

# Lessons We Can Learn from the Educational Philosophies of Rabindranath Tagore and Roberto Assagioli

By Catherine Ann Lombard

People look at everything from the viewpoint of science. But man is neither mere physiology, nor biology, nor psychology, nor even sociology. For God's sake don't forget that. Man is infinitely more than the natural science of himself. You laugh at me, calling me the schoolmaster's pupil, but that is what you are, not I. You want to find the truth of man from your science teachers, and not from your own inner being.

Nikhil in *The Home and the World* by Rabindranath Tagore

One of the most compelling worldwide impacts of Covid-19 is the abrupt and profound change in how children are being educated. According to UNESCO, most governments around the world have temporarily closed educational institutions imparting more than 60% of the world's student population.<sup>1</sup> Solutions for continued learning include various online platforms and e-learning for classroom instruction, educational television programming, YouTube video lessons, national radio broadcasting of lessons, E-textbooks, and open courseware portals.<sup>2</sup> This increase and dependence on e-learning will probably continue into the next school year, as many large unified school districts like Los Angeles and San Diego will not re-open this year for in-person learning, affecting more than 600,000 students.<sup>3</sup>

Many studies have shown e-learning to have numerous advantages. For example, e-learning allows students to self-pace their instruction, which can help to increase their satisfaction and reduce stress.<sup>4</sup> In addition, e-learning is environmentally friendly, consuming 90% less energy and emitting 85% fewer CO2 emissions, as well as a reducing the need for paper production.<sup>5</sup> However, as many parents, teachers, and students have experienced during the pandemic, there are disadvantages to e-learning as well. Students and teachers who spend much of their time online can experience social isolation. Instruction tends to focus on theory rather than practice, feedback can become limited, and communication and socialization skills can be negatively impacted.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> UNESCO, "Education from disruption to recovery." Retrieved on 17 July 2020 from <https://en.unesco.org/covid19/educationresponse>

<sup>2</sup> UNESCO, "National learning platforms and tools," Retrieved on 17 July 2020 from <https://en.unesco.org/covid19/educationresponse/nationalresponses>

<sup>3</sup> Michael Burke, "Schools in Los Angeles, San Diego won't reopen for in-person learning next month," *EdSource*, July 13, 2020, Retrieved on 17 July 2020 from <https://edsources.org/2020/schools-in-los-angeles-san-diego-wont-reopen-for-in-person-learning-next-month/635924>

<sup>4</sup> Valentina Arkorful and Nelly Abaidoo, "The role of e-learning, advantages and disadvantages of its adoption in higher education." *International Journal of Instructional Technology and Distance Learning*, 12:1, pp. 29-42, Jan 2015,. Retrieved on 17 July 2020 from [http://itdl.org/Journal/Jan\\_15/Jan15.pdf#page=33](http://itdl.org/Journal/Jan_15/Jan15.pdf#page=33)

<sup>5</sup> Sander Tam, "Advantages of e-learning." *E-student.org*, Dec. 21, 2019. Retrieved on 17 July 2020 from <https://e-student.org/advantages-of-e-learning/>

<sup>6</sup> Arkorful and Abaidoo, "The role of e-learning."

## What Can Psychosynthesis Offer?

What can psychosynthesis bring to this radical change in the way children are being educated? To start, we might first examine the philosophy of education held by two great figures from the last century and then, based on their concepts and practice, see how to apply their understandings to the dire and rapidly changing situation. These two men are Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941) and Roberto Assagioli (1887-1974). During their lifetimes, Tagore and Assagioli were both participants in a larger educational movement during the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, a time of social and political upheaval, technological and industrial revolution, World War I, and the flu epidemic of 1918. Within this turbulent social context, a number of holistic educational reformers were active, including the German Paul Geheeb, founder of the Oldenwald school, and Austrian social reformer Rudolf Steiner whose educational philosophy was implemented in Waldorf schools. Swiss pedagogue Johann Hinrich Pestalozzi and Friedrich Fröbel, the founder of the Kindergarten movement, were also prevalent reformers at that time.<sup>7</sup> Both Tagore and Assagioli knew Maria Montessori, the Italian physician, psychologist, and anthropologist whose educational approach is used throughout the world today.

This essay focuses on the educational philosophies of Tagore and Assagioli, beginning with a brief introduction of how they met in 1926 during Tagore's visit to Italy. An overview of Tagore's and then Assagioli's educational philosophies follows. Based on their ideas and practices, the essay ends with suggestions that will hopefully provide students, teachers and parents a psychosynthesis approach to integrate into the curriculum during the next school term.

## How Tagore and Assagioli Met

Rabindranath Tagore, poet, novelist, dramatist, musician, artist and Nobel Prize winner of literature, visited Italy on three occasions. During his third visit in late spring 1926, he met Roberto Assagioli, philosopher, psychiatrist, spiritualist and founder of psychosynthesis.<sup>8 9</sup> Tagore's visit to Rome in 1926 had been arranged by indologist Carlo Formichi, professor of Sanskrit at University of Rome. During Tagore's visit, Assagioli was Formichi's substitute interpreter when Formichi was "absolutely unable to be present."<sup>10</sup> As a result, Assagioli accompanied Tagore while he was in Rome, Florence and Torino and would later publish an article recounting his impressions of the poet's journey.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Mohammad A. Quayum, "Education for Tomorrow: The Vision of Rabindranath Tagore." *Asian Studies Review*, DOI: 10.1080/10357823.2015.1125441, January 2016.

