

## Psychosynthesis - A Practical Psychology For Our Times

*Hetty Einzig – 8 April 2013*

Psychosynthesis is a transpersonal psychology – that is, it goes beyond the personal to include the universal and beyond the psyche to include the spiritual. As its name suggests, Psychosynthesis seeks to synthesise more than analyse, to connect and heal fragmentation rather than break down the complexity of the whole to a study of its smallest constituent parts. It offers a practical way of working based on the core assumption that while the human being *has* a personality (complex, changeable, visible) *it is* a soul (essential and enduring). It sees the individual as embedded in the world and the health of the whole dependent on awareness, choice and right actions.

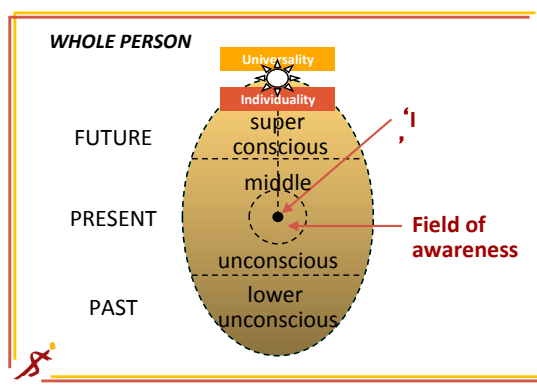
Founded by Roberto Assagioli (1888-1974), an Italian psychiatrist who lived and worked in Florence, Psychosynthesis grew out of Assagioli's deep study of both Western and Eastern philosophies and religions (eg. he studied Jewish, Greek, Latin, German, English, French, Italian, Russian and Sanskrit). Considered by Jung and Freud as their man in Italy, Assagioli was involved in the early development of Psychoanalysis but kept a critical distance. He saw that Freud's model was partial, giving scant attention to the dimensions of joy and will, creativity and wisdom. Assagioli's vision was of something that spoke to the whole of being human, and to create a psychology to help those 'who refuse to submit passively to the play of psychological forces which are going on within them'; furthermore, in contrast to the intrapsychic focus of most Western psychologies, he saw the individual as interdependent, 'an element or cell of a human group...the entire human family' (Assagioli cit Hardy p.16-17) and Psychosynthesis as making 'a valuable contribution to the spiritual, psychological and external integration of humanity. Such integration is its urgent need...[to] counteract the dangers at present menacing it, and to help usher in...a new way of living' (Assagioli, statement re. Training. Undated). In this sense Psychosynthesis is a psycho-spiritual philosophy of living: blending Eastern and Western thought and methodologies it provides practical guidelines for living psychologically aware, spiritually enriched, active lives of engagement and contribution in the world.

The first Psychosynthesis Institute was founded in Rome in 1926 but was closed down under the Fascist era in 1938; the 40's and 50's were decades of study, development, and dissemination, with Psychosynthesis gaining increasing numbers of advocates and practitioners, spreading to France, USA, the Netherlands and England. The 1960's saw an explosion of interest as Psychosynthesis joined the flowering of humanistic psychologies in the US and elsewhere, its central tenets chiming with those of the work of Maslow, Fromm, Rogers and the rising interest in a secular spirituality.

There are similarities between the 1960's and today. We are again living in times of social disintegration, of loss of faith in political solutions, in the institutions of church, law, education and state. For many these now seem irrelevant and bankrupt. There is a deep disappointment in the cynical power play and failures of appointed leaders; in a globally networked world, where information is open source, political spin and blind denial in the face of evident crises, provoke disgust, despair, anxiety and anger. But the bankruptcy of our systems is also stimulating an active search for other paths, other solutions. Increasingly, faced with the stunningly complex, entangled issues of environmental degradation, economic collapse, climate change, and rising social inequity, individuals - alone and in groups of kindred spirits - are looking for a way to comprehend and navigate our world, and to make a difference. In the 60's as now, Psychosynthesis offers a robust psychological model that speaks to our yearning to be the best we can be, not simply understand our worst, to lead lives of meaning and purpose; and it offers a manual for maximising our contribution, not just surviving in a fearsome world.

In this the connections with Daoism are several. Just as the birth of Daoism grew out of a quest to restore harmony in a time of feuding clans vying for power by asking 'What is the Way?', so Psychosynthesis does not seek to answer the questions posed by Western religions: 'What is truth?'

What is beauty, and goodness? Who is the one true god and creator?’ but asks instead: ‘What is the journey, what is the path that each of us must tread, to make the most of our individual skills and gifts in service to this world?’ Similar to Complexity Theory, an underpinning concept of Psychosynthesis is the natural tendency towards synthesis and ‘syntropy’ (the opposite of entropy): a spontaneous organisation of meaningful and coherent fields within the psyche and in our environments (families, organisations, societies and Nature). And like Daoism, instead of withdrawing from the difficulties of the world, Psychosynthesis advocates and supports engagement and service, offering guidance and practices to live a spiritually engaged life within the ‘market place’, with all its demands and compromises.



