What does “Past is Prologue” mean: Psychologically Speaking?

“What's past is prologue”, (Shakespeare, The Tempest, Act 2, Scene 1)

How often have you asked yourself, “Why do we continue to say and do things that create problems for ourselves and those we care about?” The answer is because we haven’t yet identified the unconscious causes and motivation for those behaviors. We haven't yet understood what the 19th century Spanish philosopher George Santayana meant when he said,

“When experience is not retained, as among savages, infancy is perpetual. Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.”
George Santayana (https://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/George_Santayana)

The same can be said to be true when attempting to understand the development and persistence of undesired behavioral patterns like addiction, avoidance, defensiveness, judgment, criticism or argumentation we may find in ourselves and in others.

All of us adults figured out how to express our emotions from our family of origin before we were five years old and we’ve been habitually repeating those psychological/emotional patterns we learned as children, ever since. In fact, normal early childhood development includes the formation of what is often referred to as “Ego” or “Character” constructs” which I refer to as “protector-saboteurs”. We originally developed these characters as protectors to avoid re-experiencing painful emotions, which usually included feeling unsafe, unloved or disconnected. Eventually these same ego/character patterns which operated as protectors, cause us to self-sabotage as adults.

Sigmund Freud put it a little differently. His major contribution to 19th century Western Psychology was his identification of the Unconscious. He taught us that we all have an unconscious dimension of our mind which retains the impact of early childhood experiences as forgotten emotional memories. These continue to influence our perceptions, feelings and attitudes about ourselves as adults and interfere with our ability to form and maintain successful relationships.

While successful behavioral change does not necessarily require the understanding of Past as Prologue, all depth schools of psychology are based on gaining insight into the past, to stop living in the past: to stop emotionally responding in ways we originally learned to do as children.

As an adult developmental psychologist, I believe it is a normal developmental challenge of adulthood to become aware of unconscious influences from these characters as projections onto others, which cause us to repeat self-defeating behavior patterns. These self-defeating patterns become particularly obvious when it comes to dealing with unconscious causes of addiction and negative patterns in committed relationships.

Therefore, psychologically speaking, until unconscious patterns from our past become conscious we are destined to repeat the past: Past is Prologue to our present and the best predictor of the unfolding of our future.