

Occasional Note #10 Descent of the Higher Self

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History

In 1910, Roberto Assagioli proposed a then radical vision of human nature that included the Higher, or Spiritual, Self and began to elaborate the basic principles of his contribution to the field of psychology, Psychosynthesis. This was long before the field contained any acceptance of, or interest in, the spiritual dimension and its integration with the psychological and physical dimensions—the one exception being the work of C. G. Jung. Assagioli was far ahead of his time, and it was only in the latter half of the 20th century that psychology began to acknowledge, and work with, the spiritual dimension of human experience.

Now, at the beginning of the 21st century, the principles and practices of Psychosynthesis are increasingly widespread within psychology and in mainstream culture, although their source is not always acknowledged nor made explicit. Frank Haronian, one of Assagioli's first associates in the United States, said shortly before his death in 1994, "Roberto would be so pleased because the basic principles of Psychosynthesis are being used widely in the culture."

Indeed, Assagioli's Psychosynthesis has developed over these 100 years and is now used, implicitly or explicitly, in many fields in many countries to support the psychological and spiritual development of human beings. Its basic principles have withstood the test of time, and the field has grown and evolved to include developments in other areas of psychology. For example, much more is known now about personality dynamics and structure, the unconscious, trauma, addiction, attachment, and a host of other issues than in 1910. The practice of Psychosynthesis, at its best, has incorporated these more recent innovations into its understanding of the personality and its relationship to the Higher Self.

Furthermore, over this same period, as spirituality has become a mainstream concern, and practices from many traditions have been increasingly used in psychological work to evoke and integrate the spiritual dimension with the psychological, the field of Psychosynthesis has expanded to include these also. An example is the Buddhist practice of mindfulness.

In short, what Assagioli envisioned in essence in 1910 has come to pass, and, in turn, over these 100 years, Psychosynthesis has been broadened and deepened significantly by developments in other fields. This has yielded an increasingly complex and differentiated model of the spectrum of human experience and the process of psycho-spiritual development—cause for celebration and praise for the hard work of several generations in this field over the past century.

Innovations

And still there is more to be done as humanity continues to evolve and the world to change. Psychosynthesis, like all other fields, needs to continue to grow. And this is even

more pressing now, for at this point in history, we are in the midst of particularly intense crisis and change in which old ways of living are dying and new ways are being born. Joanna Macy refers to this time as “the Great Turning” and there are many who describe it as one of cataclysmic upheaval, death, and rebirth.

In this regard there are aspects of Psychosynthesis that we have outgrown and are now obsolete. There are also aspects that have not yet received sufficient attention. And there are new principles that are still emerging. As life on earth evolves and changes, so do the ways in which we support and nurture it. In this note I want to focus on two “edges” of the field that are still nascent. The first is the somewhat neglected principle of “the process of psychosynthesis” and the second is the emerging principle of “descendence.”

The Process of Psychosynthesis

Assagioli made a distinction early on between “Psychosynthesis” with a capital “P” and “psychosynthesis” with a small “p”. The upper case version consisted of a growing compendium of theory and practice; the lower case was the natural process of bio-psycho-spiritual integration and synthesis by which the Higher Self builds, guides, and infuses the personality and personal life. Assagioli posited this “process of psychosynthesis” as inherent in all human beings, guided by the Higher Self, and always moving naturally toward an increasing experience of integration, maturity, and Self-expression. Obviously, this process can be blocked and stunted in many ways, and it can also be liberated and nourished. The work of Psychosynthesis was to do the latter.

Jung’s term for this natural process was “individuation;” Maslow’s was “self-actualization/realization,” and more traditional psychology’s, “maturation.” Albert Szent-Györgyi talked about the “drive in living matter to perfect itself,” and Teilhard de Chardin termed this cosmically as the evolution toward the “Omega Point.” It is a natural “built-in” process that has many phases, stages, and dimensions, and is seen as universal and at work on all levels—person to planet.

Over the years, I believe that this principle has not received sufficient attention within Psychosynthesis, and yet it underlies the whole endeavor. I therefore want to highlight it here; perhaps this “process of psychosynthesis” (with a small “p”) could be a common focus for our future work. There have been many debates as to which principles, or practices, were “legitimate” Psychosynthesis and which were not. This focus on the natural process would shift our preoccupation with orthodox method, or technique, or even principle, to this universal human process. In that case, any technique, method, or principle, if rightly applied, would support it; and any technique, method, or principle—even “psychosynthetic” ones, used misguidedly, or rigidly—would slow and stunt it.

