Eleanor Roosevelt and the Creative Life: Living the Adlerian Concepts of Courage and Social Interest

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Abstract

Eleanor Roosevelt’s childhood and early adolescence provided her with neither love, safety, nor a sense of belonging. In spite of many perceived deficiencies, she developed and demonstrated remarkable creativity, courage, and social interest throughout her life. This paper examines Eleanor Roosevelt’s life through the Adlerian lens with a focus on her creativity. The extraordinary courage and high level of social interest she showed during her life is given particular attention.
You gain strength, courage, and confidence by every experience in which you look fear in the face.

You are able to say to yourself, ‘I have lived though this horror. I can take the next thing that comes along.’

You must do the thing you think you cannot do.

Eleanor Roosevelt
Eleanor Roosevelt and Alfred Adler would have probably have become fast friends had they met on the streets of New York City in the 1930’s. They had much in common; a deep, abiding love and concern for humanity, an encouraging, infectious way communicating and a desire to be of service. They acted on their beliefs and had the ability to educate others. They were keen observers of the human condition. This paper shows how Eleanor Roosevelt’s entire adult life demonstrated the Adlerian principles of creativity, social interest, and extraordinary courage.

1884 – 1899: The Early Years

Eleanor Roosevelt was born on October 11, 1884. She was the first of three children born to Anna Hall and Elliot Roosevelt. Anna Hall was thought to be one of the most beautiful women of her day. Her father, Elliot, was handsome and dashing. Both parents were from well-established, wealthy New York families (Cook, 1992).

The Hall family placed a great deal of importance on physical beauty, manners and the Victorian virtues of womanhood. “Despite Eleanor’s privileged and distinguished world, her childhood was a time of anguish and tragedy. If she was ‘born into a secure golden world’, it was also a world shattered by disappointment, alcoholism and betrayal” (Cook, 1992 p. 38).

Eleanor would later describe Anna as cold, rejecting, and self-absorbed. Eleanor interpreted this as personal rejection. She saw herself as homely and clumsy. She thought her mother was disappointed to have such a child (Black, 1995).
Anna’s behavior could have been a result of Elliot’s’ drinking. Because of his drinking, Elliot was neither a responsible husband nor parent. He would often be away from the home for months at a time (Cook, 1992). As completely as she felt scolded and scorned by her mother, Eleanor felt loved and understood by her father. He encouraged her to excel, to be courageous and bold. Although she adored her father, “she never knew when he would abandon her, emotionally or literally” (Cook, 1992 p. 39).

Anna died of diphtheria when Eleanor was 8 years old. Her father was away at the time, arriving home shortly after Anna died. Elliot left the family again after moving the children to live with Grandmother Hall.

Elliot was away much of the next 2 years. Elliot wrote warm and loving letters to his “Darling little Daughter” (Cook, 1992, p. 84). The letters were filled with promises he did not fulfill.

Eleanor’s younger brother died in May of 1883, 2 years after the death of his mother. Elliot Roosevelt died 3 months after the death of his son. He jumped from a window during a bout of delirium tremens. Little Eleanor suffered her greatest loss.

Eleanor’s life up to this time was filled with disappointment, rejection, broken promises, little affection, a great deal of loss and no encouragement. She reported feelings of insecurity and inadequacy that were to plague her for many years. She found comfort in helping other people, perhaps to, compensate for her own fears of rejection (Roosevelt, 1949).

1899 – 1921: The Formative Years
Grandmother Hall sent Eleanor to England to attend Allenswood, a boarding school for girls. Eleanor was 15 years old. This was to be a turning point for Eleanor (Roosevelt, 1949).

Madame Souvestre, the headmistress of the school, knew Elliot and Anna. Eleanor’s aunt Bye had attended the school. ER was welcomed with open arms, soon becoming a favorite of Madame Souvestre (Cook, 1992).

Eleanor’s caring and concern for others are apparent in an excerpt of a letter from Madame Souvestre to Grandmother Hall:

All that you said when she came here of the purity of her heart, the nobleness of her thought has been verified by her conduct among people who were at first perfect strangers to her…I often found that she influenced others in the right direction. She is full of sympathy for all those who live with her and shows an intelligent interest in everything she comes in contact with. As a pupil she is very satisfactory, but even that is of small account when you compare it with the perfect quality of her soul. (Cook, 1992 pp. 109, 110).

“After my father’s death when I was eight years old, I did not have a sense of being cherished which he gave me until I met Mlle. Souvestre when I was 15” (Black, 1995, p. 9).

“The head mistress of the school I went to in England, she exerted perhaps the greatest influence on my girlhood”. (Roosevelt, 1945). A great deal of importance was placed on beauty, in the Hall family. Eleanor thought she fell short. At Allenswood “a great deal of stress was placed on intellectual achievements, and there I felt I could hold my own” (Black, 1995, p.10).
“For three years, I basked in her generous presence, and I think those three years did much to form my character and give me the confidence to go through some of the trials that awaited me when I returned to the United States” (Black, 1995, p.10). The 3 years with Mlle. Souvestre helped Eleanor become aware of her privilege and wakened in her a sense of social justice.

