

Assagioli's Reflections on the Poor Man of Assisi

Catherine Ann Lombard

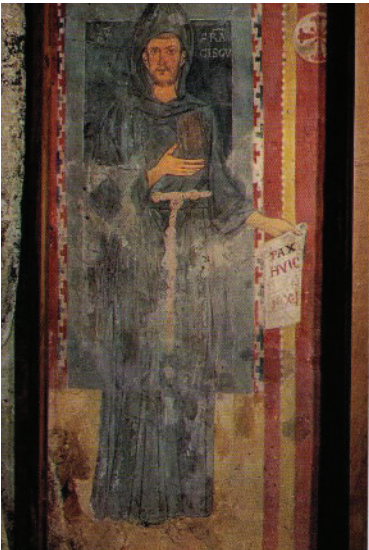


Figure 1. Fresco in the Sacro Speco ('sacred cave') of St. Benedict in Subiaco, possibly the oldest and most faithful image of Francis.

Saint Francis of Assisi (1182-1226) has recently come into the forefront of worldwide recognition and our collective consciousness. Pope Francesco assumed the saint's name, 4 to 5 million people visit Assisi every year, and even the [2017 EFPP Summer School](#) (European Federation for Psychosynthesis Psychotherapy) has chosen Francis' vision of Peace as its theme. Francis' greeting *Pace e bene*, "peace and all that is good," goes beyond divisions, confessions and institutions, appealing to the foundations of human existence that we all share. We are called to establish peace between body and spirit, between present and eternity, between the personal and spiritual dimensions of our individual lives through which we may joyfully discover the goodness of all life.

In this brief essay, I explore some of Roberto Assagioli's (1888-1974) references to Francis of Assisi. Throughout his lifetime, Assagioli was interested in Catholic mysticism as well as the spiritualist and American New Thought movement, Hindu mysticism, Romantic poets, and the perspectives of the Theosophical Society.¹ Francis of Assisi, having chosen a life radically dedicated to transcendent values, appears in a number of Assagioli's writings. Assagioli would have naturally been familiar with Francis, who (along with St. Catherine of Siena) is one of the patron saints of Italy. Francis also spent long periods of his life at La Verna, in the Casentine valley not far from Florence where Assagioli lived most of his adult life.

An ideal model of compassion and peace with all living creatures

In the *Act of Will*, Assagioli uses Francis as an example of transcendence through transpersonal love, in particular altruistic love. One of the oldest works of Italian literature, Francis' "Canticle of the Creatures" is referred to by Assagioli as a higher expression of love not "limited to the members of the human family," but an all-inclusive embrace of "all living things in the animal and vegetable kingdom of nature."² Assagioli also acknowledged our vital spiritual dependence on the animals with which we share this Earth, when he wrote in 1913:

Science refuses to let go of the presumption that only humans are 'wise.' By humbly lowering ourselves and asking those inferior beings, we might understand the obscure message coming from the human soul. We might more easily raise the grand veil of mystery by another small margin.³

More than 45 years ago, Assagioli recognized our need to draw on Francis' inspiration to cultivate "harmonious relations with the environment."⁴ Today Francis could be identified as the patron saint of ecologists, exemplifying many of the best attributes of what it means to be an environmentalist. As part of an age-old Italian tradition of hermits and monks, Francis spent much of his life in caves or huts in the wilderness of the Apennines, deeply experiencing nature as a gateway into the mystery of the Creator and into the mystery of his own person as one of God's creatures. Assagioli notes that Francis also had a sensory attachment to beauty, giving orders that "flowers be grown in the monastery so that all who saw them would be reminded of the Eternal Gentleness."⁵

(Continued on [page 11](#))

(Continued from [page 10](#))



Figure 2. Francis preaching to the birds, as painted by Giotto in the upper Assisi Basilica.

Francis is famously depicted by Giotto (c.1266-1337) as preaching to a multitude of birds on his way to Bevagna. The birds are painted in the fresco as a living presence, protagonists in the life of the world as they “joyfully stretched out their necks, flapped their wings, opened their beaks, and even pecked at his habit.”⁶

Francis’ gift to be one with creation is also evident in the legend about his taming the wolf of Gubbio. While Francis was living in that Umbrian city, a lone, fierce wolf was prowling outside its wall, devouring domesticated animals and humans alike. With great compassion for the people of Gubbio, Francis went out of the city gates to meet the wolf, upon which the wolf ran towards the saint with his jaws wide open. But Francis cried out, “Come Brother Wolf, neither harm me or anyone else.”

