

“WHAT’S THE STORY?”: LIFE STYLE NARRATIVES STUDY GROUP

(An affiliate of the North American Society of Adlerian Psychology/NASAP)

Summary of 11/1/20 meeting

EARLY RECOLLECTIONS OF U.S. PRESIDENTS

Thank you, all, who voted and participated in our November 1, 2020 meeting, “**Early Recollections of U.S. Presidents.**” Participants zoomed in from California, Illinois, Canada, and the swing states of Georgia and Arizona. We still are wondering who the mysterious “M” was: s/he/it/they never spoke nor showed her/his/its/their face – but thank you, M, for staying for the full two and a half hour meeting! (Yes, the meeting was publicized to last only up to an hour and a half, but, well, hey: the material was as fascinating as it was revealing – and few wanted to leave.) And, **please forgive the lateness of this summary – more than three weeks after our meeting, and three weeks after the election! (Is it over yet?) Even though we may have a new president (elect), the old one is perceiving that many – tens of millions, actually – will continue to be entranced by the con going on – as was reflected in his ER! Yes, we read an ER of Trump’s!**

In addition to those of Lincoln, LBJ, Jefferson, Adams, Grant, and – hey, why not? – Hitler!

Yes, Hitler!

(To learn more about Trump’s very revealing ER: you will have to read most of this summary! But, hey: just compare the reading of this to watching a TV show or soap opera with many “cliff-hangers,” like *The Apprentice*.)

And **which, if any, of the above presidents (and dictator/megalomaniac – most brutal in history) “fit the bill” and lived up to Alfred Adler’s idea of leadership? That is, one with**

a strongly developed social interest (community feeling) ... an optimistic outlook, and sufficient self-confidence ... capacity for quick action ... ease in making contact with people In him (her/it/they!) becomes realized what other(s) dream about (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 (Ansbacher, 1978, p. 31)

Those of you not familiar with *What’s the Story?*:

“What’s the Story?”: (Adlerian) Life Style Narratives Study Group considers an individual’s Early Recollections or perceived important memories as if, “strung together,” they compose a short story. We then interpret that “story” (our “reading”) by applying critical thinking methods adapted from literary and

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educational institutions such as The Great Books Foundation which, by emphasizing that the material (our “evidence”) may have a myriad of meanings, promote a deeper comprehension of a text. (The Family Constellation portion of a Life Style – those short descriptions of self and family members, including birth order positions – serves as a kind of “Cast of Characters” since these characters tend to populate a person’s ERs.)

We’re a book club with a twist

Check out our website:

<https://www.whatsthehistory.online/>

As stated, our subjects included the second president (Adams) to the forty-fifth (T-Rump)! Recollections (and Family Constellation information – mostly birth order) were culled from a variety of sources; however, to avoid as much bias as possible, we did not include memories from recent campaign autobiographies as we thought those might have been shaped or edited to put the candidate in the best possible light. We were looking for, as best we could, authentic memories.

And, if you’re wondering why we included Trump since he was a recent candidate: his ER was from 1987!

We also should note that participants and early readers of the material were not privy to whose memories were whose until we had almost finished discussing the first president “up,” who was ...

... **Trump.**

Be patient! We’ll get to him toward the end (as I am writing this, he still has not conceded the election!).

Next up was the president (ex-)President Trump most compares himself (favorably) to:

Abraham Lincoln!

Did the ER we found reflect his nickname, Honest Abe? Provided by the Kentucky Bar Association, from Lincoln’s law partner and apparent first biographer – yes, we could not validate to 100% accuracy all of the ERs we collected – Lincoln’s recollection (apparently in his own words!) was perhaps the saddest. It detailed how the topography of one region negatively affected another, the rains in the hills washing away whatever seeds he had planted in the valley though it had not rained there. (I know what you’re thinking! Let’s play the “The Metaphor Game”! It’s as fun as “Charades”!)

Next up: **LBJ!**

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Why place LBJ after Trump and Lincoln? As President Trump said on Fox News, June 20, 2020, “I think I’ve done more for the Black community than any other president.” Immediately, he qualified this – though only for a moment – by adding “Let’s take a pass on Abraham Lincoln.” He then, of course, disparaged even Honest Abe: “‘cause he did good but it’s always questionable.”

So, how did the ER we uncovered of LBJ, who signed the Civil Rights Act into law, measure up? It reflected a very independent, active individual who veers from – or dares leave – the advised, well-trodden path, becoming seriously hurt; fearing punishment and abandonment, his actions nevertheless, or conversely, result in uniting his often-at-odds parents (over their concern for him; “warring” is too strong a word to describe his parents’ relationship).