The trials awaiting Eleanor when she returned to the United States were many. Young women of her age and social status were expected to go through what was then referred to as “coming out” season. Eleanor was shy. She saw herself as lacking beauty and social graces (Cook, 1992). Because of her perceived deficiencies, she found the “coming out” process an excruciating ordeal (Roosevelt, 1977).

During this same time, she, along with other young women of her class, began doing charity work with children in the tenements of New York City (Cook, 1992). She taught dance and calisthenics. She became involved with the lives of the children and their families. This would be the beginning of her life’s work: doing for others.

She married a distant cousin, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, when she was 21 years old. Eleanor, never really having a home of her own, watched as her mother-in-law made all the decisions, including overseeing the furnishing of Eleanor’s home and the education and care of her children (Roosevelt, 1977). This caused Eleanor great distress and added to her feelings of inferiority (Cook, 1992). All the gains she had made in self-confidence were lost (Roosevelt, 1977). “All her life an outsider in the homes of others, Eleanor was again on the periphery and could not imagine claiming a place at the family hearth”, (Cook, 1992 p. 175). She struggled with depression and experienced an agonizing struggle to regain her self-esteem (Cook, 1992).
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Eleanor, however, did not think she had a voice in her own home but was willing and able to speak out as she became more involved in the causes of the day. As a woman with money and privilege, she was able to be involved in ways many women of her day would not have had the opportunity (Cook, 1992).

She rarely hesitated to speak, to get involved when the cause was just and compelling. Her many interests included education, women’s rights, politics, the Red Cross, social justice, and civil rights. She was against the U.S. involvement in World War I and was involved early on in the League of Nations and the World Court.

1921-1945: The Extraordinary Years

Eleanor’s life changed dramatically when her husband, Franklin, was elected governor of New York. The family moved to Albany and she was no longer under the control of her mother-in-law. After the campaign of 1920, she might measure her words, but she would not be silenced. It was during the early years in Albany that she began to find her voice (Cook 1992).

The civil rights and women’s rights she fought for evolved into a fight for human rights. The justice and human rights she fought for in the U.S. evolved into fighting for human rights for people throughout the world.

Because of her husband’s disability, she became his eyes and ears. She not only traveled the country, going into coalmines as well as into fields and farmhouses, she traveled the world. She returned with valuable information, helping her husband to make more informed decisions. The information she gathered for him would assure the voice of the everyday American citizen was taken into account when making policy (Cook, 1999).
Adlai Stevenson once said about Eleanor, “She would rather light a candle then curse the darkness”. He was right, for throughout her public life she lighted candles of courage (Cook, 1999,).

Clare Booth Luce, a noted conservative of the day, in addressing a dinner in Eleanor Roosevelt’s honor, described Eleanor as “the best loved woman in the world”…concluding, “no woman has so comforted the distressed or distressed the comfortable” (Cook, 1999, p. 201).

Eleanor Roosevelt was many things to many people. Children and adults from all over the country sent her letters. She wrote a weekly column in a New York City newspaper. She had a weekly radio program. She traveled the country and the world. She interacted with heads of state as well as the common woman and man in the field, factory, and on the street.

In spite of the fact that she suffered from severe bouts of depression, she found doing for others was the best medicine. She continued to do for others throughout her long and eventful life.

The Roles of Social Interest, Courage, and Creativity in Adlerian Psychology

In order to understand Adlerian psychology and the human condition, it is necessary to become familiar with the Adlerian concepts of social interest, courage, and creativity. These three concepts are the cornerstones of Adler’s individual psychology.

Social interest, also known as community feeling, “is probably Adler’s most significant concept” (Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1979, p.41). Social interest has been defined and explored by many psychologists and scholars. There have been
disagreements about the translation of *Gemeinschaftsgefühl*. Is the correct translation community feeling, social feeling, or social interest?

Ansbacher (1978) notes the term social interest is a translation from the singular form of the German word *Gemeinschaftsgefühl*. The plural form, *Gemeinschaftsgefühle*, is translated as social feelings.

O’Connell (1965), arguing that a “humanistic identification” is a better translation of *Gemeinschaftsgefühl*, offers this as a way to explain what some refer to as social interest and others as community feeling: “It covers the intellectual, affective, and behavioral aspects of the optimal relationship to others, namely, understanding, empathizing with, and acting in behalf of others” (p. 47).

The scholars and Adlerian psychologists referenced in this paper use both social interest and community feeling interchangeably in their writings. The differences will be noted.

According to Adler, “social interest is the main characteristic of each person and is involved in all of his actions” (Ansbacher, 1968, p. 28). Genuine social interest is necessary for the healthy functioning and well-being of the individual.