Further, this shift of focus leaves room for the particularity of support for each individual, or group; and indeed, methods and techniques can emerge “on the spot” that will be far more effective than the techniques that are known and traditional. The experience of the process itself, in fact, will show us just what to do. Assagioli himself said, “For one person, one thing: for another quite the opposite.” I believe that if we can shift the focus of our work from familiar theories and accustomed techniques to an immediate sensitivity to the natural “process of psychosynthesis,” and learn to support that process skillfully, using whatever works, it will open the whole field to new energy, creativity, and usefulness.

Everything we know can be used, but the context is different, and the organizing principle is the living experiential process itself, changing moment to moment, rather than certain stated principles and familiar techniques. The work, then, becomes alive and creative and can adapt to, and more easily respond to, the changing conditions of human life on earth. I like to think of this process of psychosynthesis as “Life living itself more deeply.” When we work directly with it, we become midwives to the natural process of development, and our responsibility and efforts are focused on how to nurture it as it unfolds and how to remove the blocks that always exist to its flow, *using whatever works*.

Note that the practice of presence becomes central to this shift in orientation, and also the skill of staying very close to the immediate experience of oneself, or a client, or group, and working with it in the here and now. To these core practices is then brought whatever principle, method, or technique best supports in that moment the process’ natural flow.

Collaboration with Process

If we make this shift in context, and bring the process of psychosynthesis to the foreground in our work, then the emphasis falls on what is already happening in a person’s experience rather than on making something happen, or keeping something from happening. We thus become collaborators with the Higher Self that is seen now as the organizing principle of the flow of experience and the process. In so doing, we affirm the particularity and uniqueness of each person and the process by which he or she is emerging and growing at this moment and over time. We exchange our knowing for certain what is going on, and what a person needs, for a close attention to what is happening within them and in their life. Our focus then changes to how we can best support that.

Of course, the traditional principles and techniques of Psychosynthesis are still useful, but the figure/ground has shifted. What becomes most important is not what we do as much as how present we are to the natural process of psychosynthesis that is occurring before our very eyes. Any school of thought and practice can be useful in this way of working with oneself and others, and some “psychosynthetic” practices may not be that useful at any particular moment. *The point is to stay close to the actual experience that is unfolding and to trust that this is exactly what is needed at this moment for the next steps in the realization of the Higher Self.*

This is one fundamental innovation that I am proposing. It is related to, and prerequisite for, the second innovation I want to propose now.

Descendence

This is the new principle of “descendence.” This principle is complementary to the more familiar one of “transcendence” and I want to introduce it through speaking of transcendence in both its strengths and limitations.

The strengths of transcendence are clear. It works to help shift identification from sub-personalities, or complexes, to the “I” and then to the Higher Self. It brings perspective in consciousness and wisdom in thought and feeling. It is the basic principle that supports the process of awakening, that synthesizes polarities, that develops a center of awareness, and that moves our consciousness toward larger and larger wholes, so that eventually we

are able to experience microcosm and macrocosm as one vital entity and being. These strengths are familiar to all of us.

Its limitations lie in its use for “premature transcendence,” wherein a person steps back from an experience without first fully engaging in, and accepting, it. Premature transcendence can be used for dissociation, denial and disembodiment, and for rising above “disowned” experience and then rationalizing this in terms of transcending it. It can lead to general ungroundedness, disconnection, and an emphasis on consciousness expansion without concomitant behavior change.

The principle of descendance is implied in Assagioli’s stages of the will, and his idea of will work, but it is not made explicit. This is the principle that underlies the process of incarnation and the Higher Self’s descent into the personality and personal life. It is the principle behind the Higher Self’s infusion of the personality with its vitality and force, and its full embodiment in everyday being and behavior. It is also the principle that works toward the experience of full aliveness and the very particular expression of our spiritual will, or calling, in daily life.