We tested our interpretation/s against that of famed Adlerian **Heinz Ansbacher** who had written an article in the 1970s about this very same ER! (Ansbacher and his wife **Rowena**, followers and colleagues of Adler, edited *The Individual Psychology of Adlerian Psychology*, which, composed of their explanations of selections of Adler’s original writings, is considered the definitive Adlerian text – known to graduate students as the “purple book” because of its purple cover.)

We did pretty well by our interpretation/s!

However, most revelatory was reading aloud, at the meeting, Ansbacher’s criticism of LBJ’s chosen biographer: best-selling author of presidential biographies and future **Pulitzer Prize winner, Doris Goodwin Kearns** (Kearns also wrote biographies of Lincoln, the Kennedys, Eleanor and FDR).

Before LBJ had chosen her to be his biographer, she had been one of his White House assistants, chosen – surprisingly, she admits – after she had criticized him in print (what did LBJ’s ER say about uniting those with contrasting or conflicting views?).

Ansbacher takes Kearns to task for searching for reductionistic causes – that is, **Freudian** causes – to explain LBJ’s behavior (over-involved or castrating Mother, uninvolved Father, anyone? [A shout out must go to LBJ’s father who overcompensated for his struggles as a poor farmer by becoming a teacher and state rep, as well as having a reputation as an honest politician. Say, what? Yes, you read that right: honest politician!]). Ansbacher notes that though Kearns admitted to having difficulty explaining LBJ psychologically, he contends that all one has to do is read the ER he had given her, and which apparently she cited verbatim, to get a good sense of LBJ’s goals, expectations, and world view. It’s that simple!

Or is it? How does the Viet Nam War fit into any of this? Once Johnson veered wildly off the path and escalated U.S. involvement – against the advice, we now know, of many, including his vice president – he felt, as he told his wife, “trapped.” And was he punished – and abandoned – for his actions! He could not heal the cultural divisions the war exposed and further fomented. Was his ER wishful thinking? He had given it to Kearns, apparently, in the early 1970s. But we conjecture. However, wouldn’t it have been great to have collected LBJ’s ERs before and after Viet Nam – to “test” our hypotheses?

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Next up: two ERS of **Thomas Jefferson**, our third president, first secretary of state, and one of the writers of the U.S. Constitution!

The revered Constitution!

In his first ER, Jefferson notes that he was “handed up to a servant on horseback, and carried on a pillow for a long distance.” Given his and his family’s ownership of humans, does he mean, as noted at the *What's the Story?* meeting, “servant” or “slave”?

Jefferson’s next recollection sees him reciting the Lord’s prayer in the hope that school will end early. “Divine intervention?” a participant joked, or expected pampered-ness ([?], as also was evidenced in his first ER – oh, to journey on a pillow! A quick aside: did you know that the “**MyPillow Guy**” – yes, that TV personality-hawker – said to *People* magazine that “God directly chose Donald Trump to be the president of the United States”?)

If only we knew the outcome of Jefferson’s prayer! Did school get out early? Or did this prompt him to question religion? (Adler, for example, gives a few ERs in which he questions or confronts religion, such as when he waits up at night for proof that the promised Passover angel will visit his childhood home [it never comes, giving support to one of Adler’s main concepts: trust only action/movement!]).

Could Jefferson’s praying ER have influenced his “writing” of *The Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth*, popularly known as the *Jefferson Bible*, in which he edited out of the *Bible* mention of miracles, the supernatural, the divine, and in the process reduced it to a mere 84 pages, exposing Jesus’ true humanity and the hypocrisy of accepted authority? What does this reveal about Jefferson’s own humanity and hypocrisy: that is, his writing that all men are created equal, yet he owned slaves and fathered some six children with his slave, Sally Hemmings? Oh, the entitled-ness of it all!

And, how apropos, that next we considered the ERS of Jefferson’s frenemy and fellow revolutionary, and a co-writer of the U.S. Constitution, **John Adams** who, as *What's the Story* member, **Aimee Daremus**, informed us, did not own slaves (unlike many of his compatriots, Adams was vehemently anti-slavery).

(Jefferson beat Adam’s bid for a second term; both died on the same day, July 4, 1826 – fifty years to the day of the adoption of their Declaration of Independence, our nation’s birthday!, and years after they had renewed their friendship. Divine intervention, anyone?)

And, wow, are their recollections different! Of course, we were able to find only two of Jefferson’s. Adams’ ERS – four of ’em! – are very detailed. We “pulled” them from his autobiography, that he had written not for the public but for his children. Hmmm, is that why their focus is on hard work (farm and academics) and pleasing Daddy?

