

The Third Awakening
Thomas Yeomans, Ph.D.
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Background

First of all, let me say how grateful and happy I am to be here today and to have the opportunity to explore with you the process of spiritual awakening and the use of psychosynthetic principles and practice in supporting this deeply human experience. I have worked in the field of Psychosynthesis for now forty-five years, and have never ceased to wonder at, and admire, the depth and breadth of Roberto Assagioli's conception of the human being and our relationship to all levels of life, from person to planet. Since age 30, when I first saw the oval diagram in the book Psychosynthesis and recognized instantly this is what I had been looking for, I have never stopped uncovering more and more of what this vision contains and marveling at how it could grow to include new experiences as we learned more about the process of psycho-spiritual development at all levels. I am deeply grateful for the experience of meeting and studying with Assagioli in these early years of my professional life (1972) and for his continuing influence on my life and work in the time since.

I studied Psychosynthesis also at the Psychosynthesis Institute in Palo Alto and completed Advanced training there in 1974. I then worked as a trainer for the Institute and by the middle 70's we, the staff, were teaching training programs all over the country and abroad. It was a heady and exciting time, for a powerful and committed group had gathered at the Institute and we were inspired to bring Psychosynthesis to a world that was hungry for it. Michael Murphy, the founder of the Esalen Institute in Big Sur, declared at that time that Psychosynthesis would "integrate the Human Potential Movement", and many leaders from that movement came to study at the Institute, as well as professionals from other parts of the US and even leaders of other Psychosynthesis centers in this country and abroad. Yet by the end of the 70's the Institute had collapsed,

torn by power dynamics and shadow elements, and I had seen at first hand, within the span of a decade, the best and the worst of spiritual life. The catastrophic demise of the Psychosynthesis Institute, by then in San Francisco, was devastating, both to those who were directly involved, and to the larger movement in this country. (This episode is documented in Chapter 7 of the book Psychosynthesis in North America—1957-2010 and had a far ranging effect on the field.)

Soul Calling

Personally, this experience left me shattered and shaken, and not at all sure where to go. Then, one day in the fall of 1980, in the aftermath of the collapse, I was sitting in our living room in San Francisco in this quandary, feeling a thick fog all around me and quite dazed and discouraged. Now it just so happened that Anne and I had bought a desktop globe for our sons, and through this fog of confusion I saw it sitting there across the room. I was holding this question of where now with my life and work, when suddenly the globe lifted off the desk and came straight at me, and I heard a voice clearly say, “whatever it is, it needs to be about the earth as a whole”. At that very moment the fog lifted and I knew I had an answer—the planet had to be the context for whatever I did from that time on, and it has been.

I continued to work in the field of Psychosynthesis to help it recover from the debacle of the PSI collapse. This work put me in touch with people all over the country who had been hurt by this event and it led to an international conference, co-hosted by John Weiser and myself, in Toronto in 1983, to which more than 500 psychosynthesists came. Also during the 80’s John Weiser and I co-edited and published three books of readings in Psychosynthesis in which the context was person to planet, and, in 1988, I gave a keynote talk at the international conference in Italy on the hundredth anniversary of Assagioli’s birth, entitled “World Awakening: “Psychosynthesis and Geosynthesis”. In the 80’s and 90’s this calling took me to Europe and eventually Russia, and a

touching detail of the intensity of my intention was that I carried an earth flag wherever I went to teach and presented it as a gift to the institute, or center, I was working in. In any way I could I shaped my work to include the context of person to planet, and this calling has led me here today, 35 years later, to be speaking on the Third Awakening and its importance to planetary health and life.

The Three Awakenings

Roberto Assagioli was fond of a particular practice of which he often spoke. This was the practice of the “second awakening”. Every morning when he first awoke (first awakening) he would sit up in bed and meditate in order to contact his Higher Self and identify with this aspect of his experience. This was the “second awakening”. The movement in consciousness was from unconsciousness to personal consciousness and then to spiritual consciousness. He recommended this practice highly and it represents the essence of consciousness work in Psychosynthesis and many kindred disciplines — we “wake up” from our various “sleeps”, or identifications/attachments, and transcend them in order to become more connected, more aware, more our true selves.

