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An Adlerian Study of Marilyn Monroe¹

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My particular interest in the case of Marilyn Monroe was aroused through two early recollections that she gave in her inter- view in *Life*, published two days before her death, and her child- hood dream published in *Time*. Through these three items, together with the basic data about her reported by the press at the time of her death, I felt that I understood her very well--although I had never met her. Later information that became known about her confirmed the original hypothesis.

I arrived at the conclusion that as a child living in foster homes, Marilyn had set herself a godlike goal. Her misfortune was that as a sex goddess she achieved that goal to a fantastic extent.

Pampered by her circumstances as she was, she never gained a mature outlook and remained unprepared to meet the tasks of life as a human being. Her suicide was, so to speak, a confirmation that she had no place in this world.

The following is not technically a case history, but psycho- biography or psycho- history, a new and somewhat controversial discipline. Adlerian psychology lends itself very well to this approach to characters in the news and in history, and can be most helpful in making them more understandable.

Objective Account and Contradictions

The case of Marilyn Monroe is particularly interesting because she has become a controversial figure. Even at the time of her life and

1 This discussion follows closely an earlier presentation, part of the author's chapter on "Goal-Oriented Individual Psychology: Alfred Adler's Theory", in Arthur Burton (Ed.), *Operational Theories of Personality*. New York: Brunner/Mazel, 1974. Pp. 99-142.

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shortly after her suicide, so many contradictory bits of information became known about her that she appeared to most people as a puzzling and complicated character. However, with the Adlerian approach these contradictions resolve themselves, and one can see that behind the surface contradictions there is a great inner consistency.

The contradictions are, to begin with, that she was enormously successful and at the same time so very unhappy that in the end she committed suicide. To indicate her onetime immense popularity, at the height of her career fans sent her 5,000 letters a week, and her 23 films since 1950 grossed about \$200 million. Even so, on August 5, 1962, she died from an overdose of sleeping pills; she was lonesome and all alone.

During her last years she had suffered severe setbacks. Two months before her death, she had been dismissed by 20th Century Fox for unjustifiable absence during filming. She pleaded with Fox in vain to let her return to work. Her two previous films had been box office disappointments.

Another contradiction developed around the idea that she was a sex symbol. Although her success was based on her unusual sexual attraction, in her own life she had not succeeded in marriage. She was divorced from Arthur Miller after four years, and two previous marriages had also ended in divorce. It *is* questionable how much she was interested *in* sex altogether. According to one biographer, Marilyn was too self-absorbed to respond to men most of the time.

As a child she was considered a tomboy, liked to lose herself in group sports such as baseball, was always considered a good athlete, and was not interested in feminine skills. Physiologically, too, there were difficulties with the feminine role. She had suffered at least two miscarriages and *was* never able to have *a* child.

Also, her personality seemed to have two sides. On the positive side, people who knew her well from living and working with her most often described her as warm, likable, good-humored, and witty. She *was also* considered generous, conscientious, healthy, zestful, and relaxed. On the negative side, her most exasperating characteristic was her truancy and tardiness through which she finally lost her contract, since the studio could no longer afford the enormous expense this caused. On one occasion, in 32 days on the set she showed up only 12 times, and made only seven and a half usable minutes of film. She was from one to 24 hours late for appointments. She would spend four hours on her make-up, knowing that reporters were waiting for her in the next room. She was also considered self-absorbed, if dedicated, lacking self-control and self-discipline, having a bad temper, given to rages and private furies, and, most frequently, nervous, scared, and unsure of herself. One publicity man felt Marilyn had a tremendous inferiority complex.

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As to habits, it was reported the urge to go nude in public was her strongest whim. While she was still an unknown starlet she posed in the nude for a widely distributed calendar photograph, at a time when this was by far more unusual than it would be today. In a later interview she said she was not ashamed about this. She spent her last day sunbathing, glancing over film scripts, and playing with cloth dolls.

It was with all this that she had been considered a sex symbol, a contemporary Venus, and yet she was actually what one might call frigid.

Marilyn liked to tell that she had had a terrible childhood.

