



# **PSYCHOSYNTHESIS**

**QUARTERLY**

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**The Digital Magazine of the Association for the Advancement of Psychosynthesis**

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**Child Psychosynthesis and Child Psychotherapy —Martin Kolev**

**Reconnecting the Personal Self with the Higher Self — Journeying with Dante — Catherine Ann Lombard and Kees den Biesen**

**The Vulnerability Model and Psychosynthesis — Richard Schaub**

**The Risk of Living Deeply — Dorothy Firman**

**Poetry by Bonney Kuniholm and Shamaï Currim**

**A Review of *The More Beautiful World Our Hearts Know is Possible***

**The Farther Reaches of Life Coaching**

**A Week Without Judgment**

**The AAP 2015 International Conference, August 5-9, in Montréal**

***And more . . .***

# Psychosynthesis Quarterly

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## EDITOR'S NOTES

We will be attending the AAP International Conference in Montréal in August, and we hope you will be there, and encourage your colleagues to come! The conference will explore a core concept of psychosynthesis (Self) and may provide you with exciting new experiences and tools to use personally and professionally.

Because of the conference, the submittal deadline for the September issue of *Psychosynthesis Quarterly* will be extended to **August 15**. We hope you will find time to write about your thoughts and experiences, and share them with the psychosynthesis community.

This issue includes a fascinating look into the art of working with a child, presented by our Bulgarian colleague Martin Kolev.

Also Richard Schaub explores aspects of the application of the Vulnerability Model developed by Bonney and Richard Schaub.

Catherine Ann Lombard and Kees den Biesen take us alongside Dante, through the *Inferno* and into self-discovery; Didi Firman invites us to take a risk worth taking: to live deeply; and Abigail DeSoto invites us to “a week without judgment.”

Poems by Bonney Kuniholm and Shama Currim open our eyes and hearts.

Enjoy!

Jan Kuniholm





**Be Your  
True Self:  
Discovering Inner  
Resources**

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- Mark Horowitz, MA
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- Thomas Yeomans, PhD, of *The Concord Institute*.
- And Many Others



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## Child Psychosynthesis and Child Psychotherapy: A Case Study Martin Kolev

*“Every child is an artist. The problem is staying an artist when you grow up”  
- Pablo Picasso*

*In loving memory of my brother.*

The primary idea for this case is my restless interest in human development and each person’s ability to cope with different blocks and problems along the way—both as a process and as a manifestation. This case presentation came from the process I’ve been engaged in for the past three years: expanding the psychosynthesis perspective into child psychotherapy.

The contemporary overemphasis of some therapies to describe people as psychopathologies (where this is a fact) is leading us to a vast milling of theories and systems that aim for almost the exact same thing—human development, health and well-being through unification—but strangely, the exact same theories divide themselves into sub-theories with incredible speed. This leads professionals to become eclectic (mixing with no specific center to use as a balance point) rather than synthetic (synthesizing with a center of stability and awareness). Of course, emphasis on psychopathology can give us explanations; however, including the healthier parts of the human being and integrating them in a unifying way can give us results whose effects have the potential to reside into our own existential reality.

Psychosynthesis offers this same idea of integration and living in unison with oneself. In the following case study, I explain (to the community and to myself) my attempt at a psychosynthesis adaptation in child psychotherapy. This will include ideas about primal wounding, its effects, resulting defenses, compensations and addictive behaviors; engaging in freedom, blockages along the way, the confrontation with nonbeing and purpose; the conception of the Will, Self, subpersonalities, identification/disidentification processes and humor as a guide towards the sublime. Drawbacks in this case might be the over-schematic explanations of different ideas and insights, but I don’t aim by any means to explain a final destination for this type of work. It’s almost unnecessary to say that child/human development is a boundless ocean that has to be accepted as it is, with all the unique aspects in each individual being. So I’m trying to follow the manifesting qualities and blockages rather than to explain only how or why they are present.

### Case Information

Johnny is an eight-year-old boy referred for therapy by friends of the family after a long observation of specific and strange situations happening in the family system at home or outside of it. He is curious and active, and comes from a cross-cultural family—his father is of Turkish origin, and his mother of Bulgarian origin. The family doesn’t report any mental illness history for at least the past three generations.

Data from the interview with the parents report high levels of anxiety both in the mother and father; their main concern is that Johnny might turn out to be homosexual and is not “as capable as other children.” After a period

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of observation and therapeutic work with John, one can actually see where he is developmentally. Growing and developing mentally, emotionally and physically, he is now right where he should be, according to many theorists and practitioners who have studied child development. The following case will discuss how John manages himself in bio-psychosocial settings, as viewed from a psychosynthesis perspective.

## Assessment Information: Physical Development

*Physical development should be included in the therapeutic and observational framework with children because Roberto Assagioli himself viewed the body as an important part of the Psychosynthetic system which he in fact calls Bio-Psychosynthesis (Assagioli, 1965).*

John (J will be used hereafter) followed a normal development through the prenatal, infancy and toddler years. He was born in 2007 by cesarean section after a full-term, normal pregnancy. As a newborn, his mother breastfed him with no added formula. (When we first met, his body looked neglected, as if it was not cared for properly. Here I assume an additional hypothesis that this may be a result of the neglect and abandonment by the father in the early years, where the psychosomatic link is stronger and more unforgiving than in adults, because the parental care for the psychological well-being results in a firm foundation for the physical well-being and vice versa—but this can be reviewed in further work and assessment.)

According to the parents, he achieved all the important developmental stages and processes in spite of the fact that the father was absent from the family for almost two years. In his pre-school and early school years he acquired all the gross motor skills with ease—like running, jumping, ducking, etc. (Seidler, 2010, Humphrey, 2013). At the end of his pre-school years, a slowing down in acquiring the fine motor skills was present—cutting with scissors, playing with small objects like cubes, puzzle pieces, drawing straight lines with a pencil, etc. Dressing and undressing are no problem for him (except for zipping and unzipping) (Seidler, 2010). Interestingly enough, he is able to tie his shoes; according to the mother this skill was acquired through many “unforgiving” repetitions. Now he is able to do the above-listed things alone, but still needs practice being able to use his hands for manipulating fine materials and objects. J is right where he should be with his physical development in order to explore the world with no difficulties.