<sup>8</sup> Giuseppe Flora, "Tagore and Italy: Facing History and Politics." *University of Toronto Quarterly*, 7:4, Fall 2008.

<sup>9</sup> Irma Piovano, "L'Italia incontra Tagore. E cronaca della visita del poeta al Torino." *Collana di Letture del Cesmeo*, 4, pp. 1-17, 2011.

<sup>10</sup> Mario Prayer, "Italian Fascist Regime and Nationalist India, 1921-45." *International Studies*, 28:3, pp. 249-271, 1991, p. 268.

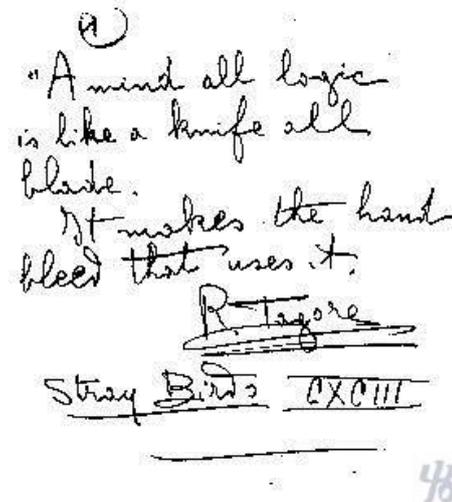
<sup>11</sup> Roberto Assagioli, "Impressioni sulla visita di Tagore in Italia." *Ultra*, 4, pp. 234-239, 1926. Note all translations from Italian are mine.

Upon their meeting in Rome in 1926, one can easily imagine the younger Italian psychiatrist's enthusiasm for the great Bengali poet and musician. Besides being world-famous after receiving the Nobel Prize in 1913, Tagore was Assagioli's senior by 27 years, possibly evoking feelings in the latter of a spiritual father-figure. Alongside Goethe and Keyserling, Assagioli refers to Tagore as an example of psychosynthesis<sup>12</sup> and notes that Dante's *Divina Comedia* and Tagore's writings are both testimonies of superconscious exploration.<sup>13</sup> But perhaps more importantly, at the time of Tagore's visit to Italy, Assagioli saw him as having the unique ability to embody a synthesis of Eastern and Western cultures and humanity.<sup>14</sup>

### Tagore as an Educator

In addition to his literary and musical genius and accomplishments, Tagore spent forty years of his life as an educator. In fact, "he was always, in one way or another, a teacher" in nearly everything he did and wrote.<sup>15</sup> And yet at the same time, he was always a poet, for his goal as a teacher was to create a poem "in a medium other than words."<sup>16</sup> During his lifetime, Tagore undertook the enormous task of creating three schools through which he might impart his humanistic and universal vision unto others.

In 1901, he founded Santiniketan (Abode of Peace), a boys' school situated 100 miles north-north-west of Calcutta on the property trusted to him by his father. The grounds included seven acres of nearly bare land, a house, pond, and a prayer hall. Despite the surrounding landscape being hot, barren and poverty-ridden, Tagore lived close to the elements and "in intimate touch with infinitude."<sup>17</sup> The school started out with no fees, five Bengali pupils, one of whom was Tagore's own son Rathindranath, and five teachers, three of whom were Christian. Financed in part by the sale of his wife's jewellery and the liquidation of substantial amounts of his own property, Santiniketan was a constant struggle to maintain and realize. By 1908, the school was accepting girls, becoming one of the first in South Asia to provide co-education and instruction in the vernacular.<sup>18</sup> Prominent former students



Archivio Assagioli, Firenze © Istituto di Psicointesi

"A mind all logic is like a knife all blade. It makes the hand bleed that uses it." R. Tagore, *Stray Birds*, CXCVIII (Assagioli's note from his archives)

<sup>12</sup> Roberto Assagioli, Manuscript notes, ID Doc. 14892. Archivio Assagioli, Florence, Italy, (n.d.). Retrieved on 17 July 2020 from [www.achivioassagioli.org](http://www.achivioassagioli.org)

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., ID Doc. 11618.

<sup>14</sup> Roberto Assagioli, "Impressioni sulla visita di Tagore in Italia."