But, while it was not perfect, it was not as bad as she made it. Marilyn's mother had been married and divorced and her two previous children were not in her custody. Marilyn's father never entered the picture. For the first seven years Marilyn remained at one foster home where she was kept with up to four other boarding children, strictly, but rather well, in a religious atmosphere. Her mother visited her on weekends, and Marilyn saw her grandmother even more frequently until the latter was committed to a mental institution.

This was followed by two years when her mother tried to lock after Marilyn, and by two years in an orphanage of 50 boys and girls. She was very well-liked by the principal of the orphanage and led actually a relatively good life there. Then came four years of various placements, and at the age of sixteen she married. The marriage had been suggested by friends as a way of finding a home for Marilyn. Her husband, Jim Dougherty, was a simple and good young man. But toward the end of the war, and after it, he was away with the Maritime Service. During that time Marilyn lived with her in-laws and took a job in a parachute plant, at which she was an ambitious and productive worker. She won a decoration for excellency and became a forewoman, but was somewhat disliked by those under her for being too severe with them and a kind of slave driver.

It was there that she was discovered by an army photographer who was sent to the plant to do a story on women in war work. This was the beginning of her way into modeling and the moving pictures, the realization of a lifelong ambition. She had always wanted to be an actress. Although she actually liked her husband, she divorced him in 1946, feeling that the marriage would stand in the way of a film career. Everyone said her husband was a nice young man and they had a good time at first. Since she was a tomboy, they went hunting, fishing, and hiking together and had a nice life.

For the new career, she changed her name to Marilyn Monroe.

So much about the "contrasts" in her life, the most remarkable of which was that she changed all of a sudden from a very ambitious person

working as a factory forewoman to a movie star and model. We shall come to that later, and it also can be explained. There seems to be a dual personality and a complete changeover. Adlerian psychology, however, believes in the constancy of the life style, and this change can be very well reconciled.

The Adlerian Approach

To understand the life of Marilyn Monroe is to see this inner consistency, and it can be seen only if we can formulate the answer to the question, "What was she actually after?" What was Marilyn's goal? The answer ought to be the key to the resolution of the contradictions in her life.

As to hereditary and environmental causal explanations, true, her maternal grandparents and her mother were eventually committed to mental institutions, and an uncle committed suicide. True also that she did not have a childhood home of her own. But these factors explain her failure no better than they explain her ambition and great success. If she had all this against her, why wasn't she always a failure? Nor, and this is more important, can we see in such explanations any application to psychotherapy.

Marilyn saw several psychoanalysts in her later life and right up to the end. What this did for her comes out in some of her utterances in interviews. These confirm our guess as to what their explanations may have been. "We are all born sexual creatures [that must have been the notion of infantile sexuality]. But it is a pity so many people despise and crush this natural gift [repression]. Art, real art, comes from it--everything [libido, sublimation]." At first she thought the treatment helped: "I'm beginning to understand myself. . . I've spent most of my life running away from myself. . . I don't feel as hopeless as I did. . . I've read a little of Freud, I think he was on the right track." But in the end it was, "I have never understood it--this sex symbol."

From the Adlerian point of view, and in accordance with experimental psychology and especially behavior therapy, it must be possible to operationalize a statement, i.e. it must be possible to translate a statement into a description of what one actually does.

Now, "running away from yourself" is something that cannot be done.

It is absolutely inconceivable, and cannot be operationalized. One can run away only from something outside oneself. Furthermore, in Marilyn's case, if one wanted to use the phrase, one could only say the opposite, namely, that she did not run away from herself in that she was too self-absorbed.

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Regarding Marilyn's other interview statements, in Freudian psychology, of course, everything is interpreted in terms of sex, while in Adlerian psychology sex is just one of the functions of life, although a very important one, and, like all other functions, is subordinated to the personality as a whole, the style of life.