The wolf meekly approached Francis and lay down at his feet. Francis then made a proposal for peace. The people of Gubbio would feed the wolf every day in exchange for their freedom from the fear of being eaten by him. The two sides agreed to the pact, and peace reigned. The wolf lived for two more years, going from house to house without harming anyone, the people feeding him with great pleasure. When he died, they mourned his death and gave him an honorable burial. Today, the wolf’s bones are buried in Gubbio’s Church of Saint Francis of the Peace.



Figure 3. Francis and the wolf of Gubbio on the altarpiece in San Sepolcro, as painted by Sassetta (1437–1444)

In his essay “Emotional and Mental Obstacles: Aggression and Criticism,” Assagioli refers to this legend as a metaphor for how goodness, gentleness, generosity and love can be powerful, dynamic, and radiant in taming not only the lone wolf of Gubbio, but “many other ‘human wolves.’”⁷ Assagioli continues by talking about how goodness also means “a constant emphasis on the good qualities of things, people, and circumstances.”⁸ This type of optimism is not naïve or Pollyanna-ish, but rather implies an ability to appreciate the positive aspects of life notwithstanding the coexistence of its negativity polar reality. Such positive attitudes make life easier and more joyful. Assagioli emphasizes this when he writes: “In fact, joy, mirth, and benevolence are magnetic.”⁹ We see Assagioli himself evoking these higher qualities of appreciation while spending time in prison.¹⁰ However, in his writing he once again turns to Francis as a model for willful conscious choice of a higher good and qualities such as appreciation, praise and gratitude. In this case, Assagioli turns to the verses of Italian poet, Vittoria Aganoor Pompili (1855-1910),¹¹ who wrote eloquently of an imagined dialogue between Francis and one of his followers.

“Saint Francis, I’m frightened that I can hear snakes hissing in the bushes.”

“I hear nothing but the rustling of the pine trees and the song of the birds.”

“Saint Francis, a terrible stench is coming from the overgrown path and from the pond.”

“I smell thyme and broom. I have joy and health for my drink.”

“Saint Francis, we are sinking, the evening is coming on and we are far from our cells.”

“Lift up your eyes from the mud, man, and you will see the stars blossoming in the heavenly gardens.”

(Continued on [page 12](#))

(Continued from [page 11](#))

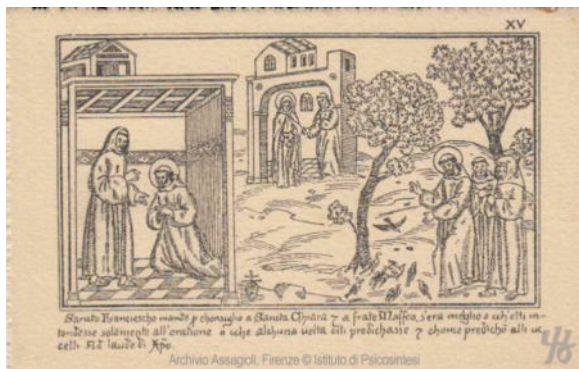


Figure 4. A hand drawn depiction of Francis with (left to right) Brother Masseo, Saint Clair, and Francis preaching to the birds. This is from [Assagioli's Archives](#), ID# 14609.

Letizia, a lighthearted spiritual cheerfulness that accompanies suffering

In Assagioli's treatise on *Letizia*,¹² he makes clear that, as we attempt to fulfill our higher needs, "conflicts, crises of adjustment and growth" are bound to arise, leading us to experience our suffering alongside joy. Usually these conflicts occur between our subpersonalities. While we might feel joy at mastering a particularly unruly subpersonality, this subpersonality might experience this harmonization as painful. A part of us might rejoice in our willful determination to bring a subpersonality into check, even as this subpersonality defensively kicks and screams, making our lives temporarily a painful travail. Assagioli writes how the great mystics and saints were able to smile as they endured their inner torments and physical martyrdom, specifically

quoting Francis' outlook on this spiritual process: "So great is the Good I look forward to that I take joy in every pain."¹³ And: "It is inappropriate for the servant of God to appear sad and to have a gloomy face."¹⁴ Assagioli retells the story of how Francis preached these very words to Count Orlando Catani of Chiusi, who was so pleased by its message that he offered Mount Verna as a new site of retreat for Francis and his brotherhood.¹⁵ We might recall Assagioli's well-loved essay calling for us to do the very same and develop "smiling wisdom."¹⁶ Assagioli is the first to commend us to love and accept these psychological, spiritual, and often physically difficult periods that seem to inevitably accompany self-actualization and Self-Realization. He clearly states:

