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Abstract

The authors interview Francis X. Walton, psychologist in private practice for more than 40 years. Walton discusses how he applies Individual Psychology principles to an array of life's issues, from therapy to parenting.

Keywords: Individual Psychology, interview, master therapist

At the 2012 North American Society for Adlerian Psychology conference held in Atlanta, Georgia, Steve Stein facilitated a "last person standing" demonstration. All members stood as he began to increase the years of involvement with NASAP, asking those who had been a member for at least the designated amount of years to remain standing while asking those with less experience to take a seat. Frank Walton was the last person standing. As he realized that he was the only person not sitting down, his first reaction was not to look inward with pride for what he had accomplished over so many years. Rather, with a familiar laugh and classic smile he asked jokingly where all of his colleagues were. He looked outward to the community he had long ago embraced and committed himself to serving. With such a humble approach to life after many years of a successful career, one does not have to look far to find an example to support his status as a master.

The planning of this interview had been a work in progress for months before the 2012 annual conference. However, we were truly grateful to have an additional opportunity to experience Dr. Walton in a variety of milieus. Over the years, we have watched as he lectured and presented, we have seen him counsel families, we have read his published works, and we have shared jokes and laughter during less formal occasions. Needless to say, we were very happy when he agreed to take some time to converse with us and be a part of the "Advice from the Masters" series, which was initiated in 2009 with Shifron and Rasmussen's interview of Mica Katz. Our conversation occurred over the phone on June 26, 2012. The purpose of the interview was to allow Walton to share some of the useful insights and experiences he has encountered over the course of his 44 years as a psychologist. We selected the questions to help highlight content that will be particularly helpful to

the next generation of Adlerian- and Dreikursian-oriented thinkers. We hope this interview not only increases readers' understanding of Individual Psychology but also the rate at which one's thinking matures and develops.

Conversation participants are designated by the following initials: Frank Walton (FW), Korey Watkins (KW), and Thomas Lindquist (TL).

The Conversation

KW: I would like to start the conversation with theoretical orientation. Oftentimes, especially with young clinicians, whether it's an interview for a practicum or an internship, questions get brought up such as, "What is your psychological orientation? How do you see things? How do you view clients?" When asked one of these questions, how do you typically respond?

FW: Well, I would likely say that I use the psychology of Alfred Adler and that I feel very fortunate, after I finished my doctorate, to have run into a psychiatrist with whom I later had the opportunity to study, and I watched him do a demonstration. When I saw how he was able to use clues and principles to understand and help those people, I knew that I wanted very much to study those techniques. When I saw Dr. Dreikurs operate, I knew that this was an area that I needed to know more about. Quite literally, we understand behavior as purposive. Along with that, in a nutshell, I think it's valuable to share with people, our clients or others, that we are motivated to move from a minus to a plus. Not only do people not want to be in a position of inferiority, but they won't stand for it. Also, behavior is best interpreted from a holistic point of view. So at least from the time we come into this world, maybe even slightly before that, we look around our own environment and at the genetic baggage we bring with us, and we draw conclusions about ourselves, life, and about others. Those conclusions are, to some extent, not accurate, because they are just based on our own sample and we are drawing those conclusions when we are very young, but nevertheless, we draw those conclusions and they become our personal way of understanding the world, a personal road map for approaching life. In fact, they take us to our successes and to our difficulties. So, what I will do while I am working with a client is ask him or her questions to help me understand the movement they might be making towards goals and the conclusions they have drawn that work to their advantage or disadvantage. And just one more principle that I would want to share with you is that Adler taught us that we have the capacity to develop

social interest: a sense of caring about fellow human beings, a sense of community feeling. As we move from a minus to a plus, we have a chance to do it in a way that is infused with a concern for fellow human beings. This choice of including the welfare of fellow human beings in our decision making is an extremely important one.

kw: One of the sayings that I've heard a few people repeat at this recent NASAP conference is that you should treat every session like it's the last session. We should always try to be useful in each session and always try to give clients something that they can walk away with and say, "Yeah, I like that; I'm going to take that with me." What's your thought on this?

fw: Well it's true, and it's actually a quote from Adler that I use as a guide. We don't just want to gather information for a session or two if we are treating this like the last session. Somewhere we need to stop and apply what we learned to the presenting problem. I think we make a mistake when we don't do that, and I've seen that mistake made by people who overemphasize gathering facts to the detriment of beginning to offer disclosure and encouragement to the client. We can always gather more information in subsequent sessions, but in the first session the competent Adlerian counselor is normally able to disclose the connection between the client's approach to life and his presenting problem(s), and is able to help the client understand how reasonable it is that the client has formed such an approach to life given the sample of life he experienced and his interpretation of that sample. Normally, the first session is very encouraging to clients.