## Cognitive Development

*This part of the case and its assessment is included because good cognitive development leads to a better personality adjustment for psychological and social purposes after the personality is formed, around 13 years of age (Vygotski (1925), Piaget (1951), Matanova(2003)).*

While observing J over the past few months, I have seen his cognitive development characteristics begin to take shape and integrate themselves through his choices and achievements. His language development has progressed from babbling through constructing words, short sentences and finally to full sentences that vary adequately in length, timing and purpose of use. His overall cognitive development hits all the required milestones for his age. No special cognitive work has been needed. The cognitive tasks are used as the basis for praise of him (he seeks attention and praise for his work sometimes) because he is drawn to exercises that he himself calls “logical.”

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## Emotional/Social/Psychosexual Development

*Emotional functioning, social interaction and psychosexual development are all included (in a sense) in the concept of a Soul's manifesting chapters in life, but are also the constructing bricks of the functioning personality. That's why I chose to put them under one title and review them with connections in-between for this child and his specific needs.*

From birth onwards J was able to express a wide range of emotions, eventually naming them and understanding reflectively what they meant in the particular social situation. Speaking from an attachment theory point of view, his attachment to the mother and vice versa is an unsecured—ambivalent—one: the mother seems to have given contradictory emotional responses towards J (this may be explained by the personality difficulties the mother manifests, because of her two-year-long attempt to fill the place of Mom and Dad simultaneously). The mirroring process (Winicott, 1945) seems to have resulted in (almost) an adequate mentalizing about himself and others—meaning that J has a good potential to hold someone else's mind in his mind (Fonagy, 1993). The return of the father when J was a two-year-old activated J's phantasms about reality and about his father's image (Freud, 1915). According to the mother, J “saw someone unknown to him, and still to this day we have a father that is seen like a second adult in the family with no other function but to tell J how he should and will develop—like a true man.” This leads J to literally freeze and enter a survival personality mode (Firman and Gila, 1997) that is trying to please and understand the “second adult”; this is what I would call “loving anxiety”—the process of manifesting Love through fear that results in desperation and loss of purpose in other parts of life besides meeting the needs of one particular person—which in this case is the father. From a mentalization theory perspective, in his father's presence, J's mentalizing capacity decreases and his anxiety rises to the point where he manifests alexithymic symptoms.

Another noticeable development of J's is the ability to play with peers, and getting a sense of gender and diversity (Anna Freud, 1945). He enjoys playing games with his little brother when the father is not around; when he gets home, the little brother gets all his attention and J is left to battle with the father's comments in his thoughts and fantasies: “Your brother is a grown man despite the fact he is so small—you should learn from him... be like him.” The resulting sibling rivalry is something J is still overwhelmed by and this provokes his seeking a secure base to calm himself down in the face of women in his vicinity and women in general (Bowlby, 1973). That is why he plays almost only with girls and gives his father the impression that “...he is homosexual.” Here I allowed myself to utilize the concept of Jacques Lacan (based on S. Freud's ideas) about the Name-of-the-Father, emphasizing the importance of “...the place that she (the mother) reserves for the Name-of-the-Father in the promulgation of the law” (Lacan, 1955). This serves as a cornerstone to the process of therapy and is meant to include both parents into our work with J in order to give them the opportunity to explore their places in the psychological life of the child. This idea was expanded and developed throughout the course of therapy; the parents were invited to explore their own sub-personality structures and primal woundings in order to see how J views the family structure and his role in it. Mentalization Based Therapy was once more used to support the overall process (Fonagy et al., 1991). It turned out that in the father's family, “sex” is something almost forbidden to be spoken of, and is a subject to be explored by the children on their own “when he/she is old enough” (these cultural differences are a subject for further research). After I received this info, I gave J a book entitled “*My First Book About Sexuality*.” His reaction to the word “sex” was “What is that? Sounds weird...” The subject was almost completely unknown to him but his interest and curiosity needed to be satisfied, so we had several sessions exploring what it meant to really be a boy or a girl, where do babies come from, how they develop, etc. After the father found out about J's new knowledge, he almost dragged me aside and asked angrily “Are you mad?! How old do you think my son is? How dare you give him books that describe such things?!”

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This is not for children, you know..." It sounded almost fanatic. When I explained to the father that children also possess sexuality and manifest it in various ways, this put him in a state resembling Rodin's "The Thinker." Outcomes of this situation are still developing. The place of the father is still reserved for J to understand, repair and integrate as, symbolically "the second parent." Psychotherapist Robin Skynner expresses almost the same idea as Lacan's with his valuable insight that "the toddler has got to see that Mum isn't God as a first step to seeing that Dad isn't God, and that...he's part of something bigger too" (Skynner, 1984). This concept may be included in future psychosynthesis work with children for symbolic distinction between self, Superego and Higher Self that I don't have any specific experience with.

## Development of Beliefs

*As belief development is strongly neglected in psychological thought, there are some researchers who deal with this topic with unconditional trust. Here I will briefly follow several theorists' ideas and try to conceptualize the functioning model for this specific case.*

In their book "*Religion and Spirituality in Childhood and Adolescence*," Lisa Bridges and Kristin Moore gather ideas and concepts from authors who have seen children's spirituality as a source of healthy development, as well as a source of mental disturbances if not managed properly. One such author is Fritz Oser, whose theory focuses on stages in the development of religious judgment. Oser defines religious judgment as "... reasoning that relates reality as experienced to something beyond reality and that serves to provide meaning and direction beyond learned content..." (Oser, 1991). Oser was particularly interested in developmental changes in the explanations that children and adults have for experiences, both personal and observed, that appear to be contrary to religious beliefs. Religious judgments thus involve the answers that individuals find for themselves that reconcile religious faith with reality that appears to contradict that faith.

Because of John's cross-cultural, cross-religious background, he is in a state of vertigo and confusion about what is good to believe in and what is not. His religious judgment goes beyond family traditions, but is still not developed as a life-serving principle. He can explain different personal experiences of compassion, love, courage and so on, but can't rely on them because of family traditions that postulate that one can only believe in what his parents believe. Things get rough when we add to this the cross-cultural religious views from both sides of the family—Christian and Muslim. For example, he knows that there is good and bad, a place where good people go, and a place where the bad ones go. They have no nomination or manifestation in his belief—or at least it looks this way because of the confusion of the two-way "rituals" the parents do with him since birth without explaining what they are meant to stand for: baptism, but also the Muslim equivalent of it (*wudu* and *ghusl*); eating various foods according to Christian beliefs, but at the same time denying them according to Muslim beliefs, and so on. This situation means that the psychosynthesis idea of healing the lower and middle parts of one's personality before attending to the transpersonal is more than adequate with children. This doesn't mean that J's beliefs are to be neglected; more likely they need space and right timing to be found, structured and manifested.