They are the result of an attempt to grow, and are of the upward quest; they are a by-product of temporary conflicts and imbalances between the conscious personality and the spiritual energies bursting through from above.¹⁷

In fact, Francis suffered through a tremendous inner conflict before his spiritual awakening. The son of wealthy parents, Francis had been encouraged by his father to become a knight. On his way to fight in an armed expedition against the kingdom of Sicily, the young recruit fell ill in Monteluco, a village not far from home. That night he dreamed he heard a voice telling him to return to his own town and embark on a different type of crusade, a crusade of the spirit. His physical suffering ended, and Francis returned to Assisi the next day. From then on, his life was irreversibly transformed from days and nights of rich and rowdy street encounters full of amusements to time spent in solitude, seclusion, poverty and prayer.



Figure 5. Francis renounces all worldly possessions, as painted by Giotto.

Learning to discern one's inner voices

Francis would continue to hear the voice of God (i.e. the Transpersonal Self), directing him at various stages of his natural life. Assagioli writes how this "inner hearing" is one effect of receptive meditation and stresses the need to carefully discriminate between true transpersonal hearing and our own psychic perceptions. He writes:

The information coming from the higher levels is for the most part impersonal in character; the messages are brief, but pregnant with meaning. They often have a symbolic quality, even when they appear to carry a concrete meaning.¹⁸

(Continued on [page 13](#))

(Continued from [page 12](#))

Assagioli uses Francis as an example of how we can easily misinterpret these higher messages. He briefly retells a well-known story about Francis to illustrate how our intuition, illuminations, and revelations can frequently be misinterpreted by us as commands to act in a certain way.¹⁹

While meditating in front of the crucifix in the ruined little chapel of San Damiano, Francis heard a voice coming from the cross that told him three times “Go and repair my house. You see it is all falling completely to ruin.” Francis took this message literally and thought he was to repair the dilapidated chapel where he was kneeling. He then ambitiously improvised as a mason and managed to rebuild three churches in Assisi, begging throughout the city for the bricks he needed. It was only two years after hearing this message that Francis actually came to understand that the church he was to restore was one of the spirit, the ruined temple of the soul that longs for tender healing. Once this full understanding of his true vocation became apparent, Francis assumed forever his habit of coarse homespun wool with its triple knotted cord down the side.

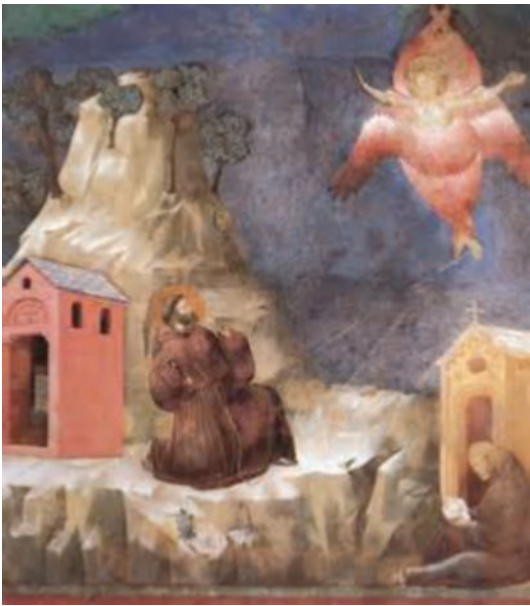


Figure 6. Francis receives the stigmata at Mount Verna, as painted by Giotto.