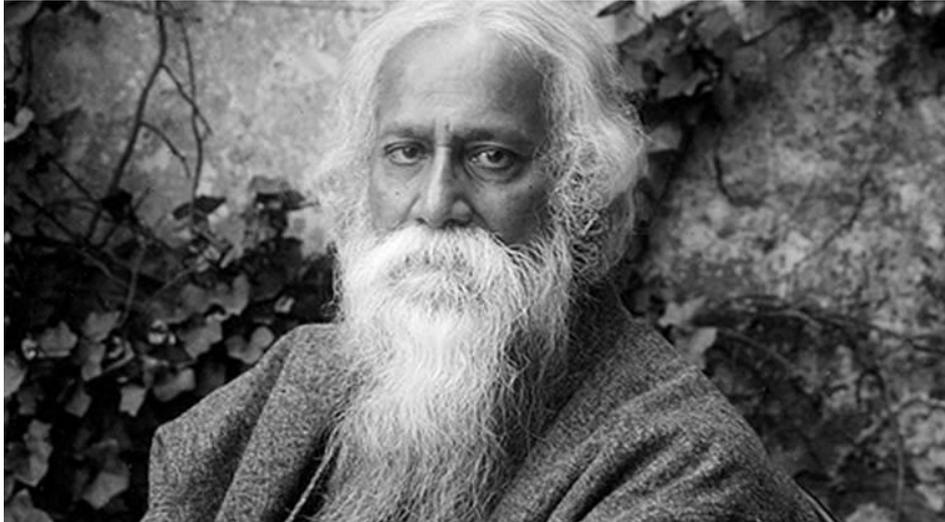
<sup>15</sup> William Radice, "Never Not an Educator: Tagore as a Poet-Teacher." *Asiatic*, 4:1, June 2010, p. 42.

<sup>16</sup> Rabindranath Tagore as cited in Kathleen M. O'Connell, "Rabindranath Tagore on education." *The encyclopedia of pedagogy and informal education*, 2003, Retrieved on 17 July 2020 from <https://infed.org/mobi/rabindranath-tagore-on-education/>

<sup>17</sup> Krishna Dutta and Andrew Robinson, *Rabindranath Tagore: The Myriad-Minded Man*. London, Bloomsbury, 1995, p. 134.

<sup>18</sup> O'Connell, "Rabindranath Tagore on education."

include film director Stayajit Ray, Prime Minister of India Indira Gandhi, and Amartya Sen, winner of the Nobel Prize in Economics.



*Rabindranath Tagore (Wikimedia Commons)*

The institution was upgraded to a university in 1921 and called Visva-Bharati, the name deriving from the Sanskrit word for the universe and Bharati, a goddess associated with Saraswati, the Hindu goddess of learning. Many years later, in a letter to Gandhi, Tagore described his “International University” as the “vessel which [carries] the cargo of my life’s best treasure.”<sup>19</sup> Yet, until his last breath, Tagore bore his university “almost like the cross on the way to Calvary”<sup>20</sup> as he grappled with its lack of financial backing, scholarly recognition, support from his own country, and the school’s inadequate accommodation, food, water, and insufferable heat. In fact, after learning he had been awarded the Nobel Prize in literature, Tagore told others in an off-handed manner by announcing during a school committee meeting that “money for the drains has probably been found.”<sup>21</sup> For most of his conservative contemporaries, Shantiniketan was a poet’s whimsical dream, a place for delinquents, orphans and disorderly students – and certainly not a school where they would risk sending their own children.<sup>22</sup>

Tagore’s third institution Sriniketan (Abode of Prosperity) was intended as Visva-Bharati’s institute of rural reconstruction, “aiming to make the villagers self-reliant and self-respectful through improvement of their physical, intellectual and economic condition.”<sup>23</sup> Sriniketan projects extended to fifteen villages and included land development; tree plantations; seed experimentation; animal husbandry; the promotion of new cottage industries; schools where young boys were taught music, agriculture and hygiene; a

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<sup>19</sup> Rabindranath Tagore, Letter to Mahatma Gandhi. 2 March 1940. Rabindra Bhavan Archives, Visva-Bharati, India.

<sup>20</sup> Dutta and Robinson, *Rabindranath Tagore*, p. 219.

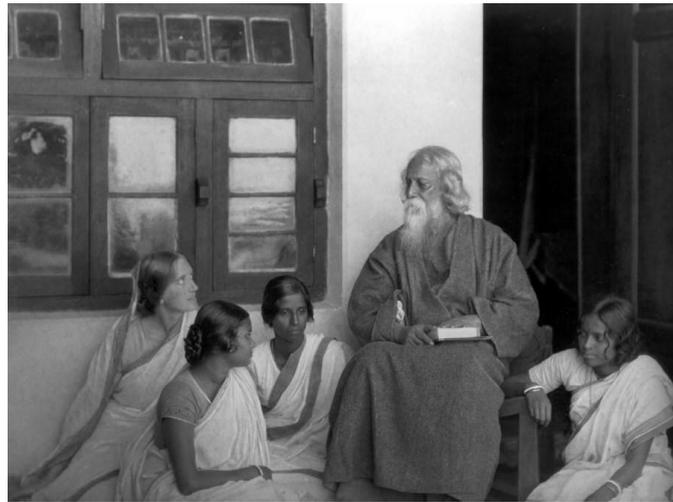
<sup>21</sup> Amartya Sen, “Poetry and Reason. Why Tagore still matters.” *The New Republic*, June 9, 2011, Retrieved on 17 July 2020 from <https://newrepublic.com/article/89649/rabindranath-tagore>

<sup>22</sup> Radice, “Never Not an Educator.”

<sup>23</sup> Quayum, “Education for Tomorrow,” p. 20.

circulating library; and village festivals.<sup>24</sup> Ten years after his death, all three institutions were taken over by the central government of India, which continues to run them today.