These first two awakenings have been both central and sufficient to psycho-spiritual work until recently, for they describe two major steps in the process of spiritual awakening and have been invaluable to countless people seeking to grow and mature spiritually. Further, they correlate with what Assagioli called “the process of psychosynthesis”, what Jung termed “individuation”, Maslow, “Self-realization”, and Erikson and the Constructive Developmentalists “Maturation”. They are the backbone of how consciousness grows and expands to include more and more of our experience and eventually to root in what Assagioli termed “the

Higher Self”: All of us know these two awakenings and have practiced them consciously for years. And even if we have not, they still happen, for Life itself tends in the direction of such awakening, and the process is deeply natural and built in, so to speak. As Jung said, “who looks outside, dreams/ who looks inside, awakens” We, as psychosynthesists, merely make this process conscious and explicit and then seek to support it in any way we can. These two awakenings are familiar territory for us, and vastly useful in the process of human maturation.

The Third Awakening

In the last years, however, I have begun to recognize, and think about, the existence of a “third awakening” which springs from the first two, but is different in focus and actual experience. This is an awakening, as a soul, or Higher Self, to the soul of the world, and our place in it, and a realization that the world, as well as oneself, is sacred. To build on Jung’s statement, it is “to look outside” again, now as an awakened soul. With this awakening comes a growing sense of one’s particular place in this sacred whole as well as one’s particular part in nourishing and protecting it. Further, this third awakening is an experience, not so much of transcendence as of descendance and incarnation. It is a movement “down and in” rather than “up and out”. Transcendence is prerequisite to it, but descendance is the principle by which it happens. It is a realization, as a Higher Self, or soul, that the world and planet also are sacred and the universe alive. David Spangler, who is developing “Incarnational Spirituality”, puts it this way-- “We are not incarnated enough. We have privileged the transpersonal; now we need to privilege the personal and hold it as equally sacred.”

The attributes of this third awakening are quite distinct.

First, it is very kinesthetic and comes through the body and direct experience rather than through the mind and feelings, although these resonate with it. It is a visceral and vital awakening.

Second, it comes through a growing sense of real work in the world rather than just spiritual consciousness, no matter how pure and powerful. It is the realization of a part to play in the larger whole of Life on earth.

Third, it tends to come through the collective, or group consciousness, and brings us an experience of our bond with others who are at work in the same way, and our relationship with all beings on earth. It is an experience of the inherent interdependence of all Life.

I have two examples of this experience—one personal, one collective. The personal one is the story of our younger son, Ben, who at one point when he was a teenager, as we were sitting at the kitchen table, asked me to tell him about my work. I, of course, loved this rare opportunity and spoke passionately about the soul and spiritual development. He listened respectfully and then said at the end “ I understand all that. I’m going to do something else”. And this intention has led to his being a builder and building straw bale houses on Indian reservations.

The second is the Peoples Climate March in September of last year. This was a huge collective event, initiated by 350.Org and Avaaz, both of whom have email lists of hundreds of thousands of people all over the world. 400,000 people marched in New York City and marches were held simultaneously all around the globe at the same time. The placards were not about consciousness, they were about action, and there was a great joy among the marchers in demanding action and taking action themselves on climate change.

And yet, at the same time, at 12:55 there was a planned call for silence in memory of all those people and plants and animals that had already suffered from climate change, and would you believe it! right on time the 400,000 people fell silent, raised their hands and held each others', looked to the earth, and remembered. Then, at 1 PM sharp the most incredible roar swept through the marchers, down Central Park West, across 58th street and down 6th avenue to 14th street. Bells, horns, voices, trumpets rang out to sound the alarm about climate change, and this powerful cacophony was heard by the world leaders who were meeting at the UN the next day, most of whom cited the march in their speeches. This was, to my mind, a third awakening event-- very practical and engaged, and global in scope. The other two awakenings were part of the experience, but no longer the focus of it.