As our work began it was just a matter of freeing space and time for Johnny to expand his awareness and knowledge about the "unexplainable" things happening around him. His questions were regarding the structure of the family system, and how its past might affect its future. Following a feedback given to the parents after our sessions, it turned out that the father had been absent for almost two years, so the care for Johnny was given to his mother and his two grandmothers right from birth. After the father returned to the family he already had an idea for a second child. Now Johnny's brother is four years old. The mother reports that "...the little one is

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really occupying his father's time—they are the first pair in our family, and me with Johnny—the second.” Utilizing this additional information, I changed the sessions with J to explorations of his inner resources and his abilities to cope with the neglect from his father. He really liked drawing, but he never liked what he drew. During one of our sessions he said, “I like drawing, but it always looks awful . . . I want to learn how to do it! Can you teach me?” This last question opened the gate for me to try to adapt techniques from my psychosynthesis work with adults to children.

Here I'll include the full dialogue regarding the idea of social roles or subpersonalities:

Martin: “You know how we all have different “costumes” that we wear for different occasions...”

Johnny: “Like track-suits, tuxedos or old clothes we wear when we clean the house?”

M: “Exactly! And I think that it's better to consider the thing that you are doing with your outfit. What do you think?”

J: “Can you repeat the question?”

M: “Yes. I'll give you an example. How would you honestly react if you see someone running on track wearing a tuxedo?”

J: “Haha! This is funny.”

M: “Because...?”

J: “Because that will look weird and crazy! Haha!”

M: “Maybe you're right. And what if he wants to change this crazy thing and get things straight?”

J: “He'll have to wear something else. At least shorts and sneakers... But if he's hairy like dad he'll surely have to wear a t-shirt. Otherwise my eyes will melt. Haha...”

M: “Haha—we'll continue with body hair some other time. So, back to our guy with the tuxedo on the track. If we give him shorts, sneakers and a t-shirt what will happen?”

(We really continued with “body hair” and “hairy like dad” in another session. This had to be done in order to free the energies engaged in his anxiety of punishment by his father. For the purpose of this article I will just outline it.)

J heard several times his father saying to his mother “Why is he doing these things?! Why is he playing dumb?! He's trying to separate us—I'm sure...” After J expressed his fears of being punished or abandoned, we agreed that it's much easier if you tell or ask someone about something that you need to know. He did it with his “son outfit” and established a better dialogue with his father that was much needed.

J: “He'll be able to train and run without looking funny.”

M: “That's right, but I think that if we give him these things, he'll just hold them in his hands and do nothing.”

J: “Why is that?”

M: “I'm just assuming that he doesn't know how to put them on. Sports equipment is a very specific type of clothing—I think that not everyone knows how to ‘use’ it.”

J: “You're making things too hard...”

M: “I know, but it's up to us to resolve it the easy way. What can we do to help our guy get his costume on? Remember, we assume that he doesn't know how to put it on.”

J: “We'll put it on for him.”

M: “That's one way to do it, but he'll get used to our help and not do it by himself if this continues.”

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(Here I was probing for the learned helplessness that is so very common in children with learning difficulties).

J: "It won't continue. After we show him how to do it he'll start doing it by himself next time, and the one after that..."

M: "How do you suggest we do it?"

J: "First he has to untie his shoes, than get off his trousers, coat and so on. When he is left in his underwear he can put the equipment on and start running."

M: "How do you put your equipment on? I don't understand..."

J: "Ugh... You know... Put one sneaker on, tie it, put the second one on, tie it again, then get in your shorts, your t-shirt on, your headband, earphones, iPod and go. Is it really that difficult?!"

(J's last explanation of how things must be done shows how the external example of a subpersonality gets internalized gradually by referring from "his" to "your," going through the stages of willingly executing his conceptions. My assumption is that for a brief moment Johnny got in touch with the "I-Thou" connection (Buber, 1923). In this particular situation the "I-Thou" link might be aligned with the learning process of "approximal development." In Lev Vygotsky's idea this is "...the distance between the actual development level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance, or in collaboration with more capable peers" (Vygotsky, 1987).

M: "Now I'm pretty sure the guy knows how to get out of the tuxedo and get his sportswear on."

(I must point out that the two main things happening here correspond (in my mind) to the Act of Will technique, part of the subpersonalities idea and part of the identification /disidentification idea.)

J: "And won't look weird... Duh."

M: "Yes. And I think he can do things easily now. How we can call this guy?"

J: "Johnny the Runner!"

M: "Sounds good. He wasn't quite a runner at the beginning though."

J: "Well... he is now."

M: "Okay. Let's try and do the same thing with your drawing."

J: "How?!"

M: "We'll see what's getting in your way."

Here we ran out of time and the work was transferred for next week. His homework was connected with this previous outline that we made together so he was more than eager to try and see if he could draw something and monitor his difficulties along the way.

Next session he entered the room with his hands behind his back. It was obvious he was holding a sheet of paper with a drawing.

J: "Guess what I have here..."

M: "I don't know. What is it?"

J: "Look!"



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The picture attached above demonstrates his way of drawing. Because he is left-handed, handwritten text or drawings with pencil/colors/crayons get smudged by his palm from the movement from left to right. I was really surprised how he came to this idea, so I asked. One of the adapted psychosynthesis principles can be seen here: with adults it is good for them to evoke, register and expand awareness; with children the corresponding method is to provoke curiosity and hunger for knowledge in every sense of the word. This way the sensory filter of the kid opens wide and he/she expresses joy (which often leads to the therapist “Joy” being drawn out to play), fulfillment and purpose—he/she develops. In addition, a connection between the emotional and social functioning can be seen here: when curiosity leads to positive emotional response, the mentalizing capacity goes up—meaning that the social factors and markers are read better.

M: “Looks really nice! You used the rubber to draw, right?”

J: “Yes. And I have at least 10 more at home. This one is for you!”