Fundamentally, Shantiniketan started, in Tagore's words, "with this one simple idea that education should never be dissociated from life."<sup>25</sup> His distinctive views of education included a number of revolutionary ideas: the need to gather knowledge from everywhere in the world (East and West) and assess its value through critical reasoning;<sup>26</sup> the importance of freedom in education so that the child might pursue what interests him or her in a positive natural environment;<sup>27</sup> and the wholistic understanding that while knowledge is necessary, learning how to be empathetic makes for a "life in harmony with all existence."<sup>28</sup> Perhaps all three of these concepts derived from Tagore's own bitter school experiences, his distaste for rote learning, and the memories of teachers' brutal discipline. Having only eight years of formal education, by the age of thirteen Tagore chose to leave school because of the mechanical way knowledge was forced onto the students and the poor treatment by the teachers. He explains in *My Reminiscences*: "I could not make up my mind to be tied to the eternal grind of the school mill which, divorced as it was from all life and beauty, seemed such a hideously cruel combination of hospital and gaol."<sup>29</sup> In a 1924 lecture, Tagore said:



*Tagore reading to others.*

... the child's life is subjected to the education factory, lifeless, colourless, dissociated from the context of the universe, within the bare white walls staring like eyeballs of the dead. We are born with the God-given gift of taking delight in the world, but such delightful activity is fettered and imprisoned, muted by a force called discipline which kills the sensitivities of the child mind which is always on the alert, restless and eager to receive first-hand knowledge from mother nature. We sit inert, like dead specimens of some museum, while lessons are pelted at us from on high, like hailstorms on flowers... We insist upon forced mental feeding and our lessons become a form of torture. This is one of man's most cruel and wasteful mistakes.<sup>30</sup>

<sup>24</sup> Chandan Gowda, "The Sriniketan Experiment of Tagore." *Bangalore Mirror Bureau*, March 12, 2015, Retrieved on 17 July 2020 from <https://bangaloremirror.indiatimes.com/opinion/views/institute-of-rural-reconstruction-shantiniketan-rabindranath-tagore/articleshow/46507052.cms>

<sup>25</sup> Dutta and Robinson, *Rabindranath Tagore*, p. 10.

<sup>26</sup> Sen, "Poetry and Reason."

<sup>27</sup> O'Connell, "Rabindranath Tagore on education."

<sup>28</sup> Rabindranath Tagore, *Personality*. New York, Macmillan Co. 1917, p. 142.

<sup>29</sup> Rabindranath Tagore, *My Reminiscences*. London, 1991, Part IV:16.

<sup>30</sup> Rabindranath Tagore, *A Tagore reader*. A. Chakravarty, ed., New Delhi: Rupa, 1961/2003. pp. 214–215.

Tagore ended up being tutored at home. He never matriculated from any institution, and the degrees he received were honorary (four from Indian universities, including the University of Calcutta and a doctorate from Oxford University).



*Students at Shantiniketan in 1914*

In a 2011 lecture for the Smithsonian Institute, Udaya Narayana Singh, the Pro-Vice Chancellor of Visva-Bharati at the time, said that Tagore's main goal of conceiving and creating Shantiniketan was "the divinization of man and the humanization of the Divine."<sup>31</sup> Connecting human beings with the sublime, enabling the manifestation of the Infinite within the finite material world was perhaps Tagore's deepest conviction. Through Shantiniketan, Tagore created and maintained the open space necessary for this Infinite energy to appear in the everyday life of whomever was sensitive to it. This openness is literally exemplified by the practice of holding classes in the outdoors "where the children had the greatest freedom possible under the shade of ancient trees and the field around open to the verge of horizon."<sup>32</sup>

In order to remain open and free to the experience and the power of their imagination, memorization of facts and figures was minimal. Tagore said, "Instead of putting the entire burden on the memory, the power of thinking, and the power of imagination should always be given opportunities for free exercise."<sup>33</sup> The simplicity of everyday life, including basic food and living conditions, also helped to maintain an open framework in which to experience the Divine. Instead of using disciplinary techniques on the students, teachers were encouraged to be more open and empathetic – to be like "gardeners' looking after the tender young shoots of the human soul."<sup>34</sup> In fact, the rules at Shantiniketan were that the students were left as much as possible in charge of their own affairs, with teachers only dealing with extreme and difficult cases.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Udaya Narayana Singh, "Shantiniketan to Smithsonian: A Tribute to Tagore," 2011, Retrieved on 17 July 2020 from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7mfadGrUjSA&list=PL5473471FE926C232&index=4>

<sup>32</sup> Rabindranath Tagore, "My Educational Mission." 1926. Retrieved on 17 July 2020 from [https://archive.org/stream/MySchool\\_201905/MySchool\\_djvu.txt](https://archive.org/stream/MySchool_201905/MySchool_djvu.txt)

<sup>33</sup> Rabindranath Tagore, as cited in Chandra, S. & Sharma, R. K., *The Philosophy of Education*, New Delhi, India, Atlantic Publishers & Distributors, 2006, p. 205.

<sup>34</sup> Rabindranath Tagore, as cited in Quayum, "Education for Tomorrow," p. 4.

