

Adlerian Psychology and the Uses of Music

By

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Alfred Adler gave the name, 'Individual Psychology' to his theoretical framework of personality and psychotherapy to reflect his belief in the holistic aspect of individuals as they interact within their families and in their community. The word, 'individue' in Latin, translates to 'indivisible'. Adlerian psychology is an 'holistic' approach that views 'Personality' as a 'unified system' that can not be divided into parts, such as Ego, Superego and Id as Freud proposed in his writings on psychoanalysis. Adler believed that problem behavior of an individual could only be properly understood by examining the social context in which the behavior occurred.

Vienese Psychiatrist, Dr. Rudolf Dreikurs, is largely credited for translating and systemitizing Adler's model for Human Nature into a coherent and easily understandable framework for therapeutic change. Dreikurs, who was also a founding member of the National Association for Music Therapy believed, like Adler, that music could play an important role in bringing about therapeutic change for individuals, and ultimately for the groups or communities that individuals connected themselves to:

"Music pulls people together, uniting a group and integrating each individual into the whole. It sets an emotional tone for group activity while producing an equalizing effect on all those under its' spell."¹ **Dreikurs, Rudolf, "The Dynamics of Music Therapy", Music Therapy 3 (1953):15-23.**

In my work with adolescents and adults, I have found music to be a unique and powerful tool for assisting these individuals to overcome adversity in their life. In this article, I will present four original song lyrics, and will discuss the manner in which I integrate Adlerian principles and practices with basic songwriting skills, to make a positive impact on reducing feelings of inferiority in individuals, while stimulating 'social interest'², a term used by Adler to describe 'social feeling', or the innate potential of all individuals to show 'interest in the interests' of others. ²**Adler, A. Social Interest. London: Faber & Faber. (1938).**

In 1983, at the age of twenty-nine, I experienced a severe brain hemorrhage resulting from a vascular malformation that had gone undiagnosed throughout my entire life. During the initial phase of my recovery, I wrote the following song. It has served me well in providing an optimistic and respectful manner to grieve my losses, and to give birth to a new future with exceptional gains. The songs' universal appeal has elicited in many of the audiences that I have played for, a strong sense of being connected to the human condition:

Living Every Day Rob Guttenberg³ (Copyright 1992)

Dirty old red rag shirt
Hangin' on my back
Guess that's why
I'm not driving a big black Cadillac
I won't go chasin' for better things

I guess that's O.K.
I go slow now
As I go now
Living Every Day

2nd verse: Well, some folks race
And some folks chase
And some folks run around
Me, I'm just staying in one place
With my feet on the ground

I won't be famous
I won't be rich
I won't be on T.V
No, I'm just doing the best I can
And that's alright with me

3rd verse: It used to be
That I could see
The reason and the rhyme
Now I stop, and think about it

And boy, it takes some time
My life has changed
It's rearranged
I guess that's O.K.
I go slow now
As I go now
Living Every Day

³From the recording, **Living Every Day**, by Rob Guttenberg, 1992

For many of the adolescents with learning disabilities and the adults in treatment centers with whom I have shared this song, their common response has been that they draw new hope and strength for overcoming the adverse conditions in their lives. During a visit to Belarus in 1997, I performed for hospice workers who tended to the needs of the families of children whose lives had been greatly affected by the Chernobyl disaster. These dedicated social workers responded deeply to the sounds of the melody, rhythm and my acoustic performance without understanding each of the words in the song.

Senior citizens have connected to the existential aspect of inevitability that this song reflects on. Others, going through divorce, traumatic critical illness and other deep losses have shared with me their sense of feeling uplifted by the music, the message and the spirit of my performance. Perhaps it is the universality of the lyric, combined with the simplicity of the melody that enables this particular form of music to provide a sense of comfort and healing to many. Individuals affected by acute critical illness, alcoholism, divorce, depression or financial ruin have at least two things in common: the experience of pain coming from deep feelings of inferiority, and a resultant compensatory striving to overcome adversity.

As an Adlerian therapist using music to assist people in their movement from (-) to (+), I concern myself with stimulating 'socially useful' strivings for individuals and families. Songs that provide encouragement and insight help to bring about a truly meaningful outcome on the journey back from despair. When written from the heart, songs that possess positive therapeutic value are generally expressive and are capable of enhancing the sense of 'social interest' for the individual, and for the community as a whole.