In the famous Psychosynthesis ‘egg’ model of the psyche equal weight is given to past, present and future, especially to balancing attention on our lower unconscious (repository of events or memories that may block our energy) with our higher unconscious, domain of our aspirations, wisdom and creativity. Surrounding the psyche is the collective unconscious, the dotted lines indicating that all boundaries are permeable, past, present and future interacting to affect the individual who in turn influences and is influenced by society, environment and the global zeitgeist. (There are echoes here of the concept of Pachamama which goes further than the Gaia concept to mean earth, sky, wind, all time and all place)

The central concepts and working techniques of Psychosynthesis are as follows:

- **The I** or ‘self’ is a still centre of pure consciousness, essential and enduring, composed of the energies of ‘love’ and ‘will’, being and doing, reception and assertion, awareness and responsibility, understanding and expression. Like yin and yang these are complementary, both necessary for psychic health and expressed via the personality.
- **The Personality.** The personality is multiple (rather than dual or composed of eg. the trinity of id, ego, superego). Thus essential drives and human tendencies (empathy, collaboration, care, envy, competitiveness, fear and anxiety etc) can be addressed by seeing them as sub-personalities – eg. my frightened child, my bully, my warrior, my critic and judge and therefore understood, accepted and transformed into higher expressions. So rather than endlessly turn my critic on myself I can come to understand the drive, the inner need and the hidden gift of discernment and deploy this skill more effectively. The metaphor of the orchestra is useful: no one instrument is better than another or should be suppressed. All are inter-connected. The task is to seek to play more harmonious music.
- **Dis-Identification.** The I is like the conductor. Dis-identified from any one instrument (sub-personality) the ‘I’ is a place of choice, a focus for integrating and coordinating the personality.
- **The Will.** Central in this is the concept of the Will – which lies at the core of our being. We are not condemned to be victims of our personality or the vagaries of life but can make

conscious choices to live lives of purpose and meaning. There are 4 types of Will: strong, skilful, good and transpersonal will.

- **The Transpersonal.** The Higher Unconscious is a source of inspiration, intuition and illumination. It is within us all and can be actively worked with, explored, strengthened and drawn upon in empowering the individual to self-actualise. The personal self, or 'I', is a reflection of the higher or transpersonal Self (or soul): our highest expression, experienced as both individual and universal. We become most aware of the Self in moments of profound or transcendent experiences: eg. feeling a part of all that is, at one with the world, feelings of joy, of rightness, alignment and connection. Growth is seen as an expanding and shifting of consciousness.
- **Pathology of the Sublime.** The recognition that much of what gets categorised as mental illness, depression or anxiety is instead expression of spiritual longing, an inborn yearning for fairness, wholeness, harmony and the deep need in us all to express the best of ourselves, our gifts and values, in making a contribution. Conversely beauty and aesthetic harmony are recognised as healing and regenerative; experiences in nature, art, music, poetry, dance and the cultivation of appreciation and gratitude are actively pursued as part of transpersonal growth.
- **Toolkit.** A wide range of active techniques is used – in particular guided visualisation and meditation, imagery, metaphor, drawing and dialogue to stimulate right brain functioning (imagination, empathy, pattern recognition), right and left brain collaboration, the capacity for concern and for creative actions. The toolkit was always intended to be open source; it has been added to by many practitioners and many techniques have found their way into other psychological schools – eg. NLP.
- **Ideal Model and Wise Being.** Just as the acorn has within it to become an oak tree, so each human is born with an emergent life purpose. Working with the ideal model is about realising our highest potential and living congruently with our ideals, not about conforming to a socially defined ideal. This takes time, facilitated through co-opting our imagination. As energy follows thought so all images have motor force; imagination can be used to facilitate development or distort it. By giving form to our innermost wisdom (as a wise being) we consciously access this power to envision our highest purpose and choose the steps to realise it.
- **The Journey.** Life is conceived of as a personal journey with a starting point and a sense of direction, a purpose, constantly unfolding. Challenges will be met along the way but the core of the individual is recognised as courageous and resourceful rather than weak and helpless. A large part of our work on this journey is to come to terms with our Shadow: working with the dark as well as the light to enable us to own rather than project onto others our very human contradictions, weaknesses, failings, fears, greed and envy.
- **Emergence.** Pain, crisis and failure are seen as natural occurrences on our journey and times for learning (the school of life) if we can attend to what is seeking to emerge through these situations; rather than 'solve' or 'excise' we can discover what is trying to be born. Every situation provides creative possibilities for gaining mastery over ones inner states and for transformation. "There are no problems, only tasks and opportunities" Assagioli.
- **The Ways.** All psychological functions are valued - thinking, feeling, sensation, imagination and intuition- and provide routes to raised consciousness. In the same way there are seven broad Ways that individuals follow to fulfilling their purpose and expanding consciousness. These ways are not exclusive, often overlap, and have a deep resonance in the style of operating, the quality and way of being in the world of the person. They are the Way of: Will; Love, Activity; Beauty; Knowledge; Devotion; Ritual.

Psychosynthesis blends the pragmatic with the mystical, engaging head, heart and hands by marrying reflection with action, inner understanding with outer service. It holistic, global and inclusive, appealing to those of every faith and to those of none, offering a practical path for the human-within-the-world. While created within a therapeutic setting Psychosynthesis is applicable, and applied, in many contexts, therapeutic, educational, health, organisational and

business. In the same way Assagioli recognised that for Psychosynthesis to flourish and its ideas to stay relevant, it was essential for it to remain organic, adaptive and open – indeed he referred to the institutes around the world as a ‘constellation not a solar system’, and resisted publishing definitive works until the mid 1960’s. In 2002 John Whitmore and Hetty Einzig with Diana Whitmore, adapted Psychosynthesis to create a programme of Transpersonal Coaching in order to bring the models, ideas and techniques to the world of work; we continue to run TP coaching programme within organisations and as open programmes for coaches, managers and business leaders.

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“True Self love is about loving our potentialities for growth, for development, creative ability and communion with others and that self love becomes a powerful means of loving others” Assagioli

“From a...wider and more comprehensive point of view, universal life itself appears to us as...a labour and an aspiration towards union. We seem to sense that - whether we conceive it as a divine being or as cosmic energy – the spirit working upon and within all creation is shaping it into order, harmony and beauty, uniting all beings with each other...achieving – slowly and silently, but powerfully and irresistibly – the supreme synthesis” Assagioli

### **References and Further Reading**

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