The holistic Adlerian approach proceeds phenomenologically and teleologically to arrive at explanations. The crucial heuristic device is the working hypothesis of an overall goal, a guiding image toward which the person strives and of which he is not really aware, yet from the viewpoint of which all his actions "make sense", although often only private sense rather than common sense. When the nature of the goal and the opinion of oneself and the world are somewhat correctly inferred, even contradictory phenomena will fall into place without unresolved basic contradictions--in contrast to the usual assumptions of "inner conflicts" and ambivalences. The there), would attempt to modify the goal and the opinions of one's self and of the world, in order to attain more self-transcending, contributive, and satisfactory behavior. One way to get at people's subjective views is to have them tell what they remember from their earliest days, their early recollections.

Early Recollections and Interpretations

Marilyn's world view and goal may of course be inferred to some extent from the story so far. But these inferences become much more palpable from an examination of her early recollections (ERs), a most specific Adlerian technique. A remembered childhood dream is included, as are ER's that may be more or less fantasy, or are based on stories retold to the subject by others. The objective truth is not so important. Fortunately, we are supplied with a series of such ER's.

An introductory summary of all her early recollections is that Marilyn never does anything with anybody. In each one of them she is by herself and in contrast to others.

ER 1 When at her grandmother's at the age of one, she told her husband Arthur Miller, "I remember waking up from my nap fighting for my life. Something was pressed against my face. It could have been my pillow. I fought with all my strength." (Guiles 1969, p. 12).

The age at which this took place is immaterial. Marilyn sees that the world is a hostile place where one fights, and that fortunately she is strong. You have to fight for your life. This is the first motif that she remembers.

ER 2 Also at a very young age at her foster home, there was a boy, Lester, two months her junior. One day, Marilyn recalls, she and Lester shed their clothes in the front yard and were surprised to find a

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difference in themselves. She was shouted at, while Lester escaped punishment (p. 13).

In ER 2 we have the nude motif. How it came about is unimportant.

The important thing is that nudity was a factor in her life. She was shouted at, while Lester escaped punishment. Every one of her recollections includes an indictment against the world. She is always the poor innocent little me, and the world is always against her. This is, of course, a way to escape responsibility. She is always the victim. When she does something wrong she has wonderfully good reasons, beautiful excuses.

EH 3 Lester and Marilyn shared a tricycle. One day she pushed it over with Lester on it, bumping his head. She got a whipping with a razor strap. "I got into more trouble than the other kids" (p. 16).

Although she did something wrong, she was not in any way sorry for it, but still made an accusation that she got a whipping. Regarding Marilyn's statement that she got into more trouble than other children, getting into trouble is a sign of activity--Marilyn was a strong and active person.

ER 4 While I was in the second grade, the public school chose me to appear in the Easter sunrise service at Hollywood Bowl. . . All we children were arranged in the form of a cross. Just when the sun rose we were given a signal to throw off the black robes (we wore white tunics underneath) and that changed the cross from black to white. I got so interested in watching the sky I did not. . . see the signal. I was the only child who forgot to throw off the black robe. I was the only black mark on a white cross (Zolotow, 1960, p. 106).

She is different, even if it is by doing something wrong. And when she does something wrong, it is for a wonderful reason--she appreciates the sky. Actually she spoiled the whole thing, yet she *is* someone better just the same.

ER 5 When I was maybe 6 or 7, I dreamed I *was* standing in church without any clothes on, and all the people there were lying at my feet on the floor, and I walked naked, with a sense of freedom, being careful not to step on anyone (Time, 1962).

This recollection was in *Time Magazine* at the time of her suicide.

It almost doesn't need any interpretation. It is interesting that she is being careful not to step on anyone. That was a redeeming feature in her; people thought she was nice and considerate. She had this friendly and tactful aspect even when she walked over other people's heads.

Later on in life, according to the myth of today, she was ex-

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plaited and degraded by publicity people *as a sex* symbol. But smart publicity people usually take their *cues* from the subject. It was actually she who made a symbol out of herself. Marilyn made herself a goddess or an angel, but certainly something out of this world, not of this world.

ER 6 At age 7 or 8 she recalled seduction by an elderly star boarder who wore a heavy golden watch chain over the wide expanse of his vest, and that he gave her a nickel “not to tell”. When she nevertheless did tell, her foster mother severely punished her for making up lies about the “fine man” (Luce, 1964, p. 72).