tl: Can you describe what it was about Adlerian theory that really pulled in your interest?

fw: Yes. It was terribly exciting. You like to have an idea that you're being good at what you do, and it just seemed to promise a significant leap forward if I could understand and use the principles and techniques that Dreikurs was using to help people. That drew me initially to the Adler Institute in Chicago [now the Adler School of Professional Psychology]. At that time, Dreikurs taught many of my classes, but all of them were quite exciting because you could see the elements of the theory coming through and people taught through demonstrations.

tl: Is there anything else you would like to add as far as what it means to think like an Adlerian or to be an Adlerian?

fw: Well [pause and laughter], to an Adlerian, these aren't just good ideas; they are true. So if nobody wants to stand to be in a position of inferiority, then let's take that as a principle that we want to advance in whatever way we can: walking down the street, being in a store, meeting with a client, dealing with your husband or your wife, your children,

and your students in the classroom. To me and many of my colleagues, these ideas are building blocks for life. Consistent with that, any honest Adlerian knows the value of helping our clients to understand what they are up to [laughter], but we want to question ourselves about what we are up to on a regular basis as well.

kw: During the banquet at the recent NASAP conference there was a last man [or woman] standing contest so to speak for people who have been involved over the years in NASAP. I noticed that you were the last one standing. Given that your excitement for the theory still radiates today, I wonder if you could tell us how your life would have been different had you not stumbled upon Dreikurs and gained exposure to Adlerian psychology? Where do you think you would be, and how would your life be without these basic building blocks, as you put it?

fw: I would have just kept looking for what would seem to be closer to the truth and more accurate and helpful to fellow human beings. You stimulate me to recall that as a doctoral student I came across Prescott Lecky and his theory of "self consistency" in the library, and I gave a lecture on it to my fellow doctoral students years before I realized Lecky was an Adlerian. Now, if it would not have been possible for me to find an approach that genuinely placed me in the position to be fairly helpful to people, well, I might have hung that up and moved on [laughter]. Maybe I could have become a good carpenter. I would have kept in motion; that's my style. I suppose I would have just looked around for another way to lend a hand in a way that would feel exciting according to my own lifestyle. But, there are a lot of ways to do that you know. I used to do that catching punts and running off tackle [laughter], and that was all right for a while.

kw: When you were in Chicago a few months back, you discussed some of your views on ADHD [attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder]. I was wondering if you could speak a little about the medication trend and how it seems to be becoming more and more prevalent.

fw: Well, one of the contributions we could make is to act as if we had something to say about the various problems that society encounters. Give it a good shot and first see if it falls into the realm of psychology. I am so often trying to encourage practitioners and students not to either excuse themselves or frighten themselves away from handling the situation just because they haven't handled it before, because if this is a person, then you have handled it before. This is a person who operates according to the principles of Adlerian psychology so *give it a shot* and see what you can do or how you can help them using the typical principles and techniques we would use. Now, the time will come, almost surely, when the fallacy of treating so many youngsters who meet the

criteria for the ADHD primarily with drugs will probably be exposed. I think we are getting closer to that, and more and more that information is becoming available. It is important in the meantime not to go to war with anybody. Sometimes you have to speak pretty firmly I suppose, in writing or in speaking about drug companies. But, we don't want to lose the parents who come in for help. We don't have to find fault with drugs; we just have to take a look at how the fellow is approaching life and how that works to his advantage and disadvantage, and how that might explain the symptoms that he is manifesting. We Adlerians can do a better job of sensitizing people to the common patterns in households that lead to the manifestations of the symptoms of ADHD.

KW: It seems like a lot of the pressure is coming from parents who come through the door with the mind-set of finding a magic pill. Could you mention ways you navigate parents who come in so fixed on the idea their child is broken and they need a pill to fix him.

FW: Well, a lot of times, the exchange in a counseling session is very similar to the exchange in the classroom; we are teachers as therapists, and there are various ways we can influence the clients who are our students. It is not a bad idea, sometimes, just to say, "I want to offer you some ideas about some things that I think I see as I look at behavior through the years." Then you explain a little bit about how behavior is directed towards goals. So many parents, and even professionals, think that something is making our kids misbehave. Our job is to take what we are seeing and relate it to the presenting problem. It would not be uncommon for me to say, "Let's not focus on the medication. Let's consider that functioning well in the classroom, just as in the rest of the world, calls for a willingness to be a responsibility taker and for a spirit of cooperation. Let's take a look at the extent to which your son has acquired those characteristics." That usually wins people over. The task is simple, but I do not mean to indicate it is easy. Each of us as counselors needs to develop a varied repertoire of techniques that help people to come to the conclusion that their behavior, while goal directed, is contributing to their problem. This objective reminds me of the famous line from the old *Pogo* comic strip: "We have met the enemy and he is us."

