

Creating Harmony in Life: A Psychosynthesis Approach

by Roberto Assagioli

Introduction by Catherine Ann Lombard

Exactly fifty-five years ago, this collection of lectures by Dr. Roberto Assagioli (1888-1974), psychoanalyst and pioneer in the fields of humanistic and transpersonal psychology, was published in Italian under the title *Psicosintesi: Per l'armonia della vita*. Since then it has been a mainstay for Italian students of psychology and psychosynthesis alike. While Assagioli published more than 150 articles in numerous languages during his lifetime, he wrote relatively few books. Hence the publication of this fundamental work in English feels like a renewal of his thought and vision – perhaps precisely when the world needs it most.

These fifteen chapters encompass twenty lectures, ranging in topics from the meaning of synthesis to the dangers and drawbacks of exploring the unconscious to the joy of discovering the elements of our higher consciousness. Together they provide a comprehensive introduction to the process of psychosynthesis as a lifelong human endeavor. The aim of psychosynthesis is to integrate all the human dimensions – physical, emotional, mental and spiritual – into a harmonious and synthesized whole so one can fully express him or herself and live life creatively. Psychosynthesis differs from psychoanalysis in that psychosynthesis emphasizes personal and spiritual synthesis, not analysis. While Freud's psychoanalysis focuses on the “basement” or unconscious of the human personality, psychosynthesis includes the “attic” or spiritual dimension.

These lectures can be dated to 1933 when Assagioli was living in Rome and offering classes to the public in his home, which was also the seat of the newly named Istituto di Psicosintesi (“Institute of Psychosynthesis”), initially founded in 1926 under the name Istituto di Cultura e Terapia Psichica (“Institute of Psychic Culture and Therapy”). We have the

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testimony of Luisa Lunelli, who became a close friend of the Assagioli family, of her first encounter with Assagioli around the time he would have been offering these lectures in the mid-1930s. She wrote that upon entering the lecture room, she experienced:

...a vast space of singular luminosity. A whiter, finer, brighter light than the bright summer sun of Rome. A light that I haven't forgotten and that only a few times in my life I've encountered. In front of the room was a middle-aged man who was just finishing his talk to an attentive audience... When the instructor [Assagioli] left the classroom, everyone surrounded him. Almost everyone wanted to talk with him (Lunelli, 1991).

Thirty-three years later Assagioli was offering these same lectures again, only this time at the Istituto di Psicopsintesi in Florence, where his home was also located. In 1966, Massimo Rosselli, who would become one of Assagioli's collaborators, first met him at one of these lectures, which were typically held on Sunday mornings in a small room on the ground floor of the building. He recounts his encounter as follows:

I and my friend entered the small room and saw this old man...he seemed very old to me. The room was small, but full, and there were many women of a certain age wearing hats, something from a bygone era... What struck me the most was his voice. The intonation of his voice. He had a slight Venetian accent ... but while conducting the exercises his voice had a very particular force. But above all, I was struck by his presence, which was truly radiant, a vital force, and very warm and welcoming. And this really moves me even now ... he had a profound way of welcoming you – as you truly are.

... His lessons were extremely simple, straightforward in language. But extremely profound in how he expressed himself. And there you learned that some things that are simple are really difficult, but you can still reach them... Assagioli had the innocence of a person who is advanced in consciousness. While he appeared physically fragile and elderly, he had a grand vital force alongside the simplicity and innocence of a child (Rosselli, 2016).

As Assagioli became more renowned, these lectures grew in popularity to the point that the small conference room started to overflow with eager attendees – specialists and novices alike. People would queue outside his home to obtain a place, which often meant squeezing into the hallway or sitting on the stairs. Finally an outside microphone was installed so that everyone could more easily hear Assagioli's talks (Giovetti, 1995).

With the publication of this book, we now have the opportunity to appreciate Assagioli's lectures quietly in our own home. Although we can no longer bring our questions to him afterwards nor feel his radiating presence, we can still have a sense of his voice,

humor, scholarship and spiritual counsel. It is obvious from the book's construction that Assagioli carefully considered the trajectory of these lectures, therefore, it is recommended that readers slowly proceed through each chapter in the order of their appearance. Readers already familiar with psychosynthesis will recognize that these lessons systematically align with Assagioli's diagram of the human psyche. He begins by explaining the elements and functions of the unconscious, then describes those emotions and thoughts that we have in our everyday consciousness, and finally, in the last two chapters, introduces the higher consciousness, its latent potentialities and power. While lacking a chapter on the will, which is one of the central principles of psychosynthesis, this book, nevertheless, provides an excellent introduction to its fundamental principles, concepts and practices. Along with defining each concept, Assagioli always provides concrete examples, practical exercises, and inspirational illustrations. Appendix I is a succinct overview of psychosynthesis, its methods and techniques, which Assagioli first presented in 1961 at the Fifth International Congress for Psychotherapy, and Appendix II is a brief biography along with a chronology of Assagioli's life and work.

Since these lectures were first given nearly ninety years ago, some of his discourses might seem rather outdated, but I encourage readers to remain open. When he uses the metaphor of unexplored continents for the discovery of our unconscious or talks about the newly invented polygraph machine, we readily experience the historical context in which the lectures were given. In fact, most of his scientific references were innovative and newsworthy in the 1930s. For example, Assagioli quotes Arthur Eddington's treatise on the solar chromosphere. British born Eddington, who is practically unheard of today, proved Einstein's theory of relativity and was on the cover of *Time Magazine* in 1934 as one of the foremost physicists in the world. Assagioli also refers to Albert Einstein's theory of relativity and its idea of two- and three-dimensional perspectives when explaining the central practice of psychological detachment. These are just a few examples that demonstrate how current Assagioli was for his time, how well he was able to place his discourse in the here-and-now for his listeners, and just how timeless his deeper message remains. One can also find Assagioli referencing concepts that only recently have become commonly understood: the struggle of post-retirement depression, the integral relationship between the body and psyche (which he referred to as biopsychosynthesis), and his various techniques for releasing excess emotional energies.