Eriksson (1992) views Adler’s writings (as translated by Ansbacher) and the writings of other Adlerians as leading to one definition of this concept: “maintaining an affirmative, optimistic, understanding, and loving attitude to life and self so as to gain a sense of harmony and kinship with a friendly universe and therefore also a loving interest in the interests of others” (p. 277).

The essence of social interest is the valuing of something outside the self without ulterior motives: a true absence of self-centeredness, egocentricity, and self-absorption
Community feeling becomes manifest as social interest when individuals make an active social contribution and assume a courageous attitude toward life (Clark, 1999, p. 76).

Dreikurs (1991) describes community feeling as being all encompassing. He sees community feeling as significant in the development of the human character, taking into account every single action and emotion in a person’s life.

Community feeling is a readiness to cooperate and to demand less than is offered. This feeling is expressed by a willingness to contribute without thought of reward (Dreikurs, 1991).

Ansbacher and Ansbacher (1979) describe social interest as “a striving for a form of community which must be thought of as everlasting, as it could be thought of if mankind had reached the goal of perfection” (pp. 34, 35).

“Community feeling can be understood to be as experientially real as the phenomena such as anger, grief, or a sense of one’s own existence” (Hanna, 1996, p. 22). Hanna (1996) further defines social interest: “community feeling is a natural capacity to identify oneself with the greater community and eventually all of humanity, considering the struggles of the many to be nothing other than one’s own” (p. 23).

Empathy is an aspect of social interest. Although there is no evidence Adler was the first to use this definition, he was known to describe empathy as “seeing through the eyes of another, hearing with the ears of another and feeling with another’s heart”. Empathy, he said, was at the core of Gemeinschftgefühl (Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1956).
Although empathy is an important aspect of social interest, it is not the whole of the concept. Social interest is also a positive, evaluative, understanding attitude toward the whole of life, innate, which has to be consciously developed by the individual (Eriksson, 1992, p. 278).

Social interest serves as a guiding cognitive structure by which decisions are made. This function is perhaps the most important aspect of social interest (Ansbacher, 1968). Because of the direction giving function, social interest can also be equated with value. A person with social interest values the interests and values of others and is guided by them (Ansbacher, 1968).

Ericksson (1992) references Ansbacher (1968) by describing social interest in terms of both process and object dimensions. He describes the actual process or interest part as occurring in three developing steps (p. 278).

Step 1 assumes an aptitude for cooperation and social living. However, the tangible skills have yet to be developed. In step two, the innate aptitudes begin forming into the objective abilities of cooperation, contribution, and the ability to understand and empathize with others. By step three, social interest has become a “subjective evaluative attitude determining choices and thus influencing the dynamics of the individual” (Ericksson, 1992, p. 278).

Way, as referenced by Ericksson (1992), saw Adler’s concept as “embracing the human being’s sense of self as part of the unity of existence in contrast to the fear of standing in the cosmos as a single unrelated organism” (p. 279). Way (1950) saw this “sense of kinship and attunement with all of life to the works of the great artists and
mystics and indeed to the whole creative process found within man" (Ericksson, 1992, p. 279).

Richardson & Manaster (2003) write about social interest as an ideal. It inspires a way of life countering the feelings of disconnectedness and helplessness some experience with so much uncertainty in today’s world. They see this ideal of social interest as giving individuals a wider sense of belonging and purpose.

Social interest has a number of components: behavioral, emotional, and cognitive. According to Kaplan (1986), the behaviors associated with social interest include helping, sharing, participating, respect, cooperation, compromise or flexible behavior, empathy, encouragement, and reforming.

The feeling components include: a sense of belonging, feeling at home, an ease and comfortable feeling when dealing with others, communality, a sense of being similar to others, and faith in others. It “conveys a feeling there is goodness and social interest in all people”, the courage to be imperfect, “the feeling that making mistakes is part of being human”, being human, “the feeling of being part of all humanity”, and optimism (Kaplan, 2003, p. 237, 238).

Adlerian psychology sees the individual as striving for a sense of belonging. Showing social interest or community feeling is a part of striving for a sense of belonging. Social interest is dynamic, complex, and richly textured. Social interest is more than feeling a part of the community. It extends to feeling a part of the whole of the universe. Adler described it, as quoted in many places, “as feeling at home on the crust of the earth.”
Oberst & Stewart (2003) describe the basis of social interest as a feeling of equality. The equality of being “equally good” as another human being in spite of possible social, sexual, physical etc. differences.

The second cornerstone in developing an understanding of Adlerian psychology is the concept of courage. Courage, as defined by Webster, is “the attitude of facing and dealing with anything recognized as dangerous, difficult or painful, instead of withdrawing from it” (Webster, 1999).