After surviving several brain surgeries, I met with other adults who also had life-threatening malformations lodged in their brains. A tone meeting, after eliciting feelings from members of this support group, I composed the song, 'Bomb in My Brain' which provided all of us with a tool for expressing our fears of never knowing when the malformation might 'blow', while at the same time reflecting on the joy that we all still held for life:

Bomb in My Brain
Copyright 1994 Rob Guttenberg

(The concept for the song was adapted with permission, from the title of the book, 'Bomb in the Brain', by Steve Fishman

It's been on my mind such a long, long time
Having to live with this fear of mine
Never to know if will live or die
Living with this 'bomb in my brain'
Living with this 'bomb in my brain'

Doctors', they say, not to give up hope
There's so many ways you can learn to cope"
My life's a flame on this measured rope
Living with this 'Bomb in my Brain'

Bridge: Still love this life of mine
Even though it's on measured time
Got to find, some peace of mind
Living with this 'bomb in my brain'
Living with this 'Bomb in my Brain'

Tonight I will dine with my son and wife
Tomorrow, I'm under the surgeon's knife
Never to know, if I will live or die
Living with this 'bomb in my brain'
Living with this 'bomb in my brain'
Living with this 'bomb
In... my.....brain

By concretizing our common experience in metaphor and music, members of our support group were able to experience a connection through a process that expanded our courage, supporting each of us in our own process of healing.

Adler's contributions of the concepts of 'organ inferiority' and 'compensatory striving'⁴ provide a model for understanding the manner in which human beings, when faced with adverse conditions will direct themselves to move from a 'felt' (-) in life, towards conditions that are perceived to represent a felt (+). The long-lived tradition of 'Protest' songs demonstrates the significant role that music can play in assisting individuals to compensate in a useful manner.

In 1997, an executive from the National Organization of Disability (N.O.D.) contacted me to request that I perform at a rally in Washington, D.C. to protest the decision being made by the Franklin Delano Roosevelt Memorial Commission to refuse to allow FDR's statue to depict him in a wheelchair. I composed the song, 'FDR in a Wheelchair' at a time in my own rehabilitation process where I was connecting with the contrasting feelings of shame and anger experienced by those of us with disabilities striving to return to a sense of normalcy in our lives.

4. Adler, Alfred. Study of Organ Inferiority and it's Psychological Compensation. New York: Nervous and Mental Disease Publishing Co.,1917.

'FDR in a Wheelchair'
Copyright Rob Guttenberg, 1996

**Chorus: We all need a vision to succeed
And this great man inspired us to believe
We all need a vision to succeed
And this great man inspired us to believe**

**1st verse: Franklin Delano Roosevelt
I have seen your message felt
In the eyes of those who cannot see
In the minds of those who cannot talk
And the 'souls' of those who cannot walk
You've given us your strength and courage to succeed**

[Chorus]

**2nd verse: Franklin Delano Roosevelt
The world has changed since you were dealt
That fateful blow that left you in your chair
But have we changed enough to say out loud
That we have overcome, and we are proud
Or must we shame this generation with our fear**

[Chorus]

**Bridge: So, sit down, and be counted
Let your voices ring out loud!
Tell the story to the children, and the youth**

**FDR led from his chair
So let his statue show him there
The time has come for us to finally tell the truth**

[Chorus]

**We all need a vision to succeed
And this great man inspired us to believe
We all need a vision to succeed
And this great man inspired us to believe**

Besides the therapeutic aspect of being able to express my thoughts and feelings through this musical creation, the song 'FDR in a Wheelchair' has also played a role in assisting the N.O.D. in their efforts to win approval from the President and Congress to have an additional statue of FDR sitting in his wheelchair placed at his memorial on the Tidal Basin.

Humor is a great equalizer as long as we use it to laugh with and not at each other. Rudolph Dreikurs often spoke about the need for individuals to develop, 'the courage to be imperfect' in order to reduce inferiority feelings, thus expanding the potential for 'social interest'. The combined use of humor and music provides for a very effective way to reduce stress. I wrote the following song to serve as a 'National Anthem' for stress management. It includes a wild 'scat' section in the middle where parents are encouraged to let loose with any sound that feels good (cows, trumpets, ducks, violins, kazoo, etc.):

The One-TooMany Things to Do Blues
Copyright, RobGuttenberg, 1996

1st verse:

I've got the 'one too-many things to do' blues
And I've been walking with these blues in my shoes
I walk up
I walk down
I walk the city all around
With those 'one-too-many things to do' blues

2nd verse:

I'm crying the I'll get around to moan
I'll get around to it, once I get off the phone
I got three hungry boys
Makin' plenty of noise
When I cry the I'll get around to it moan

Chorus:

Drop now!
Some of your plans
You gotta learn to let things go

Stop now!
Put something down
You gotta learn to just say no!!

Scat Bridge

3rdverse:

I've got the 'had it up to here now' fits
I've lost perspective, my temper, my wits
If I hear onemore complaint
I may just lose my restraint
And throw the 'had it up to here now' fits

I've got the one too-many things to do blues
And I've been walking with these blues in my shoes
I walk up
I walk down
I walk this city all around
With those one-too many
Two, too many
One-too many things to do blues!

In summary, Adlerian Psychology has as its' primary goal, the reduction of inferiority feelings, along with the development of an increasing capacity for each individual to activate their 'social interest', their 'interest in the interests' of others. This article has demonstrated how the creation of an art form, such as songwriting, aids in this compensatory process of moving from (-) to(+).