

The Early Recollection: A Clue to Present Behavior

By Warren Rule, Ph.D.

Early recollections can provide important insights into who you are today, according to the Adlerian perspective on memory interpretation. Alfred Adler believed that we choose to remember those few early experiences and associated feelings that best summarize our own current attitudes. We then use these memories to remind us of what to expect from life, ourselves and others.

Here are some hints for recalling and understanding your early experiences:

- ☐ Lose your eyes and visualize your earliest memory. The most useful memories are those that occurred before age 7 or 8.
- ☐ It is most important to remember your subjective experience — what was it like for you?
- ☐ Pay attention to the early memories of specific incidents, rather than a phase or series of events.
- ☐ Seemingly insignificant early recollections are as important as the dramatic ones.
- ☐ Don't worry about whether they are accurate representations of what happened. All early memories contain omissions and distortions constructed from information in your mind.
- ☐ Your feelings about the remembered event are an important part of the memory.

Interpreting Your Memories

Start to interpret your memory by asking these questions:

1. How does the role you played in your earliest recollection relate to the role you play today?
2. Based on these early memories, what kinds of self-messages have you learned?
3. If these memories reflect who you are today, what stress situations would make you vulnerable to self-destructive behavior?

Examples of the possible options for interpersonal roles recalled from early life include:

- ☐ acting out, observing, or being acted upon;
- ☐ leading or following;
- ☐ giving or receiving;
- ☐ being center stage or overlooked;
- ☐ feeling competent or inadequate, appealing or unappealing, encouraged or discouraged.

Making the Connection

It may be that your role in these early recollections touches a tender nerve about the way you interact with your world today. You may feel that this role is an ideal that you are obliged to live up to or a troublesome aspect of your personality that you should avoid or overcome.

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All self-roles have blind spots or pitfalls. And in the stress of daily living, you are most likely to rely on these time-tested roles and expectations to cope with life.

From the interpretations of your early recollections, you can begin to explore your role expectations that make you susceptible to particular stressors. Examples of roles and their respective vulnerabilities are:

- ☐ the passive pleaser who is criticized severely
- ☐ the artful dodger who is trapped
- ☐ the observer who finally is forced to act
- ☐ the leader who is dethroned
- ☐ the charmer who loses some magic
- ☐ the excitement seeker who is floundering in boredom

- ☐ the victim who is forced to accept self-responsibility
- ☐ the hero or the sufferer who loses admirers
- ☐ the perfect one who screws up

Once you become aware of your weaknesses in certain stressful situations, you can seek out alternative coping strategies consciously — contacting a partner or friend, relaxation, imagery, rehearsal, assertion, and affirmation. Your counselor or therapist can help you to develop strategies that can work best for you.

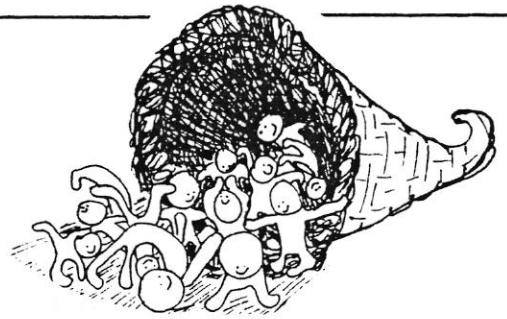
Remember, your early recollections are related to your present situations: If your fundamental outlook in life changes, the way you recall early experiences is likely to change as well. Or you may discover new early memories with different emotional tone and content that reflect your new outlook.



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Cornucopia Kids: Those Who Want Everything



Children who demand only the best, who have a need for constant stimulation, who do not follow through on projects and who have a great need to be accepted by others are exhibiting the behavioral characteristics of what Bruce A. Baldwin has dubbed "Cornucopia Kids."

It is not unusual for achieving parents to have these "Cornucopia Kids." When the children begin to show the inevitable signs of immaturity and unrealistic expectations, these parents often seek help from family therapists in attempting to break the unhealthy patterns.

Baldwin, a nationally known psychologist who deals with promoting quality of life for achievers, says the "mythical horn of plenty always represented as full to overflowing," is an apt representation of the kind of good life many middle class families are living. The problem is that, often, children raised in this cozy suburban habitat leave unprepared for the real world and unable to meet adult responsibilities.