<sup>35</sup> Ernest Rhys, *Rabindranath Tagore: A Biographical Study*, London. MacMillan and Co. Limited, 1915.

This openness is further exemplified by Tagore's effort to build East-West links with the intention of creating a space in which students and scholars from all over the world might come to the school and exchange their expertise, spirituality and ways of life. This practice was intended to help widen the students' horizons and understanding of humanistic ideas, as stated by Tagore:

There was also another kind of freedom at which we aimed [at Visva-Bharati University], the freedom of sympathy with all humanity, a freedom from all racial and national prejudice... There are, of course, natural differences in human races which should be preserved and respected and the mission of our education should be to realise our unity in spite of them, to discover truth through the wilderness of their contradictions.<sup>36</sup>

During his lifetime Tagore travelled to 30 countries where he lectured and shared his poetry, music, and dramas. Likewise, Shantiniketan welcomed peoples from Burma, Malaysia, Indonesia, China and Japan. Scholars also visited from Europe, including French orientalist Sylvain Lévi, and Italian orientalist Carol Formichi and Giuseppe Tucci, from the University of Rome. It was their presence and grand gift of 500 volumes of Italian classics for the university library that, in part, persuaded Tagore to visit Italy in 1926.<sup>37</sup>

Also fundamental to the ideals of Shantiniketan was the cultivation of a love for Nature. Tagore's worldview, as evident throughout his poetry, is that Nature, as God's creation, reveals the spirit of the universe (both outwardly and within our own souls). As he explains in *Sadhana*, the goal of human life is to find peace, which means one is in perfect harmony with man and nature, and therefore in undisturbed union with God.<sup>38</sup> When children connect to the natural beauty and wonder around them, they have the opportunity to connect to the Divine. "To alienate our sympathy from the world of birds and trees is a barbarity which is not allowed in my institution," Tagore explained in his essay "The Educational Mission of the Visva-Bharati."<sup>39</sup> Through the child's direct experience of Nature (and God) came the inevitable expression of self through a great variety of literary and artistic activities that took place at the school. Festivals, like the annual tree-planting ceremony "Briksha Ropana" during which each child was encouraged to adopt a tree, were a direct synthesis of the various art forms – music, literature, art, dance and drama – culminating into a celebration of nature.

#### *Assagioli's Assessment of Tagore's Educational Philosophy*

In his 1922 article, Assagioli asserts that Tagore is "a wise educator and a prophet of a more united humanity"<sup>40</sup> He starts by recapping the Poet's own account of his childhood and education as described in *My Reminiscences*. Assagioli notes the characteristics of Tagore's child-like soul as being an inner life "of concentration and intense subjectivity, combined with a deep sense of communion with nature."<sup>41</sup> But this dream world was rudely awakened

<sup>36</sup> Rabindranath Tagore, "My School." May 1925. Retrieved on 17 July 2020 from [https://archive.org/stream/MySchool\\_201905/MySchool\\_djvu.txt](https://archive.org/stream/MySchool_201905/MySchool_djvu.txt)

<sup>37</sup> Dutta and Robinson, *Rabindranath Tagore*, 1995.

<sup>38</sup> Rabindranath Tagore, "I. The Relation of the Individual to the Universe." in *Sadhana: The Realisation of Life*, London, 1913.

<sup>39</sup> Rabindranath Tagore, "The Educational Mission of the Visva-Bharati" (1930), in *The English writings of Rabindranath Tagore: Volume 3, a miscellany*, S. Das, ed. New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1996, p. 627.

<sup>40</sup> Roberto Assagioli, "Tagore." *Il progresso religioso, VII-VIII*, pp.161-178, 1922, p. 3.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

when Tagore had to attend school. Assagioli notes that everything at school “tended to cause the ultra-sensitive child [Rabindranath] acute suffering”<sup>42</sup> which “kindled in the noble soul of the poet the generous desire to save other children from the same fate,”<sup>43</sup> and hence Tagore’s founding of a humanistic institution of learning. Assagioli ends his article with a brief survey of Tagore’s philosophy of education, the daily routine of the students at Shantiniketan, and selected passages from the Statutes governing Visva-Bharati University.

### Assagioli’s Educational Philosophy

It is not surprising that Assagioli found an affinity with Tagore’s philosophy of education. During his lifetime, Assagioli wrote a number of articles about education and learning<sup>44</sup> with a special interest in the education of gifted-children.<sup>45</sup> Unlike Tagore, Assagioli found school, especially high school, easy (with the exception of mathematics). However, he disliked some of his studies at the University of Florence, from which he received his doctorate in 1910.<sup>46</sup> Agreeing with Tagore’s view of memorization, Assagioli described his particular dislike of anatomy class:

...there was the stupidity, which continues even now, of having to memorize...all those little bones and muscles and all the rest... No surgeon would rely on his memory of what he studied ten or fifteen years before. He has his atlas, so studying everything by heart is a perfectly stupid performance.<sup>47</sup>

Assagioli asserted that children’s education should help them develop into a harmonious and well-balanced human being on all levels – physical, emotional, imaginative, intellectual, ethical, social and intuitive. In addition, students need to integrate and synthesize these aspects into a fully aware individual who is conscious of the Higher Self.<sup>48</sup> He identified education as a carefully balanced relationship in which the teacher, through his or her authority and curriculum, guides the child towards discovering his or her autonomy and personal psychosynthesis.

