

# An Early Recollection of Lyndon Johnson: Adlerian Considerations

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This article centers on just one item in the very fine and fascinating work by Doris Kearns (1976), *Lyndon Johnson and the American Dream*. Yet this item points to a weakness in the book that is of considerable interest to the psychologist, although it is very minor compared to the author's accomplishment—an unusually insightful, informative, and scholarly biography of former President Johnson.

The item in question is the following recollection of Johnson from the age of 5, as told to the author.

I left home to walk to my grandfather's house, which was a half-mile up the road. Mother, always afraid that I would fall into the river, had told me never to leave the dirt path. But the day was hot and the road was dry and dusty and I wanted to cool my hands and feet. I left the road and ran down to the river bank. I was skipping along until I fell on the roots of a dead tree and hit my head. I tried to get up. My head hurt. I fell back and lay still. I thought I would be left there forever. It was my punishment.

Then, suddenly, my parents were there. Together they picked me up and carried me home. They put me to bed, blew out the light, and sat down at the end of the bed waiting for me to fall asleep. All the time they kept talking in a low voice. They sounded good together. Mother's voice was not as cold as it usually was when she talked with Father. His voice was warm, too. I remember thinking that being hurt and frightened was worth it so long as it ended this way. I thought I would have been willing to go through the experience a hundred times to be sure of finding at the end a thing so nice and friendly as my parents were then. (p. 27)

Kearns comments on this recollection merely: "The boy's willingness to exchange pain for mental peace provides an interior window on the constant

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tensions that must have shaped his childhood days” (p. 28), followed by “further evidence of these tensions.” This comment is quite consistent with her psychological background, which she indicates as provided by Freud, Erik Erikson, and other psychoanalysts. Her statement reflects an intrapersonal rather than an interpersonal orientation, the pleasure-pain principle rather than growth motivation, tension reduction (mental peace) rather than the overcoming of difficulties as characteristic of life, a conflict model of personality rather than a fulfillment model (Maddi, 1972), the individual “shaped” by circumstances rather than to a large extent the creative artist of his own personality, his style of life.

The second alternatives in the above series represent the Adlerian approach. From this viewpoint Johnson’s recollection becomes a very telling personal document. Not so much concerned with what “must have shaped his childhood days”—that is, with causes—we focus on the actions and thoughts that Johnson attributes to himself at the age of 5 and are able to derive from this some basic characteristics of his lifestyle. It should be added that the family situation in which these actions and thoughts emerged included his being the oldest child and the mother’s favorite and marital discord among the parents, the mother considering the father quite crude and inferior.

The first part of the recollection depicts Johnson as an independent and active child. He leaves home and walks to his grandfather’s house. Mother is “always afraid” lest he hurt himself, which implies, if we continue the thought: “But I am not. I am courageous. She wants to protect and pamper me, but I am prepared to meet life’s challenges. She tells me ‘never to leave the dirt path.’ But I will go my way.” He knows how to look after himself: “I wanted to cool my hands and feet.” Johnson’s detailed description of the scene indicates further, close contact with his surroundings. Such independence and competence spells high self-esteem, and he seems happy: “I was skipping along.” Then he fell and was seriously hurt. But he does not cry like a baby, makes no excuses, takes it like a man. He only fears that he “would be left there forever,” that people would not find him or look for him sufficiently. Yet he accepts responsibility for it all: “It was my punishment.” We see then an active, relatively independent, resourceful, and responsible boy, very mature for his age, who is, however, concerned that he will be abandoned, that is, not to be wanted by others.

In the second part of the recollection, social interest is extended to Johnson by both his parents, and an astounding amount of social interest is expressed by the boy himself. There is also the optimistic observation that the parents, who are ordinarily at odds, will cooperate when the matter is important enough: “Together they picked me up and carried me home . . .” Unusual sensitivity to the feelings of others is shown when the boy Johnson notes: “Mother’s voice was not as cold as it usually was when she talked with Father. His voice was warm, too.” The highpoint is that to Johnson it was well

worth the price of his suffering to have established harmony between his parents: "I would have been willing to go through the experience a hundred times." This remark is an outstanding example of social interest in the sense of empathy, not of directly socially useful action. Johnson had gone his own way in his own interest, which actually led to trouble all around, and only indirectly did this become beneficial to others, which, however, he greatly valued.