In this culture, courage is seen as doing something out of the ordinary, of putting one’s life in danger or at risk in order to help someone. We read or hear stories of the courage of firefighters running into a burning building, risking their lives to save the lives of others.

Medina (2008) asks whether courageousness has to be about taking care of someone else or can it also be about taking care of ourselves and facing our own everyday challenges. Medina goes on to write, “there is therefore a need for the individual to be courageous everyday if he is to be equal to the challenge of living and flourishing as opposed to despairing and stagnating” (p.284).

The courage Adlerian psychology talks about is this everyday kind of courage. According to Mosak “to have courage means the willingness to take a risk even when the outcome is uncertain” (Carlson et al. 2006, p.143).

Courage is tied to perfectionism in Adlerian psychology. Clients are challenged to “have the courage to be imperfect.” The ability to have the courage to be imperfect is a part of accepting our humanness.
Mosak (1991) does not agree with the popular use of courage as a “thing”. He describes it as used rather than simply possessed. If courage were to be translated into movement terms, “courage rather than being a “thing”, becomes merely the willingness to risk when (a) one does not know what the consequences may be or when (b) one knows the consequences and they are possibly dangerous” (p. 311).

Courage, according to Mosak (1991), is not something that one has, but something that one does. Courage is about risk and the willingness to risk. Mosak goes back to “risk and the willingness to risk” when describing “the courage to be imperfect.” “The question we all must ask ourselves is whether we are willing to ‘put ourselves on the line’ and meet the life tasks even if we are imperfect” (p. 312).

For some people it takes courage just to get up and out of bed in the morning. We all demonstrate courage in our daily lives, in our relationships, in the work we do, and in our interactions with our fellow humans.

Adler associated social interest with courage and independence (Ansbacher, 1968). This independence includes becoming independent of the opinions of other people.

Kaplan (1986) describes this courage to be imperfect as “the feeling that making mistakes is a natural part of being human, and the feeling that one does not have to always be ‘the first’, ‘the best’ or the “most famous’ …” (p. 238).

Creativity, the third cornerstone, is an integral part of the human experience. Creativity, in Adlerian psychology, looks at the use people make of their circumstances. “The use people make of their circumstances is as important as, and often more important than, the circumstances themselves” (Carlson et al., 2006, p. 83). Creativity is
the normal, healthy, and adaptive functioning of the encouraged individual (Lemire, 1988).

Choice permits us to select between existing options. Creativity permits us to create new options. We can create new ways of looking at things. We can create new ways of responding to things. Mosak (1991) quotes Adler (1932/1988), “The creative force arranges; it has the ability to look ahead and see what it must do” (p. 315).

People have a choice as to how they live their lives. Some will use the circumstances they encountered as children as an excuse to stay on the useless side of life. Others will excel in spite of their circumstances and live on the useful side of life.

Lemire (1998) quotes May (1975) referring to Adler’s view of creativity as a “compensatory theory of creativity—that human beings produce art, science and other aspects of culture to compensate for their own feelings of inadequacy” (p. 113).

Social interest, courage, and creativity are the three major concepts on which Adlerian psychology is built. They are separate and yet intertwined. In order for a person to show social interest, courage is necessary. Creativity in overcoming perceived deficits requires courage.

This explains how Eleanor Roosevelt overcame perceived deficiencies, acted with courage, and lived creativity. In living her life in this way, she showed social interest and community feeling, not just in her own immediate family or community but also throughout the world.

Eleanor Roosevelt and Social Interest

*Self-transcendence.* One of the factors of social interest is self-transcendence. “The essence of social interest is the valuing of something outside the self without

Leak (2006) states, “One’s identification with others and a transcendence of self-interest that results in a genuine concern with and striving for community and human welfare is social interest at its highest form” (p. 59).

Dreikurs (1991) describes this aspect of social interest as “expressed by the willingness to contribute without thought of reward” (p. 7). Mosak quotes Dreikurs as maintaining, “the meaning of life lay in the contribution to the common welfare without thought of reward” (p. 312).

Eleanor Roosevelt’s life was a study in self-transcendence. She began showing social interest and self-transcendence while doing charity work in the tenements of New York City. Nothing much was expected of women of her wealth and privilege at the beginning of the 20th century. She found great joy and satisfaction working with the children. She did this work for the joy of doing it. She was not interested in any reward or recognition (Cook, 1992).

The work she began in the tenements continued throughout her life. She worked with no thought of power, recognition or reward. She did not support World War I. She was involved in the League of Nations, and she fought for equal rights for women and African Americans. She did the many things she did because she saw it as the right thing to do (Cook, 1992).

