

SUMMARY OF INAUGURAL LECTURE

UNDERSTANDING GREATNESS: 'Dissecting' the Eminent Personality from a Psychobiographical Approach

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We live inescapably in a world shaped by the ambitions, decisions, curiosity and creations of significant deceased and living explorers, leaders and visionaries. The great or eminent personality is viewed as a distinguished, illustrious, famous and, at times, contentious person who had or has a significant impact upon their societal sphere and profession. These great or eminent persons are found in the ranks of military figures, revolutionaries, politicians, religious leaders, scientists, philosophers, artists, writers, composers and the masters at their sport. Psychobiography is a life-span, case study approach to the psychological development of eminent and sometimes contentious personalities within a particular sphere or profession and within a historical context.

This will not be a lecture on how to undertake a psychobiography as a research methodology. Neither will the focus of the inaugural lecture be on the idiographic (unique) characteristics and traits of different eminent persons. Rather, the objective is to provide developing overarching 'markers' (i.e., features, traits and life events) that have emerged from multiple psychobiographical studies of renowned personalities. Some of these personalities referred to, include (a) explorers (e.g., Albert Einstein, Eugène Marais, Steve Jobs); (b) leaders (e.g., Steve Biko, Albertina Sisulu, Sol Plaatje, Bram Fischer); and (c) visionaries (e.g., John Lennon, Brenda Fassie, Helen Martins, Ingrid Jonker). Overarching 'markers' that are referred to include creative genius, sleeping patterns, grit (i.e., perseverance and passion), leadership pathways, the workaholic personality style, the unsought penalty of mental illness, an early sense of curiosity, a sense of the sacredness of the cosmos and nature, the loss or abandonment of a parent before puberty, and unconventional lifestyles.

In conclusion, the following is noted: Not all these overarching 'markers' are present in all persons of eminence. They also cannot be generalised to all persons of eminence. Certain overarching 'markers' are more applicable to eminent individuals in specific professions. Furthermore, there is a prominent overarching 'marker' that requires further attention amongst psychobiographers, namely the underlying sense of inferiority or sense of shortcoming/shame, which is compensated for via a striving to superiority and excellence in a specific sphere or profession, an ultimate compensatory defence mechanism amongst the eminent. This idea, which forms part of Alfred Adler's Individual Psychology, is supported by pioneering South African psychobiographers such as Prof. Roelf van Niekerk from the Nelson

Mandela University. Lastly, psychological theory alone cannot fully explain greatness or eminence. So-called 'chess-board factors' (which refer to macro factors such as historical, political, economic and natural forces), as well as the Fourth Industrial Revolution and climate change, will play a significant role in understanding greatness or eminence.