Such visions were a common occurrence during Francis’ life. Two years before his death, while praying in a secluded hut at La Verna, Francis saw a seraph with six resplendent fiery wings sweep down from heaven. This angel embodied the polarity of joy and suffering, as in the middle of its wings was the image of a crucified man—the agony of the Passion held in the beatitude of the seraph. When the vision disappeared, the marks of the nails began to appear in Francis’ hands and feet, and a wound appeared at his side. These stigmata were the first recorded in history. In Canto XI of *Paradiso*, Dante (c. 1265 – 1321) writes:

*Then on bare rock between Arno and Tiber
He took upon himself Christ’s holy wounds,
And for two years he wore this final seal. (106-108)²⁰*

In 1913, as a medical doctor Assagioli countered the thought, current even then, that such mystical phenomena are nothing more than the morbid manifestations of nervous disorders. He wrote:

If, as it is claimed, Saint Francis had degenerative stigmata in his body, this certainly does not diminish our veneration of the Poor Man of Assisi; it simply shows that these stigmata do not always have the ‘degenerative’ significance attributed to them, and this may cause us to reevaluate our concept of ‘degeneration’... Even if [he] were mad, this would only mean that madness is sometimes infinitely superior to the wisdom of ‘normal’ people, including psychiatrists.²¹

In his chapter “Mysticism and Medicine,” Assagioli further asserts that the “nervous and psychological disorders of mystics ... are actually the effect or a direct consequence of their intense spiritual life.”²² He goes on to say, however, that such bodily suffering and illness have no merit of their own; they are merely imperfections of the mystic’s human nature, “which has not yet become a compliant, suitable instrument for the Spirit.” Once this does take place, the suffering individual will be healed to perfect health and become a true healer.

Francis received the stigmata shortly after the papal authority took all control over his fraternity from him, forcing Francis to accept its institutionalization into a religious order. Whereas the official biographies, commissioned by

(Continued on [page 14](#))

(Continued from [page 13](#))

the popes, paraded the stigmata as a sign of divine approval of Francis' obedience to church authority, contemporary historians and theologians view them as a sign of Francis' assimilation with the Crucified Christ. Like Jesus, Francis went through the experience that religious policies do not tolerate radical choices and that religious institutions actually repress instead of express the sublime. On Mount La Verna Francis went through a mystical crucifixion and discovered a new sense of inner freedom.²³

Since the time of Francis, more than 300 cases of stigmata have been reported and documented, often with controversy—most notably within the Catholic Church. During Assagioli's lifetime, one of the more famous of these was Padre Pio, a Capuchin friar of the Franciscan order living in southern Italy. In fact, we know from the written account of Luisa Lunelli that Assagioli's wife Nella and their son Ilario visited Padre Pio in San Giovanni Rotondo not long before Ilario's death from tuberculosis in 1951. Both Ilario and Nella were Roman Catholics and Ilario was "profoundly religious, with a great devotion to Saint Francis."²⁴ The antibiotics that had finally arrived from America after WWII were too late for Assagioli's only child; medicine no longer seemed to help Ilario's condition. He and those closest to him had since put their faith in prayer. While Assagioli did not accompany his wife and son (who went in a wheelchair) on this trip to visit the mystic priest, he did manage to procure a reserved compartment on the packed train for them and Lunelli for the two-day (one-way) journey.²⁵

How to deal with money when leading a spiritual life

Finally, we turn to Assagioli's article, "Money and the Spiritual Life,"²⁶ in which he discusses the common conflicts and confusion over the deeper meaning and use of money in our lives. We might expect that Francis, whom Assagioli called the "Poor Man of Assisi," would make an appearance in this essay. At the age of 25, Francis renounced a vast inherited wealth from his father by symbolically stripping naked in front of Bishop Guido and a great crowd in Assisi, forever devoting himself to "Lady Poverty." His initial followers were not permitted to own any possessions, lived in straw huts, and preached and begged in the streets. Assagioli states that such a way of life is infeasible in our present age, pointing out that only decades after Francis' death, the Franciscan Communities realized that "it was almost impossible to do without money and some form of buildings and land ... Franciscans now use every means the modern world provides."²⁷ Assagioli continues by assuring us, "If this is what the sons of Saint Francis do, how can any more be expected of us ... caught up in the very fabric of economic, family, and social life?" He then explains that spiritual transformation does not come from outside ourselves (where money might dominate), but from within.²⁸ However, Assagioli is then quick to qualify this statement by noting his intention is not

... to criticize or distract from the sublime act of Saint Francis, which was indeed heroic and had an incalculable positive effect as an example to others, providing us with a practical lesson in detachment ... Our intention was only to show that this way cannot provide us with a generally applicable solution to our everyday lives.²⁹