**Empathy.** As noted earlier, empathy, as Adler described it, is “to see with the eyes of another, to hear with the ears of another and to feel with the heart of another” (Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1956, p. 135). Empathy is not just a feeling. Empathy is an
understanding and an appreciation of the experience of another. The empathic person is tolerant, reasonable, and understanding, adding to her or his ability to identify with another human being (Carlson et al., 2006)

Eleanor Roosevelt began to develop empathy as a child who did not receive the attention and nurturing children needed in order to grow and thrive (Cook, 1992). She further developed empathy in a very direct way. She was “the eyes and ears” for her husband, both when he was the governor of New York and a three-term president of the US (Goodwin, 1994). She traveled the country and the world, seeing firsthand the plight of the common woman and man.

Belonging and relatedness. The desire to belong is the strongest motivator of the human being. We all strive for a feeling of belonging. From infancy on, we are striving to find our place within the group (Dreikurs, 1950). To experience a sense of belonging is to feel significant, safe, and secure. We all have the need to belong, to try to find our place among people.

Eleanor Roosevelt’s childhood and the early years of her marriage did not provide her with a sense of belonging. The 3 years at Allenswood provided her with her first taste of belonging (Cook 1992). She slowly began to experience this sense of belonging and relatedness as she became passionately involved in the issues of the day.

Goodwin, (1994) quotes Joe Lash, a young man Eleanor befriended in 1940, “…Insecurity, shyness, lack of social grace, she had to conquer them all and helping someone she cared about do the same filled a deep unquenchable longing to feel needed and useful” (p. 123).
“In all our contacts it is probably the sense of being really needed and wanted which gives us the greatest satisfaction and creates the most lasting bond” (Roosevelt, 1977, p. 39). Eleanor appeared to understand this crucial piece of being human, this need for belonging. Variations on this theme appear often in her writing. She knew what she needed and was creative in finding out how to achieve it.

**Contribution.** Because of the interdependence of human beings, it is crucial for all of us to contribute to the common good. A component of the community feeling is “expressed by the willingness to contribute without thought of reward (Dreikurs, 1991, p. 7).

Those who are willing to seek their happiness, as part of the whole, by the contribution they make to their community, will feel more satisfied with themselves and their lives (Dreikurs, 1991). The capacity for cooperation can be a measure of the degree of social interest.

Eleanor Roosevelt’s life was a contribution to the welfare of others, on a local, national, and international scale. She was quoted as saying, “When you cease to make a contribution, you begin to die” (Schlup & Whisenhunt, 2001, p. 87).

**Socially useful striving.** Striving, also seen as movement, improvement, or expansion, is another component of social interest. Ansbacher & Ansbacher (1956) describe individuals as striving from feelings of weakness and inferiority toward the goal of overcoming all the difficulties of life.

This striving can lead to feelings of worth when social interest is involved. The person begins to move from feelings of inferiority to feelings of value. The value we are
talking about is feeling valuable and worthwhile in the larger sense of society (Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1956).

In spite of feelings of inferiority and insecurity that have been well documented by many biographers, Eleanor Roosevelt was able to overcome the inferiority feelings. While a student at Allenswood, she was a favorite, not just because of her intelligence, but because of the concern and caring she showed to the other students (Cook, 1992).

**Mental health**  
According to Adler, well-developed social interest is the main measure of mental health (Ansbacher, 1978). Ansbacher quotes Adler (1929), in describing the value of increased social interest for improving mental health:

…the feeling of worth and value is heightened, giving courage and an optimistic view, and there is a sense of acquiescence… The individual feels at home in life and feels his existence to be worthwhile just as far as he is useful to others, and is overcoming common, instead of private feelings of inferiority. (p.135)

Ansbacher (1978) quotes Dewey, a contemporary of Adler, seeing mental health as “…alert, sincere, enduring interests in the objects we all can share…interest in others and in the conditions and objects which promote their development…in objects that contribute to the enrichment of the lives of all” (p. 135).

This definition defines much that was Eleanor Roosevelt’s life. She experienced severe bouts of depression resulting most likely from the repeated losses during her childhood. The depression appeared whenever the established pattern of her life was disrupted (Cook, 1992).

Eleanor Roosevelt grew up reading Dickens and Scott. These stories awakened in her “a romantic belief that no matter how grim everything seemed there was always
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some way out” (Goodwin, 1994, p. 95). This appears to be one of the guiding lines of her life.

She learned over the years that the best way to address the depression or anxiety was to work, to put the needs of others above her own feelings of inferiority or inadequacy. “My experience has been that work is almost always the best way to pull oneself out of the depths” (Roosevelt, 1949, p. 58). Work, to Eleanor Roosevelt, meant doing for others, and being of value to society.

Eleanor Roosevelt and Courage

Inferiority feelings. Inferiority feelings, sometimes referred to as feelings of insecurity, are experienced by everyone. We are born small, weak, and powerless, relying on others for our care and well-being. We later realize that one day we will die. This adds to the feeling of insecurity. There is no escape from feeling inferior. We are but a small speck in the huge and mysterious universe.

Oberst & Stewart (2003) describe inferiority feelings arising when a child is discouraged. This discouragement can be a result of a number of things, such as when the child is not loved, not adequately cared for, pampered, neglected, or affected by a health problem.