ER 7 From this period she also remembered: “Some of my foster families used to send me to the movies to get me out of the house and there I’d sit all day and way into the night, up in front, there with the screen so big, a little kid all alone, and I loved it” (Monroe, 1962, p. 33).

ER 7 is important in the sense that it is *a* picture of poor little *me*, facing the enormous figures on the screen in front of her. They were her ideal. The image expresses the dialectic between where she was--poor little me--and where she would like to be--a big figure on the screen, her dream. One can see the striving from inferiority to superiority. In her *case*, the maladjustment was that she remained immature, did not become responsible. Little children naturally dream about being big someday, but she never got beyond that, and continued to see herself as “poor little me”. Between the extremes of “a little kid all alone” and the big success, the concrete reality was ignored.

ER 8 From the time she was 11 she remembered: “The whole world which was always closed to me suddenly opened up. Even the girls paid attention to me because they thought, ‘She is to be dealt with.’ I had this long walk to school --2 ½ miles to school, 2 ½ miles back--it was sheer pleasure. Every fellow honked his horn. . . The world became friendly. All the newspaper boys when they delivered the paper would come around to where I lived. I used to hang from a limb of *a* tree, and I had sort of *a* sweatshirt on. . . Here they’d come with their bicycles and I’d get these free papers and the family liked that and they’d all pull their bicycles up around the tree and I’d be hanging. I *was* a little too shy to come down. I did get down to the curb. . . mostly listening. . . I used to laugh so loud and so gay. . . It was just this sudden freedom, because I would ask the boys, ‘Can I ride your bike now?’ and they’d say ‘Sure.’ Then I’d go zooming, laughing in the wind, riding down the block laughing, and they’d all stand around, and wait till I came back, but I loved the wind; it caressed me” (Monroe, 1962, p. 33).

In this ER Marilyn is very active and strong--climbing a tree, riding a bicycle. In her adolescence she also became very good looking and exploited her good looks, getting people to do her favors.

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She borrowed the bicycle from one of the boys and then rode off all by herself. She rode down the block and they all waited until she got back; she was testing her power; such letting-others-wait became fatal for her in the end. She loved the wind. Again, only the supernatural, superhuman is good enough for her. It is the same as in the previous instances where instead of changing her robe at the Easter performance she looked at the clouds, where she walked over other people's heads. Now, she lets the wind caress her. She is always out of this world, and in touch with something "higher".

The unifying principle in Marilyn is about as follows. She was a strong and ambitious person. She was successful in the factory and got promoted; she was a hard worker. When she saw that she could have a more promising career as a model and in the movies, she ruthlessly terminated her first marriage. Her change from factory worker to sex symbol accords with Adler's conception that one *can* strive for power and success not only with strength, but also with weakness. Marilyn changed from more or less masculine means to feminine means. In either case she pursued her goal of success. In her feminine role *she* won the world by always being coy, honest, disarming. In this light her nudity can also be understood. When a person is nude she is most vulnerable. She is not only like an angel out of this world, but she also conquers through vulnerability. Marilyn conquered through strength, and through weakness.

Further Interpretations

Psychotherapy begins where personality appraisal, interpreting what the patient tells us, begins. Early recollections, dreams, and other behaviors are considered samples of the individual's life style.

From these one arrives at an understanding of the style of life. The person does not understand this because he does not see his behavior in its context. Interpretation is based on doing just this. The difficulty in psychotherapy is to discuss basic mistakes in his life style with the patient in such a way that he can understand and accept them.

The Goal of Superiority

From ER 5, a remembered dream, we learned that "all the people were lying at my feet on the floor". How could one depict more starkly the idea of absolute superiority? With all the people at her feet in church, she becomes immediately *a* goddess, or at least an angel. Her nudity in this context seems to be more an expression of sublimity than of sexuality. In one of her late roles, "she seemed an exhausted angel trapped among earthlings" (Guiles, 1969, p. 267). Once she told a

member of the Fox studio legal staff, “I don’t care about money. I just want to be wonderful.’ In ER 8, Marilyn is again above the crowd and uses her shyness to get what she wants, in one case a bicycle which she used to leave other people behind. “I loved the wind; it caressed me.” Only *a* natural phenomenon, the wind, not *a* human, *is* good enough for her--making her in fact superhuman.