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid., p. 4.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., p. 5.

<sup>44</sup> For example, see Roberto Assagioli, “L’educazione sessuale.” *Bollettino Filosofico*, III:1, 1914; Roberto Assagioli, “Come s’imparano le lingue col subcosciente.” *L’economia umana*, 3, 1954; Roberto Assagioli, “Psychosynthesis in Education.” Greenville, Delaware, USA, Psychosynthesis Research Foundation, 1959; Roberto Assagioli, “Creative Expression in Education.” *Journal of Education*, 145:3, 1963; Roberto Assagioli, “Notes on Education.” Greenville, Delaware, USA, Psychosynthesis Research Foundation, 1968. Retrieved on 17 July 2020 from <https://synthesiscenter.org/articles/0321.pdf>

<sup>45</sup> For example, see Roberto Assagioli, “L’educazione dei giovani particolarmente dotati.” *Umanità in cammino*, IV:2, 1959; Roberto Assagioli, *L’educazione dei giovani particolarmente dotati*. Firenze, Istituto di Psicopsintesi, 1963.

<sup>46</sup> Roberto Assagioli, *Roberto Assagioli in His Own Words*. Recorded by E. Smith, Y. Dattilo, P. Ferrucci, V. Reid Ferrucci, eds., Firenze, Edizione Istituto di Psicopsintesi, 2019.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., p. 17.

<sup>48</sup> Assagioli, “Psychosynthesis in Education.”



*Roberto Assagioli teaching students during the 1965 summer session of Mrs. Faillettaz's finishing school in Gion, Switzerland, Institut Villa Pierrefeu, now ivpworld.com. (Photo by Isabelle Küng).*

Techniques that Assagioli advocated included: contact with nature and living beings, active training of the mind rather than verbatim memorization of facts, visualizations and creative imagination exercises to help students learn how to control and use their emotional energies, and training of the will. In addition, children need to receive a spiritual education “to instil into them a spiritual conception of life, make them feel the greatness and beauty of the universe ... [an] unmistakable sign that there is a Superior Being, the source of [life’s] meaning and purpose.”<sup>49</sup> Finally, as part of their spiritual education, children should be taught how to be in right human relations. Assagioli asserted that being spiritual does not mean one is only in communion with God, but also includes harmonious collaboration with all fellow beings, from the family to peers to society and nature as a whole. In psychosynthesis terms, this type of relationship is called ‘right relations.’

Tagore’s emphasis on developing open, free and respectful relationships at his schools is a perfect example of the psychosynthesis concept of ‘right relations,’ which refers to the use of all aspects of will and the deepest awareness possible to relate to all that is present in space and time. Shantiniketan encouraged and emphasized various types of relationships between teachers and students, students from diverse backgrounds and religions, scholars from the East and West, human beings and Nature, and human beings and God. Within a psychosynthesis context, right relations is an attempt to create a real, open, and honest space for love and will to synthesize and allow for personal and spiritual growth.<sup>50</sup> Such an open attitude allows for imaginative insights, intuitive understandings, and creativity.<sup>51</sup> Through

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Catherine Ann Lombard, “Psychosynthesis: A Foundational Bridge Between Psychology and Spirituality.” *Pastoral Psychology* 66, pp. 461–485, 2017. Retrieved on 17 July 2020 from <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11089-017-0753-5>

<sup>51</sup> Catherine Ann Lombard, & Barbara C.N. Müller, “Opening the door to creativity: A psychosynthesis approach.” *Journal of Humanistic Psychology*, 58:6, pp. 659-688, November 2018.

such a relationship, each person has the opportunity to relate to his or her inner and outer worlds (and to God) in a new way.<sup>52</sup>

Despite their similar thoughts on education, unlike Tagore, Assagioli did not establish a children's school or university, but he was instrumental in establishing psychosynthesis institutes and organizations around the world. In 1926, the year he and Tagore met, he established the Institute of Psychic Culture and Therapy which, in 1933, became the Institute of Psychosynthesis in Rome. In 1956, he created the Psychosynthesis Research Foundation in the United States and during the 1960s organized centers in India, Paris, Athens, and California. In the 1970s, centers continued to open in London and Canada. In 2012, there were more than 100 psychosynthesis centers worldwide, including 26 centers in Italy.<sup>53</sup>



*Roberto Assagioli with his collaborators in Florence.*

Like Tagore, Assagioli was always interested in developing national and international groups that worked towards inter-personal synthesis. Throughout his entire life, Assagioli created and participated in international congresses on psychoanalysis and psychotherapy. He was one of the 53 founding members of the Italian Society of Psychology (1910), and personally founded the Florence Circle of Psychological Studies (1913). In the 1950s, he founded the Italian Union for Progressive Judaism, which was based on “an attitude of openness and understanding and collaboration with all peoples and religions.”<sup>54</sup> During the last years of his life, he continued to receive international guests and to hold lectures, which were so popular that young people would queue outside his home to obtain a place, squeezing into the room and hallway to hear him speak.<sup>55</sup>

### Suggestions based on Tagore and Assagioli's Educational Insights

Both Tagore and Assagioli were critical of education's excessive dependence on technology. Tagore was particularly sceptical about rational training through books – just imagine what he might have said today about computers! He wrote: “have not our books, like most of our necessities, come between us and our world? ... Children should come to their lesson of truths through natural processes – directly through persons and things.”<sup>56</sup> Nearly 50 years ago, Assagioli also urged us to develop the inner qualities in order to manage our increasingly technological world:

<sup>52</sup> Lombard, “Psychosynthesis.”