Inferiority feelings also arise when we compare ourselves to other people who we see as being more accomplished, skilled, or better off than we are. This feeling is more than a feeling of envy, it is “a feeling of personal worthlessness which challenges the whole concept of myself” (Oberst & Stewart, 2003, p. 23).
Another component of inferiority feelings and how they affect each person involves the opinion, the personal standpoint, everybody, every child and adult, adopts with respect to their experiences (Oberst & Stewart, 2003).

As mentioned earlier, Elliot Roosevelt, although loving and encouraging at times, was an unpredictable father. He made promises he did not keep. He was gone from little Eleanor for long periods of time. He did not provide her with the stability a child needs (Cook, 1992).

For some reason, most likely her own private logic, Eleanor primarily remembers her father as encouraging her to be her best self (Goodwin, 1994). Some children would have remembered the broken promises, the abandonment, and the unpredictable behavior. Eleanor remembered being loved and adored by her father (Roosevelt, 1949).

On the other hand, she remembers her mother as cold and judgmental. Eleanor always felt ugly and clumsy in the presence of her beautiful mother. The inferiority feelings regarding Eleanor’s looks and her carriage haunted her into middle age (Cook, 1992).

Ansbacher and Ansbacher (1956) report Adler did not view inferiority feelings as being abnormal. Inferiority feelings are the reason for all the improvements that have been made for humanity. “…it is the result of strivings of human beings to improve their whole situation, to know more about the universe, and to be able to control it better” that has resulted in the movement of the human race (p.117).

For Eleanor “The times of depression often felt as gaps, temporary losses of certainty or identity which leave us feeling empty” (Goodwin, 1994, p. 90). Eleanor
Roosevelt appeared to be successful in dealing with feelings of inferiority, periods of depression, and anxiety due to her deep and sincere interest in the lives and well-being of most everyone she met.

**Cooperation.** Kaplan (1986) describes cooperation as “willingness to work or play together with others in order to reach mutual benefits and/or goals” (p. 235). Kaplan goes on to quote Adler (1938), “All problems of human life…demand capacity for cooperation and preparation for the visible sign of social interest” (p. 235).

Dreikurs (1991) refers to the willingness to cooperate as a crucial component of courage and cooperation. The bond to the community must be strong for a person to follow through with commitments if things are not going the way she or he thinks they should. The stronger the bond with the community, the more likely we are to follow through with the commitment.

The ability to compromise and be flexible is a component of cooperation. This could involve being willing to adjust “one's behaviors, attitudes, ideas or expectations in order to accommodate the expectations, requirement, or demands of others or of the situation” (Kaplan, 1986, p. 235).

Eleanor Roosevelt was adept at compromise, able to see all sides of the issue and bring both sides to the table. She was pragmatic. She urged others to spend less time theorizing and more time concentrating on what could be done, not why it was impossible. Eleanor had the courage to encourage newly formed women’s and other reform groups to set realistic goals, prioritize their tasks and delegate assignments (Black, 1996).
Lifestyle. Oberst & Stewart (2003) define lifestyle as the way people go about gaining a sense of completion and belongingness while at the same time meeting the life tasks of relationship, work, and community. The lifestyle is reflected in the way people experience and respond to their families, their role(s) in their family of origin, their special attributes, and so forth. The lifestyle or style of life encompasses all that makes up a person’s life.

Adler believed “every idea that is accepted by an individual is screened through her or his own life style” (Carlson et al., 2006, p. 11). Lifestyle is a person’s style of dealing with life and the idealized picture she or he has. “The lifestyle is the characteristic way that we act, think, and perceive, and the way we live. It is from the lifestyle that we select the methods for coping with life” (p. 12).

The personality is a goal directed interpersonal, phenomenological, and holistic perspective of the lifestyle. In order to understand lifestyle, one must understand “private logic.” Private logic, as defined by Oberst & Stewart (2003), is “the often unconscious reason for feeling, thinking and behaving as one does” (p. 200).

One’s private logic includes ideas about life that are developed in childhood. These ideas or ways of looking at and responding to life, may or may not be appropriate in later life. The lifestyle is built on these deeply established personal beliefs or constructs that are conceived in childhood. “As we develop we establish ideas about what is right or wrong on the basis of our personal experience” (Carlson, et al., 2006, p. 12). It is from these ideas developed in childhood that we make decisions and live our lives as adults.
Elliot Roosevelt, Eleanor’s father, died when she was 10 years old. He is known to have disappointed her on many occasions, causing her great pain with his frequent absences and unpredictable behavior. However, she credits him with giving her the ideals she tried all her life to live up to. She remembers him wanting her to be noble, studious, religious, loving, and good (Goodwin, 1994). It appears much of her private logic was developed from the expectations she remembers her father having for her.