Conquest Through Vulnerability

Without clothes, one *is* at a disadvantage in a world where clothes are worn; one is literally more exposed, more vulnerable. Yet in ER 5 she has all the people at her feet while she *is* naked. That she *is* thus venerated in all her innocent vulnerability heightens her triumph.

This gives her “*a* sense of freedom”--from any responsibility. Fitting with her state of vulnerability, she is “careful not to step on *any-one*”. It was through her nudity that she actually attempted to and did conquer the world. She also wanted to secure her immortality through her body. Twice shortly before her death she had nearly-nude and nude photographs taken of herself, saying, “I want the world to see my body” (Time, 1962). She also was found nude upon her deathbed.

The Will to Conquer--Masculine Protest

Yet the “angel trapped among earthlings” was also an active, fighting, and athletic girl who did not like her role *as a* woman. Her ER 1 sets the tone. The first thing she remembers is having to fight for her life, and she credits herself with, “I fought wit’: all my strength”. As an active child she also remembers having gotten “into more trouble than the other kids” (ER 3). Climbing trees, riding a bicycle, the pleasant memory of her long walk to school (ER 8) round out the picture of *a* tomboy who later also had difficulties with her feminine physiological functions. All this corresponds quite well to Adler’s description of the masculine protest in woman. “Fighting, climbing, excessive achievements in sports point to dissatisfaction with the feminine role and to the masculine protest”.

Human beings, however, operate dialectically, so that, e.g., defiance may be expressed through excessive obedience. In fact, “The masculine protest in women is usually covered up and transformed, seeking *its* triumph with feminine means”. When the army photographer discovered Marilyn’s talent *as a* model, she immediately pursued this opportunity of realizing her old ambition with the vigor characteristic of her. It also was the start of her transformation toward “seeking triumph with feminine means”. As if to mark this transformation, she changed her name from Norma Jean Mortensen to Marilyn Monroe.

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If we regard her transformation as merely a change of means, from “masculine” to “feminine” means--and we have seen that she was able to utilize both--while she actually saw life as a fight requiring “all my strength”, then we have the resolution of the apparent contradiction that the “sex symbol” was unable to *stay* married and probably also was not a good lover. It would also reconcile Marilyn’s traits of being warm-hearted and affable with her inclination toward temper, rages, and private furies. Either way she *was a* lone fighter.

“I have always had pride in the fact that I was on my own” (Monroe, 1962, p. 33).

Lack of Social Interest

Not one of her ER’s indicates that Marilyn believes goals can be attained through cooperating on an equal footing with others, as a fellow human being. She is either above others (Ers 5 and 8), getting something for nothing (ER 8), fighting alone for her life (ER 1), being different from others (Ers 2 and 4), alone (ER 7); *or* being victimized by being punished for something she did (ER 3), or being punished unfairly (Ers 2 and 6), or being sexually seduced (ER 6).

Marilyn can certainly be considered to have been a neglected child in the sense that her mother was unable to introduce her to the world as a friendly place where people essentially cooperate.

For such individuals the probability *is* great that they will “seek a form of life in which they are alone”, believing the others to be their enemies. Their goal of success will be, to be on top—alone.

The Antithetical Mode of Apperception

The Adlerian dialectic inferiority-superiority dynamics is greatly accentuated *if* social interest remains underdeveloped and the striving is one for personal superiority. This sharply polarized mode of apperception is shown in ER 7 where Marilyn is sitting *in* the movies, “up in front, there with the screen so big, *a* little kid all alone”, the people on the big screen representing her dream of the future.

At the height of her acclaim when she was so-to-speak at the other end of the continuum she still retained this polarized view, simply because everything with her remained self-referent. She had not matured. In 1962 she was asked to appear at President Kennedy’s birthday rally in Madison Square Garden in New York.

“There was *a* hush,” she told, “over the whole place when I came on to sing ‘Happy Birthday’. . . A hush like that from the people warms me. It’s sort of like an embrace. . . When I turned to the microphone I

looked all the way up and back and I thought, ‘That’s where I’d be--way up there under one of those rafters. . . after I paid my \$2” (Monroe, 1962, p. 36).