TL: Dr. Walton, something that is heavily emphasized, especially in classes at school, is having evidence-based treatments that are supported by empirical research. What are your thoughts on this, and how can Adlerians navigate this challenge?

FW: First of all, in your practice you've got to be able to deliver. We're not going to hand people a couple of pages of research [laughter]. I can remember Dr. Dreikurs saying that his colleagues were much too busy practicing to take time for research, but that's changing. So, while the

research may not be done by an Adlerian per se, just take the research and apply it to Adlerian theory.

KW: So it is not necessarily a matter of doing the research, but being mindful of the research that is out there and how it already supports or applies to what we are trying to do.

FW: Yes, but also it would be extremely important to be aware of any research that seems to refute the value of the principles we use to help people and examine that research closely. Additionally, we must keep in mind that the best proof of a psychological approach is whether it works. We don't want to discount anecdotal research. If you develop a good reputation as a therapist in the community or in the country, doesn't that mean something? If you are a professor of counseling techniques, and students see you in demonstrations helping clients to understand their behavior better and modify it in a socially interested direction, that will be proof enough for students, and the word will spread. Now, it is wise for we Adlerians to encourage researchers to form coalitions with practitioners. Practitioners are on the cutting edge and it would be helpful if more researchers tapped in to the experience of practitioners.

KW: We've spent a little bit of time talking about some of the trends that have occurred over the years. So I'm curious, where do you think the field of psychology is going? More specifically, where do you think it's going for the Adlerians? What type of directions are we looking to go to or explore for the first time?

FW: Well, what I think is happening is that people are sharing the news, and no one can share it better than a practitioner. Adlerians, and I can't say it's universal, but it sure seems to be so commonly true, want to get out in their community or out in their state or out in their country or out in the world and share these ideas with others. And there are so many vehicles for that, such as the North American Society of Adlerian Psychology, and the various smaller organizations, and of course the unparalleled contributions of ICASSI, the International Committee of Adlerian Summer Schools and Institutes, which has invited people to teach and study around the world. Who would have ever dreamed that we would have had such an impact? Where it didn't exist years ago, it exists today.

TL: The next question that we have relates to the metaphor of having a therapeutic toolbox or wearing a therapeutic belt. Are there any therapeutic tools or specific interventions that you find to be highly effective?

FW: Of course this is important when it comes to putting our theory into practice. One technique is tapping into the holistic principle very early on, being a good observer, being a good listener, being able to connect just a couple of pieces of information. If you are a good logician, it helps you to be a good Adlerian practitioner. So, always be looking for

the bits of evidence. As you see somebody do something in the waiting room, then you see some other piece of information, some comment and some mannerism or whatever, you become better and better at tying those pieces of evidence together. It helps also to be able to use humor. It allows us to get away with saying things to people and not have them take umbrage or feel criticized. It's our job to help people see what they are up to, and sometimes it's not very attractive, but you can lighten that a little bit with humor. Of course, when people start to feel embarrassed or people start to get emotional in some ways, you have to be careful [with humor] and make sure it's appropriate. And of course, laugh at yourself. Some of the best jokes in the office or in life in general are when you draw attention to your own mistakes or imperfections.

You also need to have an awareness of the importance of respectful relationships. Whether you're seeing awkward silences, whether you are giving more disclosure than the person is prepared to deal with at this point, whether you are talking about yourself or personal things too much, whatever it may be, just be cognizant that this relationship has to be based on respect.

If I had to choose one technique I would not wish to be without when working with adult clients, it would be the use of Early Recollections and the powerful help they provide in aiding us to understand the client's belief system. Certainly, the answers to the questions each of us focuses upon in the psychological investigation of the adult client can be very revealing. Essentially to me, I pay great attention to the answers to the following questions: I was the kid who always . . . Which sibling was most different from you and how? What was most positive (and negative) about your mother, your father? And of course, the Most Memorable Observation is a technique I wouldn't want to be without. Most commonly we are asking it to help us understand how this aspect of the belief system influences the parent to choose the style of parenting they are using. That's the most common use I make of it, but it is also an element of the belief system we can reflect upon and be creative about using in conjunction with other aspects of the client's belief system.

If I focus upon family counseling, I would also emphasize the very high priority the counselor needs to give to examining the specific pattern of transaction within the family. The single most common mistake beginning counselors seem to make is to fail to adhere closely to looking at the pattern of transaction. If we stick with the pattern of transaction, the process will provide the knowledge we need to have to help the family.