Perhaps the more difficult lectures for some modern readers to appreciate are on the psychology of woman. In Chapter 4, Assagioli explains how psychosynthesis and self-realization for a woman depends on her combining and integrating two functions: being a man's companion and being a mother. However, if readers can remain open to his argument, they will see that he qualifies these functions many times and in many ways. He states that one can perform the maternal function through her vocation, be it educator, medical professional, or spiritual director. He continuously qualifies all his statements with phrases such as: "in general/a general sense," the "average man," the "average woman," the "so-called 'normal' man," "I have deliberately exaggerated," and "there are many exceptions." And in the end, Assagioli clearly asserts that, while a woman can more easily reach self-realization and psychosynthesis when she is in union with a male counterpart (and vice versa), it is still possible without a partner.

What he is fundamentally calling on us to do – whatever our gender may be – is integrate within ourselves the gifts of our feminine qualities with those of our masculine qualities. Assagioli simply believed that it is easier for a woman to recognize her own masculine qualities when in relationship with a man, and vice versa. Masculine qualities that he mentions are reasoning, combativeness, and constructiveness, while feminine qualities are sensitivity, feeling, imagination, and intuition. Assagioli asserts that having a partner of the opposite sex, who demonstrates his or her gender qualities, can "be a source of inspiration, serve as a catalyst, and help bring these opposite qualities to consciousness." Ultimately, psychosynthesis is a process that requires both men and women to become aware of *all* their inner qualities and use their will to better recognize, develop, and direct the more positive ones, in order to become complete and harmonious human beings.

With regard to the methodology found in these pages, Assagioli's astute scholarship becomes immediately evident to any reader. His many citations from both Western and Eastern religious and philosophical sources are impressive. Along with his reflections on the writings of a vast array of writers, mystics and scientists alike, Assagioli does not neglect to ground his thought in his real experience. For example, in Chapter 6, he refers to the empirical 'I' as ordinary consciousness, in other words, the particular psychic contents that we are conscious of and identified with in the moment. Throughout this chapter, however, he refers to this same concept as the: ordinary 'I', phenomenal 'I', conscious 'I', and conscious Center. At the same time in this chapter, he is explaining the relationship between the

empirical ‘I’ and the real ‘I’, which is who we really are, the true substance of our being. Again, as he describes this part of our selves, he keeps changing its name to the: profound ‘I’, true ‘I’, superior ‘I’, spiritual SELF, Soul, innermost ‘I’, individual ‘I’, spiritual Center, and higher Center.

While some readers might find this lack of consistency in his terminology confusing at best and frustrating at worst, this flexibility actually reveals that Assagioli approaches the self and Higher Self in a phenomenological way. That is, these concepts are not approached, explored and defined abstractly and purely on an intellectual level, but through careful and patient observation, discovering the manifold ways in which the self and Higher Self manifest in real life. This continual experiential approach can also be seen in his archive notes, particularly on the fundamental chapter “What is synthesis?” One can see that Assagioli further developed his idea of the synthesis of polarities to include a hierarchy, something not discussed elsewhere. He wrote:

Synthesis is obtained not only between two poles, but it also may include a vast multiplicity of elements, groups, and sub-groups.

Also here the analogy with organic life is illuminating. In our bodies there are not only the fundamental rhythms of anabolism/catabolism, which we have mentioned. There is a complicated and wonderful regulation of the various organs of one system. For instance the digestive system, which includes such organs as salivary glands, stomach with its muscles and glands, intestine in its various sections, liver, pancreas, etc... Normal digestion requires a most harmonious cooperation in ordered succession of all these parts.

In the same way, a normal and ordered psychological life requires the harmonious cooperation of very many elements and functions. Even more, it requires sub-ordination... (Assagioli, n.d.)

About the manuscript

Translating these lectures meant moving from a distinct culture and audience to a more global one, time-traveling across almost a century, and transporting words from a lecture hall to the printed page. With regard to this translation, I and my co-translator and husband Kees den Biesen have tried to stay as close as possible to Assagioli’s original manuscript while at the same time rendering it assessable to a 21st century audience. While some chapters, like Chapter 1 on the multiplicity of the mind read like an actual lecture, others such as Chapter 3, which describes the meaning of ‘synthesis’, are formal in tone with many references to

outside sources. Still others like Chapter 10 appear to be a series of lecture notes that were later developed into a published article.

As editor, I have changed some nouns and pronouns to be gender-inclusive, something I believe Assagioli would have agreed with. All Assagioli's comments appear as footnotes; the final endnotes are mine as translator and editor. The endnotes include original sources for quoted material; quotations without an endnote were untraceable. Like any translation, this one is inevitably a partial defeat, but we hope we have captured not only Assagioli's ideas, but his conversational tone, warmth, and intended meaning.

This project involved the good will of many people, but I would especially like to thank Silvia Tabanelli for her soul friendship, unwavering faith in me, and financial support. Special thanks to Gruppo alle Fonti for their initiative, generosity and patience. Finally, I offer my deepest gratitude to Roberto Assagioli for his rich legacy and profound vision of what it means to be and continually become a full and authentic human being.

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