Since she saw herself at any time in this “all or nothing” dimension, her success, when it was attained and as it faded, did not seem real. “I used to get the feeling, and sometimes I still get it, that sometimes I was fooling somebody, I don’t know who or what--maybe myself” (p. 34). And again, “Fame to me certainly is only temporary and a partial happiness--even for a waif, and I was brought up a waif” (p. 38). “Then you’re at the finish line and you sort of sigh--you’ve made it: But you never have--you have to start all over again” (p. 38).

The Pampered Life-Style

While Marilyn had to some extent been a neglected child, there was also some pampering. Once she had achieved initial success, the pampering took on gigantic dimensions. The difficulty with attaining so much for relatively so little is that the elevated position is not accompanied by *a* corresponding feeling of personal growth, competence, and self-confidence. Since this disproportionate personal success was, however, all she had and cared about, and since through her pampered position this became increasingly precarious for her, she developed her various symptoms as excuses and safeguards for her self-esteem.

It is characteristic of the pampered life-style that in any serious problem situation the person has no other resort than to put the blame on others and to increase her demands. This is strikingly illustrated by Marilyn in her last interview. Instead of showing any understanding for the fact that with her tardiness she really had caused tremendous losses to the studio, she blames the motion picture industry for not taking good enough care of its famous actors.

“This industry should behave like a mother whose child has just run out in front of a car. But instead of clasping the child to them, they start punishing the child” (Monroe, 1962, p. 34). That is, she believes herself to be entitled to act irresponsibly like *a* little child, and in return to be pampered all the more by a doting parent.

To be made to suffer the logical consequences for her actions as any sensible parent would do, she considers *a* grave injustice. This unreasonable demand and accusation express the error in her life-style which therapy would have to correct by getting her to see what she is really doing, namely behaving as if she were not subject to the common human order of living.

ER 8 reflects her wanting to be pampered. She receives news-

papers and *a* bicycle ride free, without giving anything in return, and instead, going off on her own. Even letting others wait, this important part of her, is included in this ER. “The boys would all stand around and wait till I came back. This was introduced with: “The whole world. . . suddenly opened up. Even the girls paid attention to me.”

Concluding Remarks

Matching the case of Marilyn Monroe against Adler’s description of the potential suicide, we may say: Marilyn was an active person with extraordinary ambition and little thought of others. She tried, however, to enlist their sympathy and kept herself in *a* mood of self-pity, by dwelling *on* her unfortunate childhood situation, making it appear darker than it *was*. As long as she was at the beginning of her movement from minus to plus, as she had construed it, she was merely a determined fighter for her ends, be it by masculine or by feminine means. But as she advanced toward the plus side, two things happened. She *was* rewarded by society out of all proportion, and at the same time she felt increasingly threatened in her vanity and personal superiority because she had enough tacit “common sense” to feel the “unreal” foundation of it all. All her symptoms and her suicide can be seen as attempts to maintain her exalted and erroneous opinion of herself. The exogenous factor for the suicide was the cancellation of her contract, *a* situation which she was quite unprepared to meet. Having presented herself and pitied herself all her life as *a* victim of cruel circumstances, her suicide is also to be seen as an accusation of and perhaps revenge on persons close to her who did not fulfill her “insatiable demand for limitless love” (Luce, 1964, p. 78), and the world at large which she blamed for not treating her fairly. And, indeed, her suicide was taken by many *as an* indictment of the “establishment” to which, after all, she owed her success.

The task of therapy would have been to modify her opinions in the direction of common sense by demonstrating to her in *a* friendly way, step by step, her present mistaken ways. She would then recognize her over-life-size secret goal of success, her personal ambition, her disrespect for the larger social context of her life, her lack of social interest. She would then also understand and accept that her difficulties are not “caused” by anything in her past, nor by any present malice of particular persons or the system, with herself as the helpless victim, but by her goal and consequent actions. She would realize that she is in fact a very active and forceful person, and could begin to use her resources to live in a more cooperative, constructive and all-around more satisfactory way in which she would *no* longer need her symptoms.

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