The movement across Adams’ ERS shows a kind-of stubbornness to excel: first, at labor-intensive farm work and then, to please his father, at academics (before his self-direction to excel kicks in and he studies, studies, studies to better understand subjects, which might not have

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excited him, such as math). And, boy – expectations, anyone? – did his father (and other male figures) help pave the way for him to succeed: finding work on a farm to “test” him, which schools to attend, the satisfying of his want to change “schoolmasters,” making the taking of an exam – psheew! – easier (hmmm, now who’s more pampered: Adams or Jefferson?).

The father of the next president we considered ...

... **Ulysses S. Grant**, Commanding General of the U.S. Army who won the Civil War, also paved the way for his success, he and his wife giving their son the freedom to be independent and explore the world around him. Mr. Jesse Grant even applied for Ulysses to go to West Point! Ulysses did not learn about it until after he had been accepted – and even then he did not want to go, feeling he did not measure up. Such humility is reflected in Grant’s ERs, taken from his memoirs which historians (and **Gertrude Stein!**) consider the best of all presidential tomes, if only because of his, as said, humility, humanity, perceived honesty, and if anyone comes under criticism, it is himself! (I thought I had read that **Obama** considers Grant’s memoirs to be the “gold standard,” but I could not find evidence of him saying this. Wishful thinking? Obama’s recollections of his first term came out just a few days ago... Another aside: did you now that Gertrude Stein, before she became the world renown art collector, author, mentor to **Picasso**, **Fitzgerald**, and **Hemingway**, and dropper of bon mots such as “There is no ‘there’ there” and “Rose is a rose is a rose is a rose,” had planned to follow in the footsteps of her professor and mentor, **William James**, “America’s First Psychologist”? But she dropped out of medical school in her last year, complaining that she had never been so bored. Had she continued, perhaps we would be more familiar with the pre-DSM personality categorization system that she had developed as a student...)

Getting back on track:

Grant’s ERs were perhaps the most rollicking and entertaining that we considered. He comes off as an extremely active, hard-working (work horse!) individual, working alongside men much older and (at first) more experienced than himself; he also is a good-sport, taking the “ribbing” of others, and devising creative solutions to problems (for the common good, such as the safety of others, as well as that of his horses – oh, his beloved horses!) that bely his age and the expectations of adults. One does not get the idea that he was writing his memoirs to polish his image. (He was writing them for money: to provide for his family as he was broke from bad business deals; they were published just days after he died. Hmmm, let’s re-read that ER of his in which he relates a bad deal he made for a horse. But he had to have that horse! [If it were not for his friend **Mark Twain**, who intervened and negotiated for him, Grant’s royalties would have been much, much, much less. Who says we need a businessman for president!])

Grant’s ERs – as you can guess – show a big love – big love! – of (for?) horses! As participant **Paul Miki** noted in his perfect summary of Grant’s ERs, which made us all laugh: Grant showed a lot of “horse sense.”

The last ER we considered was not that of a U.S. president but ...

... **Hitler’s!**

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Yes, Hitler! More than one *Whats the Story?* participant mentioned the similarity between Hitler's ER and the first presidential ER we considered (Trump's)! Whereas Hitler notes that his "greatest spiritual experience" was reading, at the age of ten, about the "amazingly victorious campaign of the heroic German armies," Trump, at age seven, watches his mother "enthralled by the pomp and circumstance" of the British royals. In both ERs, the main character (Hitler/Trump) appears physically "passive." And this underscores the beauty (and goal) of *What's the Story?*: giving evidence to support our opinions (i.e., where's the beef?).

Yes, we conjecture! But as we stress: opinions must be supported by evidence in the text. Interpretation by the group, thus, is a cooperative effort, an endeavor that helps to hone one's listening and critical thinking, comprehension skills, as the same evidence may lead to a variety of opinions. (As we note, one's interpretation or opinion of the material at the start of the meeting is likely to change by the end!)

And this was reflected in Trump's ER. One psychologist noted that he had never read an ER in which the "client" was so passive: "doing nothing," as he put it.

Au contraire, said another – from Canada (ah, the benefits of zoom!). He pointed out that this president (we still did not know their identities) was a very active observer, if only based on the language he had used to describe the contrast or chaos of the event unreeling before him (yes, "chaos" was the word this participant used to describe this ER): the mother of our future president being "just enthralled" with how the British royalty is being presented, in real time, on TV, and his father's "impatience" with this, comparing the royals to "con artists."

Why, of all memories, was this the childhood memory Trump recalls in his first book, *The Art of the Con* – oops (Freudian slip!), I mean *The Art of the Deal* – published almost thirty years before he became president? What conclusion might he have drawn – that we may draw – from it?

Thus, the first participant's understanding was strengthened by another's different perspective – of the exact same material.

And, to repeat what we had written at the beginning of this summary: "Even though we may have a new president (elect), the old one is perceiving that many – tens of millions, actually – will continue to be entranced by the con going on." Perhaps we should substitute the word "betting" for "perceiving" given Trump's involvement (and bankruptcy) in the gambling industry. There's a sucker born every minute.

