

Why First Memories Matter

Before reading further, just close your eyes and allow yourself to drift back in time. Go down through the years into childhood, back further, back as far as you can go, and see what earliest memory floats up to meet you.

What memory has come into mind? Describe the events in your earliest memory in the present tense, as if it was happening now. Gather as much information as you can. What are you doing in the memory. What can you see, hear, and smell? How are you feeling? Are there other people present? If so, what is your orientation to them, and to the material world you remember?

The Viennese psychotherapist Alfred Adler often asked his clients about their earliest memory. He believed that remembering is not so much dependent upon what happened then as how we are now. The earliest memory encapsulates in metaphoric form how we currently see ourselves in relation to the world. It is the first chapter of our unwritten autobiography.

Most people find that the feelings represented in that first memory are feelings which they often experience in their lives, and the story has a form and pattern which is also familiar. Parents or other caretakers are usually present in the first memory. If you examine the interaction between you and the caretakers in the memory you will often find something meaningful about your relationship with them.

Working with your first memory is like working with a dream. Spend time savouring it. Allow all the details to speak to you. Seemingly minor details may be more significant than they appear at first. Consider it as a metaphor rather than a literal statement. Content is less important than the form and shape of it. Meaning is best developed using emotions and intuition rather than logic.

The first memory offers more than a path into self exploration. It is also an invitation to growth. Imagining how the drama of the first memory could have resolved itself differently, and how you might have behaved differently, can help you to develop new ways of thinking and behaving. Be prepared to spend plenty of time on this: the variations which come to imagination last will probably represent the most challenging and powerful areas for development.

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Responses to this article are warmly welcomed.

[This article was printed in Network News.](#)