Adler (Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1956) described the qualities for leadership as "a strongly developed social interest, . . . an optimistic outlook, and sufficient self-confidence . . . capacity for quick action . . . ease in making contact with people . . . In him becomes realized what other men dream about" (p. 450). This is the type who is "prepared for cooperation and contribution" and in whom "we can always find a certain amount of activity which is used for the benefit of others" (p. 168). Some of these qualities are reflected in Johnson's recollection.

But each leader is, of course, unique, just as every individual is unique. Of Johnson's uniqueness the recollection tells us that he likes to go his own way, that his social interest is more developed on the intellectual side through empathy than on the side of concrete action, and that he sees his particular contribution in the reconciliation of opponent parties. We also get a feeling of the pathos, swagger, and inclination to tall tales ("willing to go through the experience a hundred times") so characteristic of Johnson. All these traits are amply brought out in Kearns' biography. Thus the recollection gives a very brief prototypical description that is quite consistent with the full personality portrait.

Kearns recognizes that the psychology at her disposal is not really very helpful. She deplores: "There is no psychiatric principle that can explain" (p. 22) the various unique characteristics of Johnson. But she does not realize that the very quest for causalistic explanation is barren, including her attempt to use the recollection in this manner. It is an attempt to apply mechanistic methodology to human beings whose chief characteristic is, however, that they are not mechanisms but active, creative organisms who are only to some extent shaped by the circumstances. As Ruesch and Bateson (1968) stated: "The theories of causality which psychiatrists of the past have developed have usually been dominated either by superstition or by physiological and mechanistic thinking" (p. 74). Today's field-theoretical approach is concerned not with "why" but with "how," "with circular systems and self-regulatory mechanisms" (p. 74). Or as Watzlawick, Beavin, and Jackson (1967) wrote: "Where the *why?* of a piece of behavior remains obscure, the question *what for?* can still supply a valid answer" (p. 45). Or, as Adler (Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1956) said most forcefully: "The most important question . . . is not *whence?* but *whither?* Only when we know the effective direction-giving goal of a person may we try to understand his movements, which for us have the value of individual preparations. In this *whither?* the cause is contained" (p. 91).

While, according to the nature of man, we must do without causal explanations and settle at the most for probabilities, a good understanding of an individual's *modus operandi* or style of life is possible. We have attempted to show that the analysis of an early recollection on Adlerian principles—that is, with regard to the individual's actions, interests, and implied goals—is an effective method of achieving an understanding. In counseling and psychotherapy, analyzing early recollections is helpful in giving the individual a better or new understanding of himself and his situation, by which a change may be effected. In psychobiography, with which we are dealing here, the analysis of an early recollection may serve as a validation of the personality portrait arrived at from all the other sources, just as the biography itself validates early recollection analysis as a method for achieving understanding in the sense of a good description of the total personality. From this viewpoint, incidentally, the objective truthfulness of a recollection is unimportant. As Kearns discovered on her own: "What a man like Johnson chose to remember may be even more important to understand than what really happened" (p. 17). To this we would merely say that *it is* more important for understanding his personality and that this principle applies not only to "a man like Johnson," but to everybody.

Kearns also recognizes that "the psychoanalytic literature is able to analyze sources of weakness better than sources of strength" (p. 370) and complains, "There is no theory to connect these observations (the masterful way in which Johnson was able to harness and direct his personal 'needs' toward constructive, social ends) in a coherent pattern" (p. 370). We propose that Adler's theory of the unity, creativity, and goal orientation of the individual and of mental health—not as mere adjustment or conformity, but as courageous striving for overcoming obstacles and for success, in which social interest coordinates personal goals with the goals of the larger community—meets these requirements. This theory seems well suited for an understanding of human strengths, as well as recognizing in its self-consistency over time the coherent pattern of a unique lifestyle even of such a complex personality as Lyndon Johnson's.

It is a sad commentary that reductionistic, mechanistic personality theory dominates today's intellectual scene still to such an extent that a social scientist like Doris Kearns can remain unaware of available alternatives although she realizes the need for such.

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