After a small chat about how he is and a good laugh, he said something that I think is a very good explanation of what happened for him.

J: “Other kids laugh at me because I have shaky hands and every time we draw in class I have drawings made of lightnings...”

M: “How does that make you feel?”

J: “Sad...”

M: “You do sound sad. But what if someone likes lightning-like lines in your drawings?”

J: “No one does! And when they start laughing at me my hands start to shake even more.”

M: “You get scared?”

(Here I tried to defy his explanation and see if it gets corrected.)

J: “No! I’m not scared!”

M: “I know that people shake when they are scared. What is your version of that then?”

J: “I don’t know... I feel bad... I don’t know.”

(As I was seeing how he was getting upset I tried to change the topic. Parents report that he gets more and more upset in these situations until in the end he ends up in tears and leaves the room.)

M: “Okay, so how did you do this drawing?”

J: “I devised a plan. Like a mad scientist. Ha-ha-ha-ha. (Evil laughter) I will use the rubber not to erase but to draw. Haaa-haaa-haaa! (Stands up holding the rubber in hand pointed towards the sky).”

(This specific idea works as a balancing polarities experience for him—and even if I am wrong about that, he was making progress with it. Identifying with one more sub-personality, using its qualities and “devising a plan” were the things that I would rely on in this session. This was the session that showed me how much fun this process was, despite the fact that it was new and unknown to me.)

M: “Hold still, Mad Scientist! Please don’t move.”

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J: “What happened?”

M: “Something happened—you got in your mad scientist “suit”.”

J: “But I don’t have an apron...”

M: “So why did you tell me that you devised a plan as a mad scientist?”

J: “I am pretending. I’m not really a mad scientist.”

M: “You use your imagination to do it?”

J: “Yes, of course. How do you think people pretend?”

M: “Like last time when we pretended that there is a guy with a tuxedo at the track?”

J: “Something like that...”

M: “So how did your Mad Scientist help you with the drawing?”

J: “Well... you know how mad scientists in movies use strange things to make machines and dominate the world?”

M: “Yes.”

J: “This is it. I did the same thing.”

M: “I hope not dominating the world, though.”

J: “Haha, nooo... I don't want to.”

(The Mad Scientist was a survival-subpersonality of J’s that had honesty as a higher quality in his words, but his need for free expression was never met (J: “I want to say things to Dad, but he'll get mad...”). So he came up with the idea of exploring further possibilities of expression during one of his weekends with his grandmother. It wasn’t his intention to seek polarities in the sessions, but he did it by himself as a part of his drawing (e.g. the rubber turns out to be a drawing tool rather than just an eraser).

This case outline was meant to share my experiences with an empirical adaptation of psychosynthesis principles and ideas into psychotherapy work with children. This synthesis is very much needed these days because we are entering the age of enclave freedom for the young people—seemingly free, but surrounded at the same time. We need to share territories and not turn our borders into (emotional) walls (Parfitt, 1991).

My personal experience with this type of work showed me one important thing: that whatever a child does or does not do, we can use it to help free their inner space to explore, integrate and develop. Interfering with a child’s natural tendency to evolve is something that has to be avoided. This doesn’t mean that our work with children should lack rules or boundaries—it means that we have to trust children in their actions and meaning, and give them a matrix of “synthesis in accord with society.” This may seem paradoxical, because society is a structure built by adults to help them unify and escape the loneliness of solitude. So we need to give children a well-balanced synthesizing model that does not neglect anything they are, but at the same time provides them with the opportunity to experience and see what gives them their own personal uniqueness and identity—and what doesn’t.

For now, this is just a glance at what we all can attempt to do and experience. The results shared here show how children possess and can utilize a full capacity to be the best they can be, and give wisdom to the cliché-wise. I will end with my honest prayer that I hope for the best in psychosynthesis work with children and I will be more than happy if this paper can serve as a door through which all of us—concerned with children’s well-being and interested in the huge theoretical and practical inheritance of science, religion and belief—can enter and explore this enormous reality. ■

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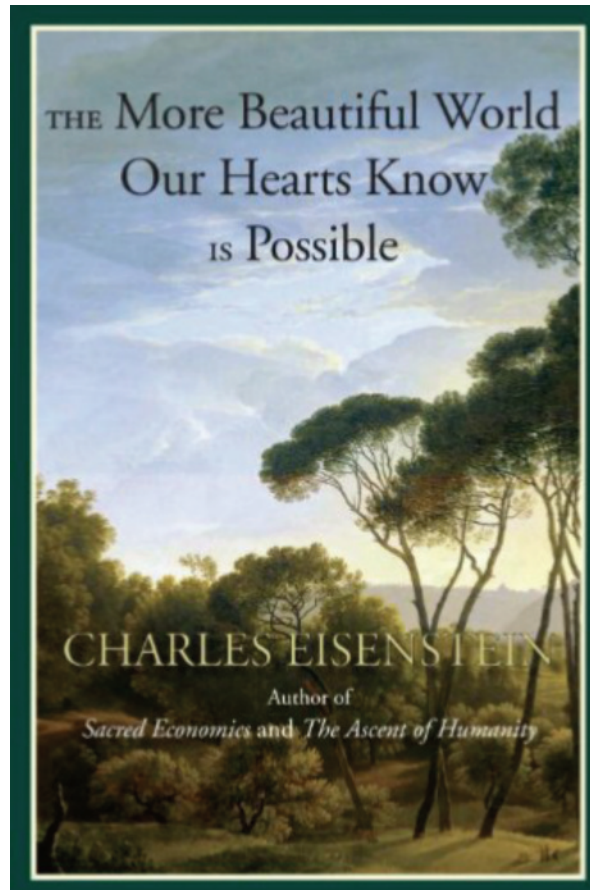
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## **The More Beautiful World Our Hearts Know Is Possible**

*By Charles Eisenstein  
Reviewed by Shamaï Currim*

With a look at the social and ecological crises, Charles Eisenstein has written yet another *avant garde* book that is both thought provoking and empowering. In this “feel good” book, Eisenstein takes us on a path of evolutionary change, congratulating us on what we are already doing, rather than telling us what we are doing wrong and forcing us upon a path of his own choosing. He looks with truth at the conditions of the earth, and all those that abide on it, with a future look and well-intentioned awareness. He has clarity of vision and the ability to say difficult things in simple language, the mark of a man of wisdom. He talks about the importance of fully embracing and practicing the principle of interconnectedness, or *interbeing*, where we become more effective agents of change and have a stronger positive influence on the world. Interlaced with real-life stories, Eisenstein shows us how small, individual acts of courage, kindness, and self-trust can create authentic change. He reminds us that separation is what has generated the present planetary crisis. He invites us to embrace a radically different understanding of cause and effect, sounding a clarion call to surrender our old worldview and enter into our heart’s knowing.