Obviously, both principles are needed to support the process of psychosynthesis I spoke of earlier and the development of psychological and spiritual maturity. I am not proposing a polarization, but rather a complementarity that will better support the process of human development in this new century. Assagioli often said, “Psychoanalysis precedes Psychosynthesis,” and perhaps we could say here, “transcendence precedes descendance.” We need to be able to transcend in order to get perspective and to build a stronger and deeper connection to who we, in essence, are, *but then* we need to descend in order to make ourselves fully realized and known in the world. We need to contact the Higher Self through transcendence *and* we need to ground and express the Higher Self through descendance. *In short, full spiritual maturity is not real until the Higher Self has come fully down to earth, so to speak, and its energies are manifest and functional in daily personal living. Who we most deeply are has to be grounded in our particular personhood, including our bodies, and in our behavior, and in the everyday world.*

I believe that this explicit inclusion of the principle of descendance and its complementarity with the principle of transcendence deepens our understanding of the process of psychosynthesis and enables us to work more effectively with it. It also enables us to respond more fully to the needs of people at this time of global crisis and to cooperate with the immense changes that are happening on the planet. It allows us to rebalance our vision of how human development proceeds and to include more emphatically the presence and energies of the Higher Self in daily life. It is in this meaning that the title of this note is *The Descent of the Higher Self*. Consciousness alone is not enough, valuable as it is. We need to behave differently and better as human beings. For, as Martin Luther King said, “We will either learn to love each other as brothers and sisters, or we will perish as fools.”

David Spangler says it this way; that we are not “incarnated enough.” We may have the higher consciousness, but we are not yet fully enough in the world with it. He sees us as halfway incarnated, and needing to ground more fully our spiritual energies in everyday life. He also speaks of “privileging the personal as we have privileged the transpersonal.” And particularly at this time of global crisis, I think we are being asked to “show up” more fully, “to put our soul where our living is,” or, in Psychosynthesis terms,

to be sure that personal and spiritual wills are fully aligned and that the energies of the Higher Self are present in our personhood right here on earth.

In this light, I have found the chart below useful in filling out this complementarity. The items on the left are the transpersonal, or spiritual; those on the right are the personal, and both are at work within the process of psychosynthesis, as discussed earlier.

**The Process of Psychosynthesis:
Complementary Dimensions**

Process of Awakening	Process of Incarnation
Series of Awakenings	Series of Vitalizations
Transcendence	Descendence
Self-Realization (Universal)	Self-Realization (Unique)
Ascent	Descent
Perspective	Participation
Toward Light	Toward Darkness
Excarnation	Incarnation
Ecstatic	Instatic
Transpersonal Union	Personal Union
Privilege the Transpersonal	Privilege the Personal
Self-identification	Self-infusion
Fully Aware	Fully Alive
Sacred Self	Sacred Planet
Heaven Beyond	Heaven Here Now
Extraordinary Life	Ordinary Life
Reorganize Forms to Know Self	Reorganize Forms to Express Self
Uncommon Beauty	Common Beauty

Implications

If we accept this complementarity of transcendence and descendance, and the inclusion of a new principle with an old, there are a number of implications for our work, both with ourselves and with others.

The first is that the “direction” of the process of human maturation is into the world rather than away from, or above, it. Rather than conceiving of life as a journey to the Higher Self we can see it as the Higher Self coming more and more into ordinary life. In fact, it is helpful to think of the Higher Self as present in daily life from the very beginning, with the connection to this spiritual core then being wounded and attenuated by trauma, circumstance, and/or enculturation. John Firman and Ann Gila refer to this as the “primal wound” and I have used the term “soul wound” in my writing.

Early in life, if not in utero, there can be “loss of soul” and consequent acute, or chronic, disconnection from this source of being, meaning, and direction within us. As we work to heal this wound and restore the connection, we also are working to help the Higher Self descend and incarnate fully. There are many phases and stages to this work, but the outcome we seek is full incarnation of our spiritual force, qualities, and calling in the present moment within the context of our daily life. Our life development can therefore be seen as a journey of the Higher Self to full incarnation in the world *as well as* an awakening to this spiritual center within us.

A second implication is that in this process of incarnation experiences of darkness are of equal value to those of light. This darkness may be our own suffering, our unconscious or that of others, or darkness in the world, including the presence of evil. All this needs to be confronted and worked with, not just as a block to the process of maturation, but rather as the very means of spiritual incarnation. We need to learn, as Higher Selves, to embrace the full spectrum of our human experience, dark and light, in order to realize the full maturity and power of our ordinary lives. Our dark places are as much teachers as our light, and the Higher Self, in fact, needs them in order to be fully realized.

