

# The journey of psychosynthesis

**Will Parfitt** begins a *Thresholds* special focus on psychosynthesis, by describing what lies at the heart of the therapeutic approach that he has championed for over 30 years

Psychosynthesis was developed early in the last century by Dr Roberto Assagioli, an Italian psychoanalyst. Its primary aim is to help us to deepen our inquiry into human nature then to find ways to effectively use our discoveries in everyday life. Psychosynthesis includes working to release unconscious patterns of conflict and restriction from the past, to restore balance to the various parts of the personality in the present, and also to find ways to promote the fuller expression of the potential and unique creativity of each individual.

## Starting the journey

My personal journey with psychosynthesis started in the mid 1970s when I discovered the humanistic psychology movement and was particularly inspired by the Gestalt books of Fritz Perls and, in this country, by the excellent book by John Rowan, titled *Ordinary Ecstasy*<sup>1</sup>. I had a longstanding interest and involvement in esoteric circles at the time and had found, whilst my colleagues in this world and I were very capable of making 'spiritual' connections in our work, when it came to everyday human, interpersonal interactions, we were, to say the least, incompetent. I knew I wanted this situation to improve for myself, and the discovery that there were people actively engaged in such work was very exciting.

After a series of courses and workshops in various disciplines, particularly regression-integration therapy, bioenergetics and Gestalt, a fortuitous meeting led me to the door of a house in Belsize Park for an introductory weekend course on psychosynthesis. I have to say, when a woman with a strong American accent opened the door and said: 'Are you here for PS?' I nearly ran a mile.

Instead, I replied: 'No, I'm here for psychosynthesis.'

When the woman, who was later to become my first psychosynthesis therapist, laughed a lot and reassured me that when she had said 'PS' she had meant psychosynthesis, I accepted her invitation to enter the house. It was one of those particularly defining moments in a life for it was there that my journey with psychosynthesis started, more than 30 years ago.

Amusingly, I had already been very aware of one of Assagioli's books, *The Act of Will*<sup>2</sup>, but had avoided even taking it off a bookshelf, simply because of a superstitious feeling about it, as my name is in the title! How glad I was, then, to discover that psychosynthesis offered just what I was looking for – a therapeutic approach that dealt with the shadow side of our nature, past traumas and the like, stressed the importance of what psychosynthesis called 'right relations', and not only did not deny spiritual potential but actively worked to encourage its presence and activity in the human psyche.

## Stages

Assagioli asserted that 'the conscious and planned reconstruction or recreation of the personality, through the cooperation and interplay of patient and therapist'<sup>3</sup> requires four stages:

- 1 Thorough knowledge of one's personality
- 2 Control of its various elements
- 3 Realisation of one's true Self – the discovery or creation of a unifying centre
- 4 Psychosynthesis: the formation or reconstruction of the personality around the new centre.

The first stage, thorough knowledge of one's personality, is a tall order, but no one is expected to achieve some final goal with this work. To think so would be hubristic and in any case unachievable. The point is to be in process, willing to enter into

a mindful reflection on what emerges from the unconscious. This can require considerable patience and is not to be rushed; indeed, a willingness to enter into the process is actually far more important than any apparent results. This stage of the work also requires the courage necessary to enter into what can be difficult memories and reflections and the willingness to stay with the process to allow the fullest exploration of the unconscious. Whilst psychosynthesis can be used for short-term counselling, when applied in psychotherapy, it does not offer – nor would it want to offer – any kind of 'quick fix'.

As the work of exploring the personality proceeds, the client is also learning to find ways to control its various elements, what Assagioli called the second stage of development. This control is, however, not about achieving any kind of rigid mastery of the personality but rather about the control that comes, somewhat paradoxically, from letting oneself go into the process and finding appropriate ways to make happen the choices that inevitably arise.

Development in psychosynthesis is a fluid, non-linear process. As Piero Ferrucci says: 'When it is balanced and healthy, human growth proceeds in all directions; it looks like an expanding sphere rather than a straight line. It is precisely for this reason that psychosynthesis endeavours to take into consideration all the dimensions of human life which truly matter.'<sup>4</sup> To use an analogy often attributed to Assagioli, if the psyche is a house, psychosynthesis is concerned with the basement, ground floor and the upstairs of this house.

Whilst the work of therapy is being done, Assagioli states, 'the harmonisation and integration into one functioning whole of all the qualities and functions of the individual must be aimed at and actively fostered.'<sup>3</sup> The primary way for achieving this



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integration is through a process of disidentification from what controls us, coupled with a growing awareness of the deeper choice that comes from self-identification, the alignment of the personality with the Self.

To achieve this end, we work towards a client becoming both arbitrator and then director of the development of their psyche: 'At first, the therapist plays the more active role. Then his influence becomes more and more catalytic... in the final stage the therapist gradually withdraws and is replaced by the Self, with whom the patient establishes a growing relationship.'<sup>3</sup>

Although they proceed in tandem, and the division is essentially artificial, in psychosynthesis, therapeutic work is considered to have two mutually interdependent aspects – personal psychosynthesis, fostering the development of a well-integrated personality, and transpersonal (or spiritual) psychosynthesis, the aim of which is the realisation of one's higher nature and purpose in life. Both these aspects of the therapeutic process are important for a harmonious development of the personality, and both are necessary for a 'full' psychosynthesis that includes all of Assagioli's four fundamental stages.