If ever a book spoke to Roberto Assagioli’s dreams, this is the one, the next step on our journey. ■

[http://www.amazon.com/Beautiful-Hearts-Possible-Sacred-Activism/dp/1583947248/ref=sr\\_1\\_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1426850658&sr=8-1&keywords=a+beautiful+world+charles+eisenstein](http://www.amazon.com/Beautiful-Hearts-Possible-Sacred-Activism/dp/1583947248/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1426850658&sr=8-1&keywords=a+beautiful+world+charles+eisenstein)



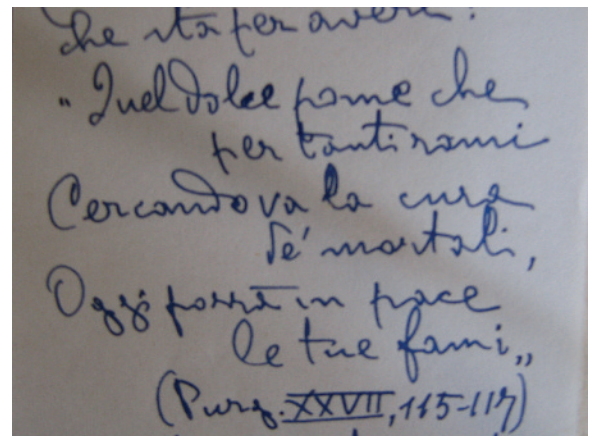
## In Dante's Footsteps: A Psychosynthesis Journey Through the Casentino Valley

19-27 October 2015

The founder of psychosynthesis, Roberto Assagioli, invites us to read Dante's *Divine Comedy*, which he describes as "a wonderful picture of a complete psychosynthesis." Together with Dante, we can descend through the circles of Hell, climb the steep slopes of Purgatory and speed through the spheres of the heavens, to finally reach Paradise and its all-encompassing synthesis.

An adopted Florentine and attentive reader of Dante's *Comedy*, Roberto Assagioli was familiar with the Casentino region and Dante's references to the valley's places and people. In this trip through the Casentino valley, we follow the footsteps of Dante and imagine ourselves traveling with Assagioli.

Starting from the *Istituto di Psicossintesi*, Assagioli's home and workplace in Florence, we visit the places mentioned by Dante. We walk through quiet forests, see beautiful villages, enjoy the *cucina locale*, and share our impressions. Together we read passages from the *Comedy*, meditate and enjoy creative activities. The trip promises to be a source of inspiration for novices and veterans of both psychosynthesis and Dante's poetry.



Essentially, the journey is an open voyage of discovery and a direct personal experience of all that presents itself during its various stages. We stay in intimate family hotels and dine in local restaurants, avoid covering large distances and hasty visits. The sole focus of the journey is to calmly and peacefully experience and enjoy historical sites, majestic forests, sacred places and informative museums while reflecting on passages from Dante's and Assagioli's writings in this beautiful area of eastern Tuscany.

**Your Guides: Catherine Ann Lombard, M.A. and Dr. Kees den Biesen**

**For a detailed program, please visit [PoeticPlaces.org](http://PoeticPlaces.org)**

# Reconnecting the Personal Self with the Higher Self: Journeying with Dante – Part I: Facing Our Shadows

*Catherine Ann Lombard and Kees den Biesen*

Roberto Assagioli invites us to read Dante's *Divine Comedy* and reflect on its various symbols in order to evoke the spiritual Self as we journey towards spiritual psychosynthesis (2000, p. 179). In this essay, we would like to explore from a psychosynthesis perspective how the poem illustrates the two fundamental concepts which define the central functions of both the Self and 'I'; namely, consciousness and will.

Our life's journey is to seek, reconnect, and synthesize the consciousness and will of the Self with the consciousness and will of the 'I'—in other words, to synthesize the transpersonal and the personal. In the *Divine Comedy*, the aim of Dante's long journey is precisely this reconnection. In this essay, we analyze his journey through *Inferno* in order to discover how, from a psychosynthesis perspective, his 'I'-Self connection is being realigned so that he might ultimately reach his full human potential at all levels—physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually. The first step on this journey is facing our shadows, poetically illustrated by Dante as his descent into Hell.

In an earlier essay (2014), we described how Dante's will faltered even before starting on his pilgrimage with Virgil as his guide. Dante first proffers excuses for not following him into Hell and then soon afterwards grinds to a halt, freezing in front of its Gate. Virgil's exhortations to "leave behind all fearful hesitation", however, prevail upon Dante, "and with a joyous expression ... he led me into the hidden things" (*Inferno* III.14, 20-21). While Dante does not enter with the same expression of joy as Virgil, he does manage to initialize the synthesis of his consciousness and will by choosing to enter Hell. At this point, Dante willingly and consciously accepts the road along which he will discover the tragic, and at times terrifying, manifestations of the disconnected 'I'-Self both in himself and others.

## Inside the Gate of Hell

Once passing through the Gate, Dante and Virgil first arrive in something like an antechamber where the Futile frantically run after a whirling banner while tormented by stinging wasps and hornets. Dante is horrified by their cries and shrieks and amazed at their great number. He even recognizes a few, but Virgil urges him to "not discuss them, but look and pass them by" (*Inferno* III.51). Guilty of refusing to commit *any* act of will, these wretched and lamenting souls never truly lived and have no hope of truly dying. They are:

... "the sad souls of those  
who lived a life without blame and without praise.  
Heaven cast them out, so as not to diminish its beauty,  
while even deep Hell will not receive them  
for they would make the guilty feel proud of themselves."  
(*Inferno* III.35, 40-42).

