution by the doctor she began to suffer from her obsession. The connection is obvious. The pharmacy was a warning reminder of her illness, an employment of the past in order to make the future seem ominous. She was connecting the possibility of having a child with danger

to her health. Though she and her husband had agreed that they wanted a child, her behavior clearly showed her secret opposition. Her secret objection was stronger than any reasonable and common sense logic which said that for her there really was now no danger in bearing children. The doctor, as a medical expert, could minimize the danger to her health, but he could not remove the symptom of fear. In this as in many similar cases we know in advance that the real reasons for the symptoms are deeply rooted, and are only to be found if we can discover the most important strivings in the style of life.

Seldom is it true that resistance to having children is based upon *objective* fears of childbirth or illness. In this case it was easy to discover that the woman had been a pampered child who, herself, wanted to be in the center of the stage. Such women do not wish to bring a little rival on to the scene, and they argue against it with every variety of reason and unreason. This woman had trained herself perfectly to be on the lookout for danger, and to perceive opportunities for taking the center of attention. Asked for her earliest recollection she said, "I was playing before our little house on the outskirts of the town, and my mother was terrified when she saw me jumping on the boards that covered the well."

A student of philosophy came to consult me about his erythrophobia. From earliest childhood he had been teased because he blushed so easily, and for the past two months this had so much in-

creased that he was afraid to go to a restaurant, to attend his lectures, or even to go out of his room. I found that he was about to take an examination. He was a faint-hearted man, timid and bashful, and whether he was visiting in society, working, or in company with a girl, in all situations alike he suffered from feelings of tension. His blushing had recently worried him more, and he began to use it as a pretext for retreat from life. From childhood this man had had a strong antipathy towards his mother, who, he felt, was partial to his younger brother. He had lived in the greatest competition with his brother; and he now no longer believed that he, himself, could achieve any success if he went on. Here is his earliest remembrance: "When I was five years old I went out with my three-year-old brother. My parents were much excited when they found we had left the house, because there was a lake near by, and they were afraid that we had fallen into it. When we returned I was slapped." I understood this to mean that he did not like his home, where he felt that he was slighted, and this opinion was corroborated when he added, "I was slapped, but not my brother." But the discovery that he had been in a dangerous situation had no less impressed him, and this was reflected in his present behavior, which was dominated by his guiding idea—not to go out, not to venture too far. Such persons often feel as though life were a trap.

It is easy to imagine this patient's painful experience when in company of a girl. We can understand how he put

his blushing between himself and women, thus did not allow himself to come into a relationship with any of them. In this way he avoided coming into a situation where he ran the risk of losing out to another man. He always feared other men would be preferred to him, as he felt his mother had preferred his brother.

When rightly understood in relation to the rest of an individual's life, his early recollections are found always to have a bearing on the central interests of that person's life. Early recollections give us hints and clues which are most valuable to follow when attempting the task of finding the direction of a per-

son's striving. They are most helpful in revealing what one regards as values to be aimed for and what one senses as dangers to be avoided. They help us to see the kind of world which a particular person feels he is living in, and the ways he early found of meeting that world. They illuminate the origins of the style of life. The basic attitudes which have guided an individual throughout his life and which prevail, likewise, in his present situation, are reflected in those fragments which he has selected to epitomize his feeling about life, and to cherish in his memory as reminders. He has preserved these as his early recollections.

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