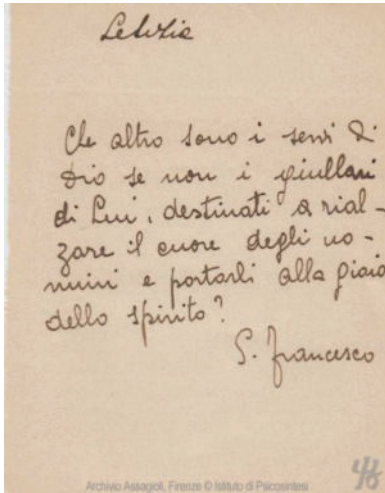
In other words, money is a necessity for living our lives, but it is our attitude and actions toward money that determine its true worth. In his prison diary *Freedom in Jail*, we see firsthand Assagioli's personal spiritual struggle with money.³⁰ Vittorio Arzilli, who was Secretary of the Istituto di Psicopsintesi in Florence from 1968-1982 remembers Assagioli as an idealist who never took profit of his psychosynthesis work, always charging too little money for consultations and lectures, with the belief that he was providing a service to humanity.³¹

A final Franciscan question from Assagioli

While researching this article, I searched through Assagioli's online archives to find any notes he might have written on Francis. I now end with a question we might engage with, a quote from Saint Francis written in Assagioli's beautiful hand (in Italian):³²

(Continued on [page 15](#))

(Continued from [page 14](#))



Lighthearted Joy

*What else are the servants of
God if not his minstrels
destined to raise up
the heart of the people
and to bring them to the Joy
of the Spirit?*

S. Francesco



References:

¹ Mauro Pasqualini, “The Remote Origins of Psychoanalysis in Italy: Modernism and the Psyche in Florence, 1903-1915.” *Culturas Psi, Vol 0*, 2012, p. 13.

² Roberto Assagioli, *The Act of Will*, The Psychosynthesis & Education Trust, London, 2002, pp. 116-117.

³ Roberto Assagioli, “I cavalli pensanti e i loro critici”, in *Psiche*, 6, 1913, pp. 349-372. All translations in this article are mine.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Roberto Assagioli, *Transpersonal Development, The Dimension Beyond Psychosynthesis*, The Aquarian Press, London, 1993, p. 253.

⁶ Bruno Dozzini, *Giotto: The “Legend of St. Francis” in the Assisi Basilica*, Editrice Minerva, Assisi, Italy, 1994, p. 37.

⁷ Roberto Assagioli, *Transpersonal Development, The Dimension Beyond Psychosynthesis*, The Aquarian Press, London, 1993, p. 187.

⁸ Ibid., p. 188

⁹ Roberto Assagioli, *Per vivere meglio*, Istituto di Psicointesi, Florence, Italy, 1965, pp. 20-21.

¹⁰ Roberto Assagioli, *Freedom in Jail*. Edited by C.A. Lombard. Istituto di Psicointesi, Florence, Italy, 2016.

¹¹This is Assagioli’s translation from the Italian, as published in Roberto Assagioli, *Transpersonal Development, The Dimension Beyond Psychosynthesis*, The Aquarian Press, London, 1993, p. 253. A typewritten copy of the Italian text can be found in his [archives in Florence](#), ID # 9432.

¹²This Italian word “*letizia*” is difficult to translate accurately into English. It is a kind of joy, one of the heart, full of delight, merriness, and high spirits.

¹³Assagioli, *The Act of Will*, pp. 200-201; Assagioli: *Transpersonal Development, The Dimension Beyond Psychosynthesis*, pp. 128-129.

¹⁴ Assagioli, *Transpersonal Development, The Dimension Beyond Psychosynthesis*, p. 269.

¹⁵Assagioli, *Per vivere meglio*, p. 20. Note, however, Assagioli writes that it was Count Guidi of Poppi who heard Francis speak, and this is not correct.

¹⁶Roberto Assagioli, “Saggezza Sorridente”, in *Per vivere meglio*. Istituto di Psicointesi, Florence, Italy, 1965, pp. 25-33.

¹⁷Assagioli, *Transpersonal Development, The Dimension Beyond Psychosynthesis*, p. 129.

¹⁸ Assagioli, *The Act of Will*, p. 226

¹⁹ Assagioli, *Transpersonal Development, The Dimension Beyond Psychosynthesis*, pp. 75-76.

²⁰Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy, Paradise*. Translated by Mark Musa. Penguin Books, 1986, p.136.