<sup>53</sup> Directory of Psychosynthesis Centers Worldwide (2012). Cheshire, MA: Association for the Advancement of Psychosynthesis. Retrieved on 17 July 2020 from <http://docshare01.docshare.tips/files/13219/132193495.pdf>

<sup>54</sup> Paola Giovetti, *Roberto Assagioli: La vita e l'opera del fondatore della Psicointesi*. Rome: Edizioni Mediterranee, 1995, p. 61.

<sup>55</sup> Massimo Rosselli, “Roberto Assagioli: A bright star.” *International Journal of Psychotherapy*, 16(2), pp. 7-19, 2012.

<sup>56</sup> Rabindranath Tagore, “Personality,” p. 142-143.

...evil does not lie in the technological powers themselves but in the *uses* to which man puts them and the fact that he has allowed them to overwhelm and enslave him. Resistance to the prevailing negative trends of modern life calls for much determination, much firmness and persistence, much clear-sightedness and wisdom.<sup>57</sup>

The following suggestions are offered as possible supplemental activities to e-learning. The hope is that these suggestions might also stimulate teachers and parents to create their own appropriate tasks best suited for their children and situation.<sup>58</sup>

### *Engage with Nature*



To counterbalance time spent gazing at a computer screen, students need to be encouraged by their teachers and parents to engage with nature. Time devoted to pets, walks, and the outdoors should be incorporated into daily life. Note that learning also takes place through all meaningful activities with material objects such as building materials, drawing, gardening, and the explorations of natural objects. For younger students, material experiences can also be

simple tasks in the home environment such as sorting laundry by color or shape. Math can be integrated into everyday life experiences such as cooking or counting birds, flowers, or butterflies found in the yard. Teachers can schedule virtual sharing time in order to encourage children to share their pets, a favorite toy and/or something found in nature.

### *Stimulate Creative Imagination*

Experiences in nature can help to activate the creative imagination. Other activities include cooking, gardening, artwork, dream work, and moments of silence. Practice counting ten positive things per day with an attitude of gratefulness and appreciation. Be creative in providing opportunities for virtual class and school community events such as art or talent shows.

### *Train the Will*

Concentration occurs when a student's mind, body and will are engaged. Younger children especially thrive on order and consistency. Teachers and parents can encourage students to participate in the work of their families at home: laundry, cooking, food shopping, dishes, yardwork, and sibling care. Have students design a project or learning plan, along with

<sup>57</sup> Roberto Assagioli, *The Act of Will*. London: The Psychosynthesis Trust, 2002, p. 5.

<sup>58</sup> While I have compiled these suggestions, some of them come from Roberto Assagioli, "Notes on Education, The Deeper Meaning of Education," Psychosynthesis and Research Foundation, 1968, Downloaded on 17 July from <https://kennethsorensen.dk/en/notes-on-education-by-roberto-assagioli/>. Others are derived from Kitty Bravo, "Montessori Pedagogical Guidelines for Supporting Learning at Home During COVID-19." The Montessori Foundation, n.d., Downloaded on 17 July 2020 from <https://www.montessori.org/montessori-pedagogical-guidelines-for-supporting-learning-at-home-during-covid-19/>

scheduling their time at home. When children can find and care for their own belongings, they feel capable and responsible. Younger children can be independent for long stretches of time when they have carefully arranged spaces for dressing, hygiene, preparing food, cleaning-up, and independent play.

Remember to promote the process, emphasizing awareness, presence and the joy of caring for belongings and others as opposed to the final result. Parents also need to learn that clean-up of an activity is also the child's work and provide the guidance necessary for the child to learn this process of keeping things tidy and in order. All these practices help students to train their will.

Teachers of older students might try creating a class that self-governs. The class might elect a mayor, community council, judge and various committees functioning under the tactful guidance of the instructor. The choices, decisions and responsibility inherent in self-government helps to develop some of the essential qualities of the will and constitutes the best type of education of freedom and democracy.

#### *Open Avenues to Spirituality*

Creating a space for students to experience and express their spiritual feelings is perhaps, at this point in time, the most necessary and the least attended to. Children and young adults students should be amply informed of the sufferings and misfortunes that much of humanity, including perhaps those close to them, are enduring at this moment. Consequently, discussion and reflection on current events and their feelings about them should occur frequently whenever possible.