Social interest has an effect on our lifestyle. The person with social interest is able to find her or his place in life in a manner that benefits everyone. A person with social interest is able to develop a style of life in which she or her thinks of others, not just of herself or himself.

“Adler believed that there are three basic life tasks: (a) work, (b) friendship, and (c) love-intimacy. To be mentally healthy, it is necessary to master each of these tasks” (Carlson et al., 2006, p.13). All people have to find a way in which to approach these tasks. Adler maintained that people face the dual challenge in life of approaching and fulfilling these tasks while also seeking completion (Oberst & Stewart, 2003).

Eleanor Roosevelt was able to master the three of the life tasks due to her creativity and courage in overcoming a multitude of perceived deficiencies. She was able to do this because of her interest in the well-being of others.

Justice. Ansbacher and Ansbacher (1956) describe justice as the bright side of the human character. They go on to define justice as the fulfillment of the demands that have arisen from person’s communal life.

Aspects of these demands are dependability, loyalty, frankness, and truthfulness. These are characteristics a community expects from its members. Eleanor Roosevelt
was an active member of the larger community, working for justice for people of color, women, labor unions, child welfare, and in politics.

Eleanor Roosevelt said, “Justice cannot be for one side alone, but must be for both” (Roosevelt, 1949, p. 52). She was a prolific writer and a sought after speaker. She was outraged and one of the first to speak up and out against Senator Joe McCarthy and the House on Un-American Activities. “She used her pen to attack the politics of fear and temerity” (Black, 1995, p. 15).

Eleanor Roosevelt and Creativity

*Creative power.* “Adler supposes that there is a creative force inborn to the child, which increases with activity; it enables people to make their own decisions and to develop their own opinions on what happens to them” (Oberst & Stewart, 2003, p. 12).

Looking at individuals past experiences and circumstances in this way shows that we are not just the product of our circumstances but are the creators of our circumstances and of ourselves. This creative force works throughout the whole personality (Oberst & Stewart, 2003).

Ansbacher & Ansbacher (1956) describe creativity as the use one makes of the “equipment” one is born with, not the “equipment” itself. They go on to define creative power as that “which casts into movement all the influences upon him and all his potentialities, a movement toward the overcoming of an obstacle” (pp. 177-178). The child senses this as an impulse giving a direction to his or her striving for completion.

Goodwin (1994) quotes Roosevelt, “We do not have to become heroes overnight. Just a step at a time, meeting each thing that comes up, seeing it as not as dreadful as it appears, discovering that we have the strength to stare it down” (p. 95).
The individual is both the artist and the picture. We create our lives through the choices we make. The use people make of their circumstances is as and often more important than the circumstances themselves.

The following quotes, (www.quotationspage.com), by Eleanor Roosevelt demonstrate her understanding of creativity in the Adlerian sense: “One’s philosophy is not best expressed in words; it is expressed in the choices one makes…and the choices we make are ultimately our responsibility.” “In the long run we shape our lives and we shape ourselves. The process never ends until we die. All the choices we make are ultimately our responsibility.” “It isn’t enough to talk about peace, one must believe in it. And it isn’t enough to believe in it. One must work at it.”

Eleanor Roosevelt and her brother Hall were raised by their maternal grandmother who was strict, rigid, and detached. They had nannies, tutors, nurses and all of the privilege that came with their upper class status. Hall chose the useless side of life, dying of alcoholism, never achieving his potential. Eleanor’s creativity was evident from an early age. She chose the useful side of life.

Creativity permits us to create new options. “We may want something, and when we have it, it is not what we dreamed it would be, the thing lies within oneself” (Roosevelt, 1977, p. 73). Eleanor appeared to have a deep understanding of human nature. She was a prolific writer. Much of her writing reflects her understanding about the choices and the options that life has to offer.

Eleanor Roosevelt created new options for herself throughout her life. Her creativity was evident in the choices she made and in the courage she showed, often under difficult circumstances.
Law of movement. Each individual has her or his own unique law of movement from earliest childhood, dominating all functions and expressive movements and giving her or him direction. This movement and direction originate from the creative power of the individual. The aim of this movement is always at overcoming all of the millions of difficulties we, as humans, face each day (Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1979).

The law of movement is a decisive factor in the individuality of each person. Individual psychology maintains the viewpoint that all is movement. Movement is necessary in order to find solutions to problems and to overcome difficulties (Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1956).

Inferiority feelings. In the mentally healthy person, inferiority feelings function as motivators for productivity, for overcoming obstacles, and maintaining oneself in life (Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1979).

Apparently, Eleanor Roosevelt learned the “active adaptation to cooperation” at an early age, as she was able to overcome the oppressive circumstances of her childhood. The inferiority feelings she experienced motivated her to overcome these feelings in a creative and masterful manner. “Every inch of her journey was filled with peril and anxiety, but she never stopped moving forward” (Goodwin, 1994, p. 95).