Of course, we must be careful not to make such conclusions based on only one ER (and one in a book that was ghost written and, given the criticism that Trump does not read: one that he might never have read!).

But it sure is fun to speculate (!), leading us to consider, for example, the hold con artists have on the American public. Can we remember who first said, "America loves a confidence man"? The con-artist as "anti-hero" (snake-oil salesman, alleged businessman, charismatic preacher, TV

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hawker, seller of the Brooklyn Bridge) is so engrained, so revered by the American public, that it can now be considered – calling **Dr. Jung!** – an American archetype.

It's become part of our national identity.

(In case you're wondering where we unearthed Hitler's ER: it came not from his memoir, *Mein Kampf* [*My Struggle*], which one of us tried to read to prepare for this meeting, but from the personality profile of Hitler that Harvard psychologist **Henry Murray** had compiled in the early 1940s for the Office of Strategic Service [OSS], the precursor of the CIA. [Murray created the famous Thematic Apperception Test (TAT), a projective personality assessment that the Adlerian Lifestyle is often compared to. A big – and important – difference between the two is that whereas the Lifestyle asks self-stimulus questions, such as “Tell me some of your earliest recollections” to get an idea of that person's narrative and guiding view of self, world, and others, the TAT presents one with provoking stimuli: that is, drawings that are, at best, “leading,” showing people looking forlorn or even with a gun nearby! How can the answers to the TAT question – “Tell me a story with a beginning, middle, and end [about this drawing and, hence, your life]?” – not reflect depressing themes, suggesting obvious psychiatric diagnoses! As to why this instrument was so popular and the Lifestyle not: well, let's not look to the past, but to the present and future: **what could Trump's ER say about him?** [Is it any wonder that Trump cites *Citizen Kane* and *Sunset Boulevard* as his favorite movies? If we consider this as a sort of projective assessment: both are about the costs of keeping up appearances. In his profile of Hitler, Murray projects how Hitler's behavior may play out: not conceding nor accepting defeat, despite all evidence, he would fight to the finish, trying to bring down the whole German people with him. Shades of today? Who says we cannot learn from history?]

(Somebody stop me! I forget – “show me the evidence!”: but doesn't Murray's profile of Hitler also note his rumored physical “un-endowment,” which might have spurred his need to overcompensate and prove his superiority in other ways: say, how he used his graceful-like hands, while he spoke, to mesmerize the German people? Wait! Didn't **Stormy Daniels** describe Trump's “family jewels” similarly? Let's play “Footsies”!)

(If you think comparing Trump to a Hitler is too extreme: Ann Frank's playmate, step-sister, and Auschwitz survivor, has already done so.)

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CONCLUSION!

Sorry for the digression.

Again, even though it is fun and easy to conjecture, one cannot assess from only one ER. It was interesting, however, to consider the presidents' ERs as a whole: what were their similarities and differences?:

Birth Order. The presidents considered here tended to be oldest children or oldest sons or oldest of “sib-ships” (that is, oldest of a grouping of siblings, their

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other siblings being so many years older as to be considered members of a different sib-ship group). What could this mean? Were these men more apt to be leaders, having already “led” (in some instances, bossed!) their brothers and sisters; could they have been placed in this position by their parents (e.g., “You’re the oldest! Be a role model!”)?

Conflicting Relationship between Parents. There were many contrasts or conflicts described within the ERs, especially that of the relationship between parents: Trump’s, LBJ’s, Hitler’s. (Even Lincoln described in some detail the contrasts between hills and valleys, and how one region can negatively affect the other.)

Independence as a Child: Grant, LBJ.

Following Rules: Lincoln, Adams.

Outsize Influence of Father: Jefferson’s, Adam’s, Grant’s (and, perhaps not as pronounced, LBJ’s), especially with regard to education and overcompensation for their father’s lack of one (Jefferson, Adams, Grant). Trump often has spoken reverently of his father...

There was more, so much more ...

Remember our question of the beginning of this summary? It has an easy answer: we should hold all of our leaders to Alfred Adler’s idea of leadership. That is, one with

a strongly developed social interest (community feeling) ... an optimistic outlook, and sufficient self-confidence ... capacity for quick action ... ease in making contact with people In him (her/it/they!) becomes realized what other(s) dream about (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 (Ansbacher, 1978, p. 31)

As I write this, our 45th president still has not accepted the election results, still has not conceded, and, unlike our 16th president who sowed seeds (that were washed away), is sowing chaos.

But, hey: we’re still entranced with what is unreeling on TV!

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STAY TUNED ... our next meeting will be either at the end of the year or in January ...

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