*admiration · appreciation · attention · beauty ·  
bliss · calm · compassion · comprehension ·  
cooperation · courage · creativity · daring ·  
decisiveness · detachment · determination ·  
discernment · discipline · endurance · energy ·  
enthusiasm · eternity · faith · freedom ·  
friendship · generosity · goodness · gratitude ·  
harmony · humor · infinity · initiative ·  
integration · joy · liberation · light · love ·  
order · patience · peace · persistence ·  
positiveness · serenity · service · silence ·  
synthesis · simplicity · tenacity · truth ·  
understanding · vitality · wholeness · will ·  
wisdom · wonder · playfulness · risk ·  
clarity · power*

Now is the opportunity for all young people to learn how to approach crisis with a positive, loving attitude. It is essential to use the events to arouse the higher qualities within them, such as sympathy and compassion for others; the awareness, responsibility, and determination to correct what social ills they can; and the acceptance of the afflictions that they are unable to eradicate.

Teachers and parents need to avoid all expressions of irritation, depression, fear and other negative thoughts and emotions in the presence of children. Above all, bitter discussions caused by conflicts between the parents' points of views should be eliminated. Adults also need to abstain from "projecting" onto children their own negative states of mind and aggressive impulses. Try instead to use humor whenever appropriate and maintain a cheerful atmosphere as much as possible.

*Encourage students to focus on an evocative word.*

Spontaneous spiritual experiences frequently occur in children. Without the obstacles often found in adults, their consciousness is open to higher energies. Therefore, teachers and parents need to pay attention to these spontaneous experiences, to appreciate their value, and to encourage their manifestation. Ways of opening up to spiritual energies include:

- Cultivate a sense of beauty, especially the aesthetic appreciation of the various aspects of nature: the sky, the sea, mountains, flowers, etc.
- Cultivate a sense of wonder and admiration for one's inner and outer worlds.
- Promote the use of evocative words and/or symbols of higher qualities.<sup>59</sup>
- Present young people with examples of persons who have led a spiritual life especially during historically challenging times: the great religious figures, geniuses, heroes — not only warriors and conquerors — but philosophers, poets, artists, scientists, and workers in the humanitarian field.
- Wisely adapt methods such as concentration, observation, and meditation in order to promote a spiritual life. For adolescents, introduce spiritual psychology that favors an understanding of their inner make-up, puts emphasis on their essential spiritual nature and on their higher potential.

### *Consciously Choose Right Relations*

In order to encourage right relations, be sure to acknowledge to the students the need for grace and courtesy at home. Many of us are house-bound or limited in our outside activities and, therefore, experiencing more family togetherness than we are accustomed to. Practice and encourage kindness, patience and acceptance with humility.

You can encourage right relations amongst students virtually by having lunch together, singing, dancing, and doing yoga together. Of course, physical interaction between students should occur as much as possible as well. Parents and grandparents can play games together with their children and create a communal time and space to share reflections and experiences that have emerged during the day. Teachers can also foster ways for students and families to collaborate remotely in large and small groups.

Moving beyond the family and class to the wider community, help students to provide a service to others in the following ways:

- Write friendly letters to the elderly and letters of gratitude to community service workers.
- Make face masks.
- Plant a garden. Weed someone's garden in the neighborhood.
- Connect with younger children in earlier levels of the school for reading aloud.
- Create care packages for postal office, delivery, supermarket or hospital workers.
- Donate time or food to local food banks.

### *The Village without a School*

The first time Matilde Santandrea, student and collaborator of Roberto Assagioli, met him in 1970, he told her the following story:

A young teacher won a contest and had to go and teach in a remote mountain village. She took all her material and books, but when she arrived, there was no school to be found. She questioned the village children that she came across, but they didn't know anything about her coming to teach them or a school. So, she put aside all her notes and books, went to the forest with the children, and they began to construct a school, sawing trees, designing architecture, building

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<sup>59</sup> See Catherine Ann Lombard, "Radiate like a Living, Walking Billboard," *Love and Will: A psychosynthesis approach to living*, August 4, 2014. Retrieved 7 September 2020 from <https://loveandwill.com/2014/08/04/radiate-like-a-living-walking-billboard/>

furniture, etc. By the end of the year, she hadn't been able to teach the children anything that she had wanted to upon her arrival, but the children had built the school and knew how to count, organize themselves and do many other things.

When Assagioli had finished his little story, he gave Santandrea a beautiful smile. But she felt completely stupefied. She had wanted him to give her practical solutions and concrete suggestions. "But he had an incredible gift," recalled Santandrea twenty-five years later. "You could feel that what he was saying was the truth and right ... The fable says this. We have to reconstruct education from its foundations, we have to change the way we teach, not do everything as we always have done."<sup>60</sup>

Rabindranath Tagore attempted this very act of will by creating his beloved Shantiniketan and Roberto Assagioli by founding and enabling the worldwide diffusion of psychosynthesis. Inspired by their life and work, it is now our turn to rebuild our village schools.

### About the Author

*Catherine Ann Lombard, MA, is a psychosynthesis psychologist, practitioner, and researcher. She received her MA in Psychosynthesis Psychology from the Institute of Psychosynthesis, London, affiliated with Middlesex University, London. She has had numerous scientific articles published on psychosynthesis and is currently writing a book about Tagore and Assagioli. You can follow her bimonthly blog at [LoveAndWill.com](http://LoveAndWill.com).*

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<sup>60</sup> Giovetti, *Roberto Assagioli*, p. 97.