Superiority striving. Adler describes this striving as, “communicated to every smallest movement impulse, takes place without words and concepts, and occupies the entire individual creative power of a person” (Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1956, p. 52).

The mentally healthy individual is concerned with gaining satisfaction by overcoming difficulties. The normal goal of this superiority striving includes the welfare
of others. It is on the socially useful side of life (Ansbacher, 1978). The striving for superiority is in the social interest, not just in the interest of the individual.

Striving for superiority is a striving for belonging and completeness. The way to achieve this sense of belonging and completeness is through creativity and social interest. Those whose striving involves creativity and a concern for the welfare of others are able to move closer to a feeling of belonging and completeness.

Goodwin (1994) notes a historian describing Eleanor Roosevelt, “…as a sharply defined personality, a forceful mind, and an acutely sensitive conscious, a remarkably strong character” (p. 117). Eleanor Roosevelt was known for her concern for others and her remarkable ability to accomplish what many did not think could be accomplished nor needed to be accomplished.

She was not happy about moving into the White House in 1933. She feared losing the independence that had marked the past 15 years of her life. However, she “…was able to forge a new role for herself, as a new kind of first lady, an activist role never practiced nor even imagined before” (Goodwin, 1994, p. 91).

Eleanor Roosevelt was able to overcome her fears about losing her independence. She overcame the fear though her creativity. She was able to create new options for herself. Eleanor had the courage to follow through in spite of criticism and the expectations to do what had always been done. She took risks and created a new role for herself as the first lady. She was able to see the possibilities of doing more and on a larger scale. Eleanor took advantage of her new position and used the position of first lady in ways no one had ever dreamed.

*Eleanor Roosevelt: A Life Well Lived*
Eleanor Roosevelt was many things to many people. “Some say she was a good wife but a bad mother, a good friend but a bad wife, a bad woman with Communist friends, a good woman with Communist friends, a reckless and wicked activist with Black friends, a good and visionary leader with Black friends” (Cook, 1999, preface).

Throughout her life she had many enemies, people who did not view the world as she did. However, this was of no concern to her. She had learned over the years that it did not much matter what people thought of her. The following quote shows Eleanor found the courage and possessed the creativity to do what she thought was right, “Do what you feel in your heart to be right – for you’ll be damned if you do and damned if you don’t” (quotationspage.com).

It all started in on the lower east side of New York City at the turn of the 20th century and has not really ended, as there are many who continue to carry on the work she began. This includes work for world peace and the alleviation of the suffering of others continue to be goals others strive toward achieving.

Eleanor struggled to find a sense of belonging and in the process she helped to make the world a better place. She found a sense of belonging in the larger world not just in her family or community.

Eleanor said: “The purpose of life is to live it, to taste experience to the utmost, to reach out eagerly and without fear for the newer and richer experience” (quotationspage.com). The above quote sums up the joy Eleanor Roosevelt appeared to have felt about living a courageous and creative life.

Conclusion
“The leading idea of the Individual psychology of Alfred Adler is found in his recognition of the importance of human society, not only for the development of the individual character, but also for the orientation of every single action and emotion in the life of a human being” (Dreikurs, 1991, p. 4).

In social interest, (Ansbacher, 1968) the interest is not in society as an object but in the interests or values of society. The interest is in the aspirations of society, an ideal, and better society of the future. Ansbacher goes on to quote Adler as saying that, in social interest, the society referred to is not merely “a private circle of our time, or a larger circle which one should join. Social interest means much more. Particularly it means feeling with the whole, sub specie aeternitatis, under the aspect of eternity. It means a striving for a form of community…as it could be thought of if mankind had reached the goal of perfection” (p. 146).

Eleanor lived her life creatively, attempting to make things better for all people. She was not interested in society and the welfare of others in the abstract. The manner in which she lived shows she was keenly interested in the aspirations of society, always striving for an ideal, for a better future. Eleanor Roosevelt was not just interested or working toward a better future for a few people or for the citizens of her country. Her level of social interest was much broader. She was interested in and striving for a better tomorrow for the world.

If Alfred Adler had known Eleanor Roosevelt he would have referred to her as a genius. Genius is defined by Adler as “primarily a man of supreme usefulness” and “depends on a high degree of courage and social interest” (Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1956, p. 153).
When an individual’s life is recognized by others as being significant, we call that person a genius. The meaning expressed in this kind of life will always be, “Life means to contribute to the whole” (Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1956, p. 153.).

Eleanor Roosevelt’s life continues to be seen as significant. Her creativity, courage, and degree of social interest reach into the domain of perfection.

“Don’t dry up by inaction but go out and do things…
Don’t believe what somebody else tells you,
but know things by your own contacts with life.
If you do that you will be of great value to
the community and the world.”

--ER to Toddhunter graduates. 3 June, 1938

(Cook, 1999, preface)
References


www.quotationspage.com