²¹Roberto Assagioli, “Psicologia e psicoterapia”, in *Psiche*, 2, 3, 1913, pp. 175-196.

²² Assagioli, *Transpersonal Development, The Dimension Beyond Psychosynthesis*, pp. 134-140.

²³Enrico Menestò, “Umbria mistica e santa (secc. V-XIV)”. In M. Sensi (Ed.), *Itinerari del Sacro in Umbria*, Firenze, Italia, 1998, pp. 33-35.

²⁴ Paola Giovetti, *Roberto Assagioli: La vita e l’opera del fondatore della Psicointesi*, Edizione Mediterranee, Roma, Italy, 1995. p. 63.

²⁵Ibid., p. 64.

²⁶Assagioli, *Transpersonal Development, The Dimension Beyond Psychosynthesis*, pp. 213-233.

(Continued on [page 16](#))

(Continued from [page 15](#))

²⁷ Ibid., p. 217.

²⁸ Ibid., p. 218.

²⁹ Assagioli, *Transpersonal Development, The Dimension Beyond Psychosynthesis*, Footnote on pp 220-221.

³⁰ Assagioli, *Freedom in Jail*, pp. 25-27, 35-36.

³¹ Giovetti, *Roberto Assagioli: La vita e l'opera del fondatore della Psicossintesi*, p. 99-101.

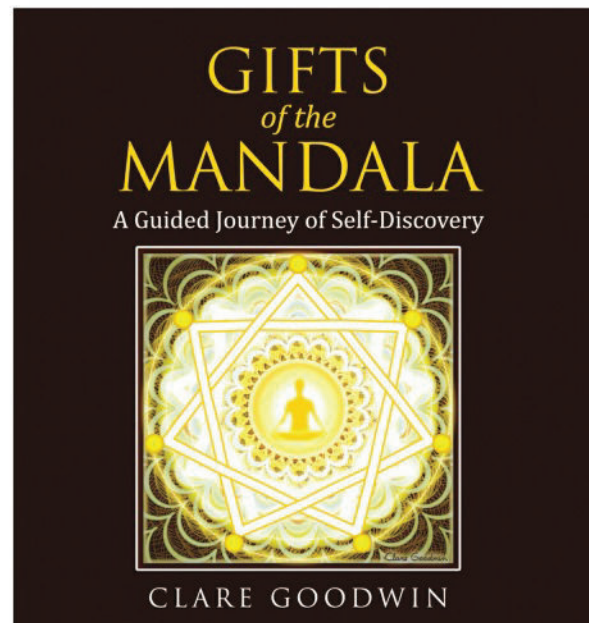
³² Roberto Assagioli, N.D. ID #8405. Retrieved November 11, 2016 from archivioassagioli.org. This translation is mine. The original Italian text is: "Letizia - Che altro sono i servi di Dio se non i giullari di Lui, destinati a rialzare il cuore degli uomini e portarli alla gioia dello spirito? S. Francesco."



Catherine Ann Lombard, M.A. is a psychosynthesis psychologist, practitioner and researcher. She has had numerous articles published on psychosynthesis. Most recently, she edited Roberto Assagioli's *Freedom in Jail*, published by the Istituto di Psicossintesi, Florence. She and her husband Dr. Kees den Biesen, philosopher and theologian, will be leading a 10-day pilgrimage in Umbria, Tuscany, and Lazio called "Journeying with Francis and Clair of Assisi" ([see poeticplaces.org](http://see.poeticplaces.org)). You can follow Catherine's bi-monthly blog at LoveAndWill.com.

book announcement

Imagine that you found a map to the invisible realms of mind and spirit. What might you discover? Such maps have been drawn for thousands of years in myriad cultures throughout the world. Today, we refer to them by the Sanskrit term mandala, loosely meaning the whole world. Mandalas are universally associated with healing and prayer. Creating mandalas is an absorbing and relaxing way to enhance your life journey. Based on **Clare Goodwin's** 35 year exploration of the mandala as an artist, Psychosynthesis therapist, and teacher of students world-wide, "*Gifts of the Mandala: A Guided Journey of Self-Discovery*" invites you to deepen your understanding of yourself through the sacred art of mandala making.



Available at: www.balboapress.com & Amazon.com

Paperback 978-1-5043-5974-0 **E-book** 978-1-5043-5975-7