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The futile running after a banner, within the background Charon crossing the Acheron; colored drawing by William Blake (1757-1827)

As pointed out by Di Marco (2014), these souls are without *any* consciousness or will, unwilling to assume any responsibility in their daily encounters. Consequently, they are doomed to blindly race after whatever flag is flying before them. They turn their backs on consciousness and will, and are, therefore, “despised by [Heaven’s] mercy and justice” (*Inferno* III.50). Having never made any choice of any kind, the naked souls are perpetually driven and urged on, “stung and stung again by the hornets and wasps that were there” (*Inferno* III.65-66).

### Upper *Inferno*: Circles of Intemperance

But this is just what awaits the outcasts of Hell! As cited in our last essay (2015, pp. 18-19), the poet Dante has divided Hell into three main sections, analogous respectively to the she-wolf, lion and leopard that blocked his upward road to the sun-lit hilltop in *Inferno* I. The upper part of Hell harbors those people who have abandoned themselves to a lack of self-restraint. They are the lustful, gluttonous, greedy or prodigal, and the angry—lost through their intemperance and irresponsibility, having unconsciously surrendered their will to sex, food, money, and wrath. They have entered a vicious circle—their weak will helps them to indulge their desires and their self-indulgence helps them to further abandon their discernment and will power. They did not *consciously* choose to be indulgent, but rather half-consciously drifted there.

We are all familiar with the fine line between desire and lust, enjoyment and greed, anger and sarcastic cruelty, and—like Dante the traveler—are easily tempted to sympathize with these universal human weaknesses. Rather than sympathize, we should—again, like Dante—recognize when we have grown weak at some point in our lives, falling half-consciously into some type of addiction.

### Middle and Lower *Inferno*: Circles of Violence and Fraud

While the shadow souls in the upper part of Hell have not consciously chosen to do evil, they are there because they have not consciously *refused* evil. They are only half-conscious and weak of will. The middle and lower parts of Hell, however, are for those who have *consciously chosen* to commit acts of violence and fraud respectively. In other words, the souls condemned for violence and fraud have consciousness and will, but they have only used their personal ‘I’ to direct their attention and action toward darker and negative goals leading them to endless suffering. As Helen Luke (1995, p. 19) writes, lower Hell “is where sin is not weakness indulged, but perverted choice.” In psychosynthesis terms, these souls have consciously used their



Overview of Hell by Sandro Botticelli (ca. 1445-1510)

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will to completely disconnect themselves from the Higher Self and, in turn, shriveled their ‘I’ into a forgotten remnant of their authentic selves.

## The Different Thresholds into Upper, Middle, and Lower *Inferno*

The distinctions between the upper and two lower divisions of Hell are clearly marked by the thresholds leading into them. Entering upper Hell and its first circle of Limbo is fairly straightforward. Dante and Virgil are carried by boat across the river Acheron by Charon, the boatman of classical mythology who transports the souls of the dead into Hades. At first Dante, being alive, is refused passage, but Virgil lets it be known that Dante must pass: “This is willed there, where all can be done/ whatever may be willed...” (*Inferno* III.95-96). Immediately, Dante’s passage is gained, for Virgil has enough power to articulate the Transpersonal Will that plays a continual and essential part of their journey.

Entry into the lower parts of Hell, however, is much more difficult. Once again, Virgil and Dante must receive boat passage, this time across the marsh of the Styx where the wrathful are mired in the bog, forever tearing and mangling each other. Among them, Dante sees Filippo Argenti, a fellow Florentine who had a very violent temper. Instead of the empathy that he showed various souls whom he encountered in the circles of intemperance, Dante says:

... “You just weep and wail,  
stuck in this place, you damned soul,  
for I recognize you, though you are all filthy” (*Inferno* VIII.37-39).



Virgil pushes Filippo Argenti  
back into the swamp;  
painting by the Flemish painter  
Jan van der Staet aka Stadanus  
(1523-1605)

As Argenti reaches for the boat, Virgil pushes him back into the swamp, and then puts his arms around Dante’s neck and kisses him saying, “Indignant soul, blessed is she who was pregnant with you!” (*Inferno* VIII.43-45).

While this seemingly harsh judgment on both Dante’s and Virgil’s part might seem heartless and even shocking to us as 21st century readers, it is, in fact, essential. Before we can come face-to-face with the dark side of reality and look upon evil itself, we must be able to have spiritual discrimination, which Assagioli (1993, p. 158) describes as the ability “to recognize the right way to go.” He also writes that spiritual psychosynthesis requires the need for obedience to “great moral principles of a universal nature... Far from restricting us, it is the only way in which we can truly become free” (p. 160-1). For Dante to accept the emerging powers of his spiritual psychosynthesis, he must be able to look upon evil, recognize it, and push it away. To enter safely into the deeper parts of Hell, Dante must use his consciousness and will to *choose against* evil. There is no other way to enter the lower echelons of the personal or collective Hell. In this respect, we disagree with Schaub and Schaub’s (2003, pp. 49-50) interpretation that Dante and Virgil are unable to resist the seductive and contagious power of rage, only to become half-consciously caught up in its negative energy and, consequently, act cruelly towards Argenti.

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But this scenario is only the preparation for their entrance into middle Hell. Unlike their former entrance into upper Hell, Virgil's sanctioned declaration that their way has been determined by the will of God (i.e. the Higher Self) is not enough when confronted by the great iron battlements of the City of Dis (i.e. the City of Satan) and hundreds of fierce demons on guard. Again Dante is refused entry for being a living man and becomes terrified at the thought that Virgil might leave him. Virgil reassures him, but turns pale and downcast once he realizes that his will alone is powerless to move the gatekeepers. To make matters worse, three Furies—images symbolic of haunting remorse—appear and threaten to uncover Medusa's Head. Virgil quickly orders Dante to cover his eyes with his hands and further protects his prodigy by placing his own hands over Dante's. If a living man catches even the smallest glimpse of the Medusa, he will forever turn to stone—petrified by the destructive forces of evil. All they can do is wait for divine help.