These families, though not wealthy, easily can afford all the comforts and conveniences advertised. They own all the latest electronic "toys" and diversions. This happy picture fronts a host of ills, however. "Children are not developing healthy work habits," says Baldwin. "Without realizing it, well-meaning parents are helping their children to become Cornucopia Kids."

The Good Life Is Their Right

Because of their experiences at home, these children grow up believing that the good life will be there whether or not they work for it. They are not taught the direct relationship between effort and reward. Baldwin says the result of this parental behavior "is that children do not mature emotionally" and that they do not learn the values and skills necessary for success in life.

To avoid creating Cornucopia Kids, parents should attend to certain social and family concerns. First, these families are victims of a "split ethic." Baldwin notes that the parents are achiev-

ers; otherwise they would not have made it to middle-class comfort. But by giving their children everything, they inadvertently raise them to be underachievers.

Secondly, the world they have created for their children is "unreal." These children grow up in a plush world, one that is probably far removed from what they can afford on their own. Therefore, children experience "culture shock" upon leaving the nest.

Finally, there is an increasing need for "character strength" in parents. They have far more material goods than their own parents ever had, and there are more fun things to buy now than ever. Parents should ask themselves whether they are strong enough not to give their children too much.

Damaging Messages

Baldwin cautions that parents who give in too often inadvertently communicate a destructive subconscious message to their children that is constantly reinforced over the years: "I am in control. I can get whatever I want from my parents. I do not have to listen to anybody. Good things will come to me if I just demand them or make a scene."

"This message is internalized as a way of relating to the world and to other people and allows the Cornucopia Kid to remain immature," says Baldwin. "The child also feels an inappropriate sense of power, which is then employed to control the parent."

How can you avoid this? How do you go about training a child who has been given everything and already may be on the way toward becoming a Cornucopia Kid? The answer, Baldwin says, is to give both more and less, to give fewer "things" and more time to teaching values directly that will permit children to succeed in adult life.

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Baldwin says that parents can prevent or deal with cornucopia kids by:

- ☐ giving children regular work responsibilities. This helps to create a sense of responsibility but also represents a personal contribution to the well-being of the entire family.
- ☐ refraining from giving children so many "freebies." Getting too much for too little diminishes motivation and creativity. Success requires wanting something bad enough to work for it.
- ☐ giving children sensitivity training. Don't overlook rude behavior. Demanding respectful and caring behavior toward others helps sensitize children to the feelings of others and builds strong interpersonal skills.
- ☐ instilling the importance of completion as a value in children. This builds the capacity for depth of involvement and provides the perseverance necessary to complete what is started in spite of setbacks and problems.
- ☐ teaching children to deal adaptively with failure. To fail after putting forth great effort and yet still be given parental support helps to take the ego out of failure and turns setbacks into learning experiences.
- ☐ making sure children are held personally accountable for their actions. Internal limit-setting and self-discipline are learned only when a child faces the consequences of actions with no excuses and no parental "fixing."
- ☐ creating money-management skills in children. Children should be taught to save a portion of their earnings and also the skill of comparison shopping.

Effective Parenting Inhibitors, or How To Create A Cornucopia Kid

Giving...

- ...in to avoid confrontation or rejection.
- ..."things" as a substitute for time.
- ...as a response to marital differences.
- ...excessively by a non-custodial parent.
- ...to compensate for childhood deprivation.
- ...to satisfy status perceptions.
- ...to compensate for puritanical parents.
- ...is easier than denying.
- ...as a result of manipulation by children.
- ...to the baby of the family.
- ...because parents are Cornucopia Kids.

- ☐ becoming involved with children in cooperative projects. Parents can help their children to learn healthy work values by having them join in home projects, provided parents display patience and support.

Simply stated, Cornucopia Kids suffer from their parents' success. It is the duty of a responsible parent to instill integrity and to create character. "If you do not accept this challenge," says Baldwin, "you may rear a child, or several of them, unable to make it in the real world and still clinging to home, indefinitely and disappointingly."

(Dr. Baldwin is author of *Beyond the Cornucopia Kids: How to Raise Healthy Achieving Children!*, available from Direction Dynamics, 309 Honeycutt Drive, Wilmington, NC 28412)

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