Often, perhaps usually, a client is not aware of these stages, partly because, as said, the division is artificial as both are happening concurrently, but also because it is a principle in psychosynthesis not to impose any kind of spiritual belief system or affective requirement on the client. Indeed, some theorists avoid using any of the more 'spiritual' or 'esoteric' descriptions in their psychosynthesis work and have found ways to express these aspects in a neutral way. For instance, describing its purpose, Diana Whitmore states: 'Assagioli maintained that the purpose of psychosynthesis is to help integrate, to synthesise, the multiple aspects of the individual's personality around a personal centre...'<sup>5</sup>

In many cases, this is all the work that is attemptable or desirable. A psychosynthesis psychotherapist will always keep in mind, however, the possibility of working towards an alignment with the higher Self. Whitmore continues: '...and later to effect a greater synthesis between the personal ego and the transpersonal Self.'<sup>5</sup>

In training, students of psychosynthesis are usually introduced fairly early on to the concept of

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'bifocal vision'! The notion of this analogy is that, as with bifocal lenses, a shift in perspective enables insight into both the level at which the personality is operating (the close work) and the underlying influence of the Self (the distance work.) Keeping to such a double vision, as it were, enables the therapist to not lose sight of the deeper motivation emerging from the Self and, equally importantly, not to be sidetracked by this energy into working in a way that becomes too transpersonal, thus not achieving the goal of harmonising and integrating the personality with the Self.

Often, people with a spiritual practice are drawn to psychosynthesis and it can be too easy for a therapist, particularly if inexperienced, to be drawn into or even swamped by the transpersonal energies that such a client may bring. Thus, the warning to trainees in psychosynthesis to be wary of 'higher sidetracking' – both that which is exhibited by their clients, but also that which can emerge in the therapeutic relationship. As always, a balance is necessary, remembering to include all parts of the client's process whilst maintaining an eye on what is emerging from the Self without being attached to any outcome.

In an article published in the 1990s<sup>6</sup> I suggested that psychosynthesis, being both integrative and holistic, is the most important psychology for the 21st century as it gives a perspective that can bring meaning to both individual and collective acts. So does this grand claim have any validity?

## Potential

Each individual has their own unique way of perceiving and interacting with the world, based on the past traumas that were experienced during childhood, as is presented in the Freudian world view. Psychosynthesis asserts that we also have potential, the 'future' within us, which, through appropriate therapeutic interventions, can bring a deep sense of purpose and meaning to life. In our modern world, anything that increases our sense of meaning has to be valuable.

Psychosynthesis does just that, helping us become what we may be, a phrase taken from Shakespeare and the title of Piero Ferrucci's classic psychosynthesis book.<sup>4</sup>

Psychosynthesis is primarily practical, and psychosynthesis therapists may choose to incorporate a wide range of methods and techniques, such as guided imagery, visualisation, inner dialogue, free drawing, body movement, meditation, story-telling, and dream awareness, as well as more traditional analytical methods. Psychosynthesis is not about the application of techniques, however, but learning to live with a vision that comes from deep within oneself. Of primary concern, as with most therapeutic modalities, is the

fostering of a therapist-client relationship through which a true synthesis may be achieved.

What makes psychosynthesis unique, and different from many other approaches, is that it marries the more spiritual approaches often found in transpersonal therapies and spiritual paths, with sound psychological methods, to create a soul-based psychotherapeutic system.

Assagioli made it very clear that a psychosynthesis practitioner is not a spiritual teacher, rather someone in service who is trying to make a positive difference. Psychosynthesis can be particularly effective at times of spiritual crisis or, more popularly, spiritual emergence/emergency. Perhaps part of its effectiveness is that it is neither a cultish system of esotericism, nor a closed system of psychology. It encourages each client to follow his or her own religious and ethical values.

Assagioli asserts that, 'the isolated individual does not exist; every person has intimate relationships with other individuals, which make them all interdependent. Moreover, each and all are included in and part of the spiritual superindividual reality.'<sup>3</sup> We can see from this that from its conception psychosynthesis has clearly had social as well as therapeutic and spiritual aspects; but elsewhere Assagioli is more direct and eloquent about his spiritual approach: 'By deepening our consciousness of essential divinity, of the Immortal God within, our power to radiate it is increased, and our ability to shed light in our surroundings, transform our environment, and live with spiritual creativity is intensified.'<sup>7</sup>

## Alchemy

Like Carl Jung, another pioneer who took his inquiry into the psyche far beyond the confines of analysis, Assagioli was very interested in alchemy, not as a method of literally changing lead to gold, but as a metaphor for deepening our understanding of the development of the human being from childhood to maturity. In fact, 'analysis' and 'synthesis' are the main twin components or activities of alchemy.

There are, of course, many versions of alchemy, but they all generally

agree that 'a common substance' is subjected to a series of operations to obtain an end product called the philosopher's stone, the elixir of life, or just simply gold. Whether taken on a purely physical level or seen metaphorically, the alchemical process takes a dead thing, impure, valueless and powerless, and transforms it into a living thing, active, invaluable and transformative. This exactly describes the practice of psychosynthesis, too.

Hermeticists believe the two most important powers of the human psyche are will and imagination (both properly tempered by love.) We use imagination to create the world in which we live, and will is the force by which we maintain it. The underlying key to a meaningful therapeutic encounter is aligning personal will with transpersonal Intent (True Will or Purpose.) As Assagioli put it, describing the journey of psychosynthesis, we then have: 'The strength and the power to express compassion according to wisdom; the wisdom and compassion to use power for the greatest good.'<sup>8</sup> ■

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