In these critical dark times that we are presently in as a species I sense that more and more people are experiencing this third awakening and the call to take responsibility, not only for their own life, but also for all Life on the planet. These people have experienced the first two awakenings, either deliberately, or in the course of living, and they are seeking now a way to be in the world that will confront the collective issues and contribute to the well being of the Whole, not just their particular life. This is a new development in spiritual life and a response to the times that we are living in.

The Process of Soul Awakening

All three awakenings are aspects of the universal process of spiritual awakening, and they are consonant with each other. They require, however, different means and practice and point to different outcomes in consciousness and action. Further, this third

awakening is coming to humanity at a time when it is most needed, and it is imperative that we find ways to support this experience and enable it to do its work—in human consciousness and consequent behavior. It is a central aspect of the next step in the maturation of the species and an antidote to the range of crises that we are dealing with at present. Indeed, at this time on earth, as individuals and as a species, I believe we are being asked to “wake up” to the realities of planetary life and to come into a new relationship to them. It is not enough to be Self-realized, though this is an important step. Rather we are being asked to take this Self-realization and bring it directly and powerfully to bear in the world and on collective Life.

We are, truly, at a critical moment in our history as a species on the planet earth. Crises are rampant, systems are breaking down, and though there is growing response to these conditions, the outcome is still uncertain and there are no guarantees that we will come through to a new and better world. There are many who are still unaware of this situation, and many who deny and resist it and affirm the status quo. There are some even who are exploiting the uncertainty for their own gain. Yet there are also a growing number of people who are aware of, and awake to, this quickening, and who are rolling up their sleeves and getting to work on whatever needs to be done to support the birth. Need and opportunity exist at all levels and work at any level can help, if it is done in the spirit of the needed changes. The third awakening is a means to this process of transformation and the maturation of the human species.

Further Attributes

There are six more attributes of this third awakening in human consciousness that I want to mention briefly. The first is perhaps the most obvious, that we are being asked to conceive of our lives within the context of the planet as a whole. Global is local and visa versa—in our communication systems, our economies, and increasingly our politics and cultural life. We are all, whether we like it or not, planetary citizens and a world community.

The second is less obvious. It is emerging in people's experience as a new spirituality that is focused on the earth rather than heaven, or nirvana, on life here now rather than the afterlife, and on living ethically and morally within the limits of life on earth as we know it. An interesting phenomenon in this respect is the burgeoning of the atheist gatherings in England and this country and increasingly all over the world. This is spirituality without religion, stressing human community and humanistic values and affirming the earth as our spiritual home rather than heaven.

The third is that this awakening is a process rather than a state of consciousness, and is continually expanding and deepening into Life. It is rooted in a living universe that is expanding constantly, and we need to keep pace with this rate of change in our own lives.

The fourth is that this awakening embraces both light and dark, joy and suffering as equal and all needed in the complexity of the realization of who we are as souls on earth. Its focus is on "human wholeness" and an experience of being alive that can hold all dimensions of our human experience and work with them in ourselves and others.

The fifth is that this awakening brings joy in being on earth through facing directly the adversities and challenges that confront us on the planet now. As we awaken, we become truly at home on earth and take our particular place and do our part as souls in the

needed maturation work of the species. Heaven, or hell, are here now, and we awake to the fact that we make Life what it is with our choices and our actions, rooted in our Higher Self, or soul.

The sixth is the emergence of a new image of humanity on earth—not the one of dominance and control, but of community participation and caring for the earth, each other, and all beings. It's as if the Divine is right here among us rather than off in the distance, and also that, as the Hopi Prophecy says, “We are the ones we have been waiting for.” We are divine and so is the world we inhabit and we are responsible for caring for it and each other. There is no one “out there” who will save us. As Martin Luther King said, “we will either learn to love each other as brothers and sisters, or we will perish as fools.”