It is probably not possible to emphasize the importance for the therapist to expand his or her repertoire of techniques for spoiling the use

of misbehavior and behavior that is not mentally healthy. Forthright but respectful disclosure of how the child's private logic is related to the presenting problem is the most common way we accomplish this. There probably are an unlimited variety of techniques to accomplish this task in addition to direct disclosure. For example, with a power-oriented father who is raising a power-oriented son, I often point to the positive side of the father's behavior. "I'm not sure Mr. Father, but it occurs to me you are a very determined person. You don't like to take no for an answer and you don't let people push you around, and that attitude has probably been a great help to you in many ways in life." With that said, a big smile often comes across Mother's face and Dad acknowledges, "Yeah, you're probably right. I don't know how you know that, but it's probably true." At this point I might add, "Have you ever thought about the fact that your son is very much like you? He's a chip off the old block. He's a determined guy, and he doesn't want anyone controlling him either." On the other hand, we see the spoiled or selfish child or adolescent. Since the therapist's job is to make the misbehavior unattractive to the client, I might point out, "Son, do you know what we call a man or woman who wants to do whatever they want to do whenever they want to do it without regard to the welfare of others?" The client very often says no. "We call them bachelors and old maids. You see, life calls for cooperation. When we haven't learned to cooperate we have difficulty in the workplace, we have difficulty making good friends, and above all we have difficulty maintaining a loving relationship with a partner or spouse."

kw: What I want to ask about next is the moments in life that happen so often, or perhaps not so often for some, where you have said, "I wish I would have known this back then," or "I wish I would have been taught this sooner." Can you speak to a few things you know now that you wish you would have known when you were starting out?

fw: Follow your dream; follow your wish, whatever it may be. In my case, it was to make a difference. I went in the direction I wanted and took a chance. If you bet on yourself and take a chance, you could fall short, but hell, you don't have to dwell on that. You get up and keep moving again, correct your mistakes if you think you made some, or move in another direction if it's available. So I'm saying bet on yourself. You don't want to be a nut about it, but take some chances and then work like the devil to make it come true [laughter]. Also, don't pass up an opportunity for a speaking engagement, especially those young people who want to go into private practice; get known in the community. People almost always welcome learning about Adlerian principles. You know, PTAs, Rotary clubs, and who-knows-what

opportunities exist. Some of them are either not paying or hardly paying, but people get to know your name and they refer to you, and you get to make a difference in the community.

TL: The next question relates to perseverance. We were wondering if you could think of any times in your life, your practice, or your clinical work where you've had difficult times, and how these have impacted your own professional development.

FW: I think my most difficult times were when I couldn't connect the dots, and I feel I should have been able to. Certainly, when I started early on without Adlerian psychology, and now I think about what passed for counseling and therapy, well, I should have gone around and given people their money back I suppose [laughter]. So, I can see the great disparity between my earliest days in counseling and my practice after learning the principles and techniques of Adlerian psychology. I think a lot of the growth takes place in the holistic direction of being able to know what people say and what it means. And sometimes you miss it for weeks or for years, but you keep on striving to see the connections and what the evidence means, and eventually you get better and better at it. Eventually, people are wondering what sort of magic you have in order to be able to do that, but it's mostly just improving one's ability to draw holistic interpretations from the pieces of evidence you are seeing. You need to have the opportunity to keep improving your skills and your knowledge. So go to the presentations and read the books that can fill in the blanks.

kw: This next one is sort of a challenge by choice if you will. But, we were wondering, since you have spoken, and certainly written a lot about the Most Memorable Observation, would you be willing to think back to your own young life and share with us your own most memorable moment or observation?

FW: [Laughter] Of course I remember it because reflecting on it one day is how I began, some 18 years or so ago, asking people in my office their Most Memorable Observation. But let me start with the home situation. I never doubted that my parents loved me, and I loved them, but we just didn't seem to be able to do business together in any significant way on any of the real problems. And one day I thought, "Holy hell, that's what's giving guidance and direction to your life, Frank." I had been trying to overcome that and guard against it for other people. At that point, it was clear that the unpleasantness was behind me, but the challenge and the joy to make a difference in the world is still there. No doubt it was revealing to me, and that's what stimulated me to start asking other people their Most Memorable Observation.

kw: I really like the way you said that. You said, "The challenge and the joy to make a difference in the world is still there." And I think anyone

who has read some of your material or just taken a look at how much you have contributed to the field, can see that the evidence to support that statement is readily available.

FW: Well, of course that's heart-warming to hear. And you get feedback as you move along here and there, which is heart warming. So thanks for that observation. I feel really fortunate to be in the situation I've been in where you have the chance to be involved in an important way in people's lives. And it's always different. It's never boring. It's always important because we are talking about the real lives of real people. And to be among that special set of people who can actually sit in with someone and help them to live their lives better. Gosh almighty, Korey and Tom, we are really fortunate to have that available and call it work and get paid for it.

References

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