Soon a messenger from Heaven arrives and the Furies and Medusa vanish. The angel touches the gate with a wand and cries:

“O you, driven from Heaven, despicable brood ...  
why do you resist and fight that Will  
that is never stopped from reaching its end  
and many times has increased your suffering?”  
(*Inferno* IX.91, 94-96)



Through the gate of Dis;  
manuscript illustration by Priamo della Quercia (ca. 1400 – 1467)

The will the angel refers to is the will of God, or the Higher Self. Virgil and Dante are then finally unopposed to enter into the lower regions of Hell. Luke (1995, p. 23) explains that this threshold is a gate that “can only be passed by those who have come to the kind of faith and humility which brought the angel to Dante's aid.” In psychosynthesis terms, before we can move more deeply through our own spiritual psychosynthesis, we must fully understand how dependent our will is on the will of the Self. One of the most difficult spiritual challenges is to discern how much depends on our will alone to act, and how much and when we need to patiently wait for the moment when the will of the ‘I’ and Self are aligned before we can act.

## The Threshold into Lower *Inferno* and the circle of Fraud

After traveling through the middle Hell, the domain of the lion and of various kinds of violence, they reach the third section of Hell, that of the leopard and sins of fraud, which is further divided into two parts: simple fraud and betrayal. The threshold into lower Hell consists of a tremendous waterfall pouring down a huge cliff. This time, no passage exists by boat or on foot. Instead, Virgil orders Dante to give him the rope girdle he is wearing around his waist, and throws it over the rim of the pit as a kind of signal. In answer, the swift-flying Geryon, mentioned in our last article (2015, p. 19), appears to carry them down into Hell's deepest pits.

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There are many interpretations of Dante's rope girdle, but it seems as if Virgil successfully uses it to defraud his way into the circles of fraud! Also interesting to note is that Dante will not gird himself again until reaching Purgatory where, before his ascent, he is instructed to do so with a reed. Again we turn to Luke (1993, p. 31-34), who suggests that the girdle, which is similar to those worn by Franciscans, is symbolic of the pilgrim's conscious resolutions to not choose evil. Sooner or later, we all need to integrate and synthesize our good resolutions—those universal moral principals that Assagioli writes about—to the point where they no longer direct our actions but they simply *are* within us. Only when Dante can consciously and willfully toss his girdle into the pit (with the help of Virgil) is he ready to squarely face the true nature of deception.

## The Threshold into the Circle of Betrayal

The last and final threshold within *Inferno* is that which leads down to the sea of ice at the very bottom of Hell. This time, Dante and Virgil encounter three Giants standing waist deep in a well. Besides offering some comic relief to the reader after the sickening circles of simple fraud and before the horrors of the pit of treachery, Nimrod, Ephialtes, and Antaeus are monsters symbolic of mass emotion: mass thinking, mass violence, and brainless vanity, respectively. We are all too familiar with the power and destructiveness of primitive mass actions which these monsters represent, and how such actions thoroughly betray our true collective human nature, one that is in touch with and guided by the Self.



The giants;  
drawing by Sandro Botticelli (ca. 1445-1510)

Virgil knows that they need the help of the Giants to lift them down to the bottom of the well and continue their journey. Knowing that mindless mass thinking is impenetrable to reason, Virgil sidesteps around Nimrod, explaining to Dante:

“Let's leave him standing here and waste no words.  
For to him every language is as his own  
is for others: understandable to no one.”  
(*Inferno* XXXI.79-81).

Ephialtes is equally unapproachable. Furiously raging yet bound in great chains, he is actually inept and powerless, a symbol of mass violence's inability to touch the essential integrity of an individual soul. Instead they turn to Antaeus, who is very vain. Virgil cleverly applies a little flattery and promises him that Dante will write about his fame once he returns to earth: “He can make you famous in the world, for he is alive and expects to still live a long life” (*Inferno* XXXI.127-128). Upon hearing this irresistible proposal, the Giant hurries to pluck Virgil up, who in turn grabs a hold of Dante, and the two are carefully put down to the “bottom that swallows Lucifer with Judas” (*Inferno* XXXI.142-143).

What might we say about this act of flattery on Virgil's part? From a psychosynthesis perspective, one could equate it to when we use our skillful will to transform and sublimate our basic instincts and drives, such as aggressive and sexual energies, for spiritual purposes. Assagioli (2000, p. 64) writes about using our skillful will to transmute vanity and pride into a higher quality such as inner dignity. Along the journey of spiritual psychosynthesis, we can cleverly and *consciously* learn to use our own vanities to invoke higher qualities, such

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as endurance, discipline, and faith. By transmuting our vanity and other lower instincts, we generate the energy needed to overcome the gigantic barriers we meet along the way. This use of transmutation and sublimation is very subtle, and is an art requiring great inner balance as we walk along the knife edge of both the negative and positive aspects of our instincts. Assagioli (1993, p. 210-211) warns us about pseudo-sublimation, the point where we are fooling ourselves into believing that our basic instincts have been transformed but, in fact, we are only masquerading as if they had. Pseudo-sublimation is unconscious self-deception; hence, the importance of learning this skill before gazing upon the people who have committed the worst kind of deception, namely betrayal.

## Meeting Satan: The Final Vision of Our Shadows

The bottom of the pit of Hell is a silent and immobile ice-sea, in which different categories of betrayers are stuck—their whole inner being perpetually frozen in cruel egotism. Dante here witnesses the final state of sin, the ice-cold antithesis of love which is caused by winds that blow from the center of the sea. He also ultimately sees the epitome of evil, “the creature that once was so beautiful” but rebelled against God and became “the emperor of the realm of sorrow” (*Inferno* XXXIV.18, 28). This creature is Satan, a huge demon whose hips are stuck in the ice at the very center of the earth. His one head has three faces, one red, one yellow and one black, which symbolize raging impotence, utter ignorance, and hateful envy. Satan vents his empty frustration by weeping from six eyes and by beating six huge wings, which cause the icy winds that freeze all life. In Satan, Dante recognizes the perversion of creative power, truth, and love: he is the anti-type of the triune God of Power, Wisdom, and Love.

One careful look is all that is needed: “It is time to leave now,” Virgil tersely remarks, “for we have seen everything” (*Inferno* XXXIV.68-69). We have only to become fully aware of the nature of this root of full evil potential within us and then be gone, fixing our sight once again upwards towards the light of truth, the star of the Self and its potential within us. Assagioli (e.g. 2000, p. 89) has often stated that in psychosynthesis “we do not aim at a thorough, complete exhaustive exploration of the unconscious... We do not make a systematic offensive against it.” In other words, we deal with only what is necessary and avoid peering “pedantically into every little corner of the unconscious, dusting it free from every last bit of ...impurity.”