The Higher Self

In terms of the topic of this conference, I think that those of us who took the Higher Self off of the top of the egg diagram were sensing this emergence of the third awakening. We were feeling the limits of transcendence and wanting more and more of human experience at all levels to be included and “held” by the Self. Our sense was that the Self was being asked to descend and incarnate more fully, and that transcendence alone, no matter how useful, was limited and needed to be complemented by this new principle of “descendence”. And in fact, if you read Assagioli closely, he is totally in accord with this movement, and all his work on the will points to this descent into action.

The Higher Self, certainly, can stay at the top of the oval diagram and this still can happen. The point is to include all three awakenings and support people wherever they are in the awakening process. People can't be forced to go beyond where

they are, nor can they be held back, once they see where they want to go. The value of making the third awakening explicit is that it gives permission and accords dignity to what is already happening and provides the Higher Self a ground and a context for action in the world. My suggestion is that we embrace the complexity of the process and not quibble over diagrams. Different people will approach the diagram in different ways, and we can work out these differences in the light of the common human process of awakening that underlies them.

“Go slow to go fast”

This process of awakening is hard, slow work--one step at a time. The thing to do is to recognize the step you want and need to take and then take it, embracing as you do the complexity, beauty, and suffering of life on earth now. This brings a spiritual perspective that is neither mystical, nor militant, but is a conscious human maturity, fully grounded in the particulars of one's place and part in daily life.

At this time I sense that more and more people are taking the step described here as the third awakening. This is where the edge of consciousness growth is now. For, think about this. All our global problems can be seen to stem from human consciousness immaturity, and that in these present crises, which spring from our collective unconsciousness, we are being asked as a species to grow up, to realize our full potential and to let go of the more immature and violent ways of dealing with each other and the earth we share. This development is, in fact, inevitable, but it can come about with greater or lesser cost and suffering. This difference is up to us--individuals, groups, nations and the species as a whole.

Listen to Assagioli on this point. This first statement is from an interview with him in the last years of his life.

“Meanwhile, although I have not the slightest fear of death (simply because I do not believe in its existence) I hope to have still a few years ahead in which to live in this most interesting, although rather uncomfortable, period and to continue doing my small part on the great work of building ‘the new city of humanity’.”

And here are two passages from his book Psychosynthesis:

“Let us feel and obey the urge aroused by the great need of healing the serious ills which at present are affecting humanity: Let us realize the contribution we can make to the creation of a new civilization, characterized by harmonious integration and cooperation, pervaded by the spirit of synthesis.” Page 9

“From a still wider and more comprehensive point of view, universal life itself appears to us as a struggle between multiplicity and unity—a labor and an aspiration toward union. We seem to sense that—whether we conceive it as a divine Being or as cosmic energy—the Spirit working upon and within all creation is shaping it into order, harmony, and beauty, uniting all beings (some willing, but the majority as yet blind and rebellious) with each other through links of love, achieving—slowly and silently, but powerfully and irresistibly—the Supreme Synthesis.” Page 31

Assagioli was fond of saying to his students, “Go slow to go fast”. There is urgency, and there is time, all at once, here and now.

He also used to talk about working “under the aspect of eternity” and taking the time that is truly needed without rushing and pushing ourselves. “Make haste slowly” was another one of his favorite adages. And yet, as Joanna Macy says, “there is no time not to love.”

Here and Now

So here we are. Take a look around the room and see who is here with you. Each and all of us have a place in this process of awakening of the species and a part to play in working to change the way we live on earth so that all beings can survive and thrive. There is no God out there who will save us, or do it for us. There is no world leader who will do it for us. There is nowhere else to go but right here now in the hell, or heaven, we make with our choices and our lives. Think about it and consider your life and work in this light. All of us are needed, all of us are growing, and it is only a question of will we awaken enough and in time to make the difference.

I want to close with a period of silence and reflection on just this question. Where are you now and where do you sense you are called to go with your life and work? I’d like to take five minutes of silence with this and then end with the ringing of the bell. After that, in the time remaining, we will have a dialogue and a chance to reflect together on this experience of the Third Awakening.

Thank you for being here, for listening, and for being the people you are.

Thomas Yeomans, Ph.D.