A third implication is that the emphasis in psycho-spiritual work shifts to ordinary life and away from special and heightened living. The ordinary *is* the extraordinary, and is the means by which the Higher Self comes fully into the world. Without all the details of existence, and the particularity of any one life, the Higher Self remains abstracted, ungrounded, and incomplete. This can lead to a hidden form of spiritual suffering where there is consciousness of the Higher Self, but not sufficient practical grounding in the real world. It can lead, in the worst case, to cult development and infantile regression in the name of spiritual life. Dorothy Maclean, one of the founders of Findhorn, once said to me, “There is nothing but ordinary life,” and what she meant was that the proof of the Higher Self is in the living of its energies in daily existence.

A fourth implication is that life-vitality, rather than meaning, becomes the focus for spiritual work. In an interview between Bill Moyers and Joseph Campbell, Moyers asked Campbell, “Isn’t it true that all people are looking for an experience of meaning?” And Joseph Campbell replied, “No, Bill, people are looking for an experience of being fully alive—the rapture of being fully alive.” In saying this he is speaking of the vitality and force of the Higher Self when we are in touch with it. From this vitality follow many things—meaning, purpose, direction, qualities, choices—but the root experience of our

core is full aliveness of being and a vital life force—one that flows through us from the universe and enters the world through our being and actions.

It is this vital force that becomes impaired and weakened by the soul wound. Through this trauma, which may happen as early as birth and usually in the early years, our confidence in this force is undermined and we cease to trust it. Rather, we settle for other sources of motive and develop ways that are attempts to feel more belonging, or control, or happiness, and that enable us to fit into whatever prevailing life conditions we find ourselves in. As I have said, personality development can be seen from this perspective as the attempt to buffer this loss of soul force and compensate for it in any number of ways—some functional, some not. Addictive behavior is often rooted in a compensation for this soul wound and an attempt to replicate the experience of spiritual force through artificial means. This is all quite possible, and, in some cases, the culture—be it of family, peers, or society—encourages these compensations as the “norm.”

Conversely, if we focus on the life force of the Higher Self, then the work becomes to liberate, channel, and ground this spiritual force through the agency of the personality in the world. The work becomes recognizing and cultivating the experiences of this life force in us or in others, removing the blocks to its flow, and finding the forms through which it can flow into the world. This is very particular work, for each person’s life force will manifest differently and uniquely. There are no general rules for the incarnation of the Higher Self, and paradoxically, it is in our very particularity that we are most joined with all Life. This is what I believe Joseph Campbell meant when he advised us to “follow your bliss.”

A fifth implication is that, although we are universal beings at core, how this is realized is through the details of our immediate life. Particular then becomes foreground to universal, and we need only pay attention to exactly where we are and what our experience is, and the rest—the universal—will take care of itself. In other words, we experience most fully our connection with ourselves, others, and all life through the experience of our incarnated particularity, the uniqueness of our given life. I often express this idea in the following way:

The stunning paradox of human spiritual maturity is that, as we become one with all Life, we also at the same time become completely and uniquely ourselves.

Finally, a root implication that underlies all these is that immediate experience becomes prime over any theory, or understanding. Direct experience is the teacher rather than any ideas about experience. The process of psychosynthesis works directly with, and through, our experience, and the Higher Self becomes incarnated fully in our experience—body, feelings, and mind. Too often, without the principle of descendance, and with the emphasis on theory and understanding, the Higher Self remains an idea, or abstraction, very wonderful, but without ground. With the inclusion of descendance and its complementarity with transcendence, we get both the numinous experience of the Higher Self *and* its earthy manifestation in the details of daily life. This is, in Assagioli’s terms, the complete alignment of the spiritual and the personal wills, which leads to a mature and effective human life on earth.

Conclusion

In this note, I have proposed a greater consideration of the natural process of psychosynthesis as a central focus of work in Psychosynthesis, as well as the recognition and inclusion of a new principle, descendance. Both give us a way, within direct and immediate experience, to explore the dynamics of Self-incarnation and spiritual descendance. They give us a new dimension of psycho-spiritual development and maturation that can complement the more familiar dynamics of Self-identification and spiritual transcendence. *Transcendence is certainly prerequisite for incarnation, but without a full descent of the Higher Self into our bodies, personalities, and daily life, full Self-realization is impossible.*

These innovations are offered in the spirit of the massive change that is occurring on the planet now, and in the recognition that Psychosynthesis needs to keep growing in order to keep pace with these changes and to contribute to their success. Psychosynthesis has served the last 100 years well, and if it stays alive and growing, it can serve the next 100 equally as well. Assagioli was fond of saying, "From the eternal, out of the past, in the present, for the future."

Wherever you are on the planet, dear reader, I wish you well in your very particular life and work.

Warmly,
Tom