

## The Early Years

*“I have never experienced such a powerful preoccupation, and will anything come of it?” (1895)*

Cherie Purtell

I was attracted to this statement that Freud made in 1895 while grappling with his ‘Project for a Scientific Psychology’, as an expression of the doubt we can all feel about our work, and our concern that what we hope is a brilliant theoretical construction could be exposed at any moment as a brilliant, elaborate delusion. It is testimony to Freud’s power of conviction that he was able to persist with his ideas despite negative receptions as, for example, when his paper, ‘The Etiology of Hysteria’ (1896), was referred to as a “scientific fairytale” (Jones, 1953, p. 263).<sup>1</sup>

Through my reading of Freud’s early works I have come to appreciate his pre-analytic achievements which largely go unrecognised. Today my tribute to Freud is to these early and difficult years when he wondered if he would become the prophesised man of renown<sup>2</sup> or sink into obscurity as echoed in his father’s words “that (the) boy will never amount to anything” (Jones, 1953, p. 16). I am also going to refer to some surprising comparisons between my life and that of Freud’s.

I recall a comedian saying that “it was a sobering thought that when Mozart was my age he had already been dead for ten years”. When I first became serious about studying psychoanalysis I already felt far behind everyone else who had an interest in Freud. However, I took comfort when I realised that Freud was roughly the same age as me (at that time) when he produced his first writings on psychoanalysis, and I was certainly much younger than Freud when I first heard about psychoanalysis as Freud had not heard of the term until he invented it in 1895 at the age of 39. So I figure that I have a chance of knowing and contributing something about psychoanalysis, and I have to face the fact that I missed the opportunity to have written several symphonies and operas before the age of 13, not to mention masses, violin concertos, piano sonatas, and several serenades before the age of 21. Sadly, all this has already slipped from my grasp. However, Freud like Mozart had not been idle in the years before his greatest works, he had already achieved what for most people would have been more than enough for one life time.

While still a medical student Freud had performed significant work towards the construction of the neurone theory through his research on the nerve cells of crayfish (Jones, 1953, pp.48-49). He has in some cases been accredited with the conception of the neurone itself (see Jones, 1953, p. 49) but it has been

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<sup>1</sup> Comment made by Krafft-Ebing (chair) at an address Freud made to the Society of Psychiatry and Neurology in Vienna. Freud did not deliver a paper in Vienna for another eight years (Jones, 1953).

<sup>2</sup> When Freud was an infant an old woman in a shop said to Freud’s mother, after looking at her baby son, that she had brought forth a great man. This was further reinforced as a youth of 11 or 12 when a street poet predicted that Freud would become a ‘Minister’ (Jones, 1953, pp. 4-5).

suggested that Freud's over cautious approach to his discoveries led to others publishing the same results ahead of him.

In a recent book by neurologist, Joseph Le Doux (2002) several references are made to Freud's pioneering work in this field. Most notably was Freud's idea that nerve cells were separated from each other by 'contact barriers'.<sup>3</sup> Two years later, Sir Charles Sherrington, a British scientist, proposed the term 'synapse' for the gap between neurones. Sherrington later went on to win the Noble prize for his work on neurones (Le Doux, 2002, pp. 38-39).

In his years as a research scholar Freud was very keen to make a name for himself in clinical or pathological medicine (Jones, 1953, p.78), not so much for the fame but because he was desperate to have enough money to marry his fiancée. In 1884 he began his somewhat infamous research into coca leaves or cocaine. At the time cocaine was a little-known alkaloid but Freud was about to change all that. Freud was interested to see if it would be therapeutic in the treatment of heart disease and nervous exhaustion, and also useful as an anaesthetic, but in the midst of his research he took the opportunity to visit his fiancée. By the time he returned, a friend, Carl Koller, had discovered and demonstrated the use of cocaine as an anaesthetic for eye surgery (p. 79). It is still used in medicine today as a topical anaesthetic.

Freud hailed cocaine as a "magical drug" that could ease the pain of a number of ailments, lift depression, aid indigestion and assist in the withdrawal from what was then called morphium. He took it himself to lift his bad moods, sent some to his fiancée "to make her strong", recommended it to his friends and colleagues for themselves and the treatment of their patients, and gave it to his sisters. In short, as Ernest Jones concluded "he was rapidly becoming a public menace" (p. 81). Freud was later to regret introducing cocaine to his friend Fleischl in the belief it would wean him from his addiction to morphine. Fleischl immediately and enthusiastically substituted one addiction for another while searching for relief from his chronic nerve pain.<sup>4</sup>

Whereas at first Freud was congratulated as the man who introduced cocaine to the world his reputation suffered when the addictive properties of cocaine became evident and it was referred to as "the third scourge of humanity" (Jones, 1953, p. 94). He recovered from this regrettable period, and went on to publish a book on aphasia in 1891, introduced the term 'agnosia' to neuroscience and was considered the leading authority on children's paralyses (p. 218) and all this by the age of 38.

Had Freud continued in the field of neurology it is without a doubt that he would have become an eminent leader in the field but frustrated with his attempts to explain human psychology through neurology he abandoned a neural theory of the mind and the rest as they say is history (Le Doux, 2002, pp. 38-39).

So, to conclude this brief tribute I would like to say that it is a sobering but also encouraging thought that when Freud was my age he still had the best years of his theoretical life ahead of him, and, that we are all here today is testimony to the fact that something did come of this most powerful pre-occupation.

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<sup>3</sup> The term first appeared in Freud's "Project for a Scientific Psychology".

<sup>4</sup> Freud later made several references to his shame over Fleischl's addiction and death in his analyses of dreams, notably in the dream of Irma's injection in 1895, approximately four years after Fleischl's death (Freud, 1900, pp. 180-195).

### References

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