Virgil and Dante grab Satan’s hairy hide and climb down into a large cave in the other half of the globe, from which they ascend to the surface of the southern hemisphere “to see once more the stars” (*Inferno* XXXIV.139). They are reborn, and it is Easter morning.

## Conclusion

In this essay, we have discussed how the consciousness and will of the ‘I’ and Self are reflected in the three major divisions of Hell in the *Divine Comedy*. In Purgatory and Paradise, consciousness and will are equally essential and prominent but assume a different nature. While the souls in Purgatory are conscious of their failings, unlike their counterparts in Hell, they are not consumed by or fixated on them: their consciousness and will is directed at purification, something that Assagioli has written extensively about (e.g. 1993, pp. 155-63).

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Satan, the Evil One, at the deepest point of Hell, mosaic by Coppo di Marcovaldo (ca. 1225 – ca. 1276) in the Baptistery of Florence

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After the necessary purification we may—this time, with Dante and Beatrice—embark upon the final, but everlasting stage of the journey through Paradise: the exploration of how it feels to live an entirely conscious life, guided by a free will and experiencing an ever deepening sense of joy. These two stages of Dante’s journey will be the topic of our next articles, Parts II and III.

We hope that this brief introduction to the fundamental psychosynthesis concepts of consciousness and will as portrayed in the *Divine Comedy* has whetted your appetite to start reading this unique work of Western literature. Reflection upon the rich symbolic images in every line of the poem can become a beautiful exercise of spiritual psychosynthesis. Along the way, you can deepen and expand your own consciousness and will by viewing Dante as an ideal model and calling upon him as an external unifying center to help you rebuild a new personality (Assagioli, 2000, pp. 22-23). Based on our own experience of reading and reflecting upon the *Divine Comedy*, alone and with groups, we agree with Roberto Assagioli that Dante, as both its great poet and humble pilgrim, can become an inspiration and spiritual friend along the long and arduous road of spiritual psychosynthesis. ■

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# SUNFISH

*Bonney Kuniholm*

I am the first one to wake at camp.  
I quickly put on my clothes, run downstairs and grab  
a bagful of breadcrumbs and the fishing net,  
and run down to the pier, stretching its long arm out to the lake.  
I fill the big iron tub under the trees with water.  
Now comes the fun! Lying on my belly across the pier,  
I hold the net with my left hand in the water  
while dropping a few of the breadcrumbs in front of it —  
and wait. Whoever said waiting wasn't fun?  
The sunfish, gleaming gold in their summer suits,  
shyly and slowly come out from their rock hiding places  
to catch a meal as the bread slowly descends.  
As soon as one comes near enough — whoosh!  
Up comes my net and it is caught and brought to the waiting tub.  
The game is to see how many I can catch for an hour or two.  
I love the warmth of the sun on my back as I patiently wait for the next catch.  
I feel the joy of concentration — of anticipation.  
When the tub is full, I leave them to wonder where they are for a while,  
but when the day starts to get hot, I return them to their cool,  
familiar rocks they call home; both me and the fish knowing  
they will be caught again tomorrow.  
I think this is a game for them too.



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**DATES & TIMES:**

Friday, July 17th, 1:00 - 7:00 p.m.

Saturday, July 18th, 9:00 a.m. - 6:00 p.m.

Sunday, July 19th, 9:00 a.m. - 4 p.m.

**INSTRUCTORS:** The weekend will be led by Jon Schottland and Didi Firman, directors of professional training programs for The Synthesis Center, Amherst, MA

**FEES:** The cost for the weekend is on a sliding scale from \$900 - \$600, with work study and scholarship options available based on need and availability.

## The Risk of Living Deeply

*Dorothy Firman*

There's a bumper sticker that says, *Life is a sexually transmitted disease and always fatal*. Dark humor, but relevant nonetheless. Life is a risky business and all we have are our own choices, day-to-day, minute-to-minute, juxtaposed with the many mysteries of life. That five-year plan we worked out (or ten or twenty year plan) may help get us to a goal that we value and it may not. The left turn that we make, because our car's GPS told us to, may get us to our destination or it may land us smack in the middle of road construction, detours, or a dead end.

So what makes sense as we negotiate the perilous journey of life? What is the sane balance between risk and safety? Abraham Maslow talked about helping people to see the risk in maintaining the status quo, not changing, staying stuck. Staying "safe" is its own danger. But taking foolish risks is an equal and more obvious danger. We never tell our young children to stay safe by staying down on the floor, crawling safely. We encourage them to take that risk and try walking on two feet... and inevitably they fall, hurt themselves, cry and get up again. A few short years later we caution them about every risk they take. *Wear your helmet, brush your teeth, use your seatbelt, wear a condom!* All good advice on the safety end of the spectrum.

The balance between too much risk and too much safety is an altogether different equation for different people. There is no right answer. But, like any person's preference for one ice cream flavor over another, one musician over another, there are ways of knowing that will help guide us. Many adventuring types feel a call to that risky lifestyle. Risks are less important to them, because safety for safety's sake deprives them of the vitality of responding to that inner call. And others move towards a much safer life, feeling, equally, a call to whatever lifestyle that might be. We may well have known at a young age that we would tend to move towards one end of that spectrum or the other. We may have moved, over a lifetime, through one swing of the pendulum (too risky) to the other (too safe).

But we are all risk takers. My "risk" might be choosing outside of family or cultural norms, not cliff diving. Yours might be learning to face the difficulties a life sends your way. My 95 year-old father takes a risk in facing each day, experimenting with how to do this part of life, wondering how to be 95, rather than 80 or 70 or 60. Every client that I work with is a risk taker, for the very fact of choosing to turn inside and look at what dwells within is truly a risky business. That is a risk that we must take to live deeply. For safety, without hearing our inner call, is just safety for the body, not safety for the soul. And even that is an illusion. The most protected of us are still not safe.

Listening to the call of Self to know what and who we are, is the only risk we can't afford not to take. Every life invites us to hear that still small voice within that pulls us towards some meaning, some value, some purpose in living. When we hear that call we may well risk everything to respond. There are archetypes that exemplify the person who takes risks in service of a higher call: the warrior, the hero, the saint and martyr. But each of us is on that same hero's journey; each of us has endless opportunities to stand up and fight for what we believe in; each of us can and often does respond to our deepest moral code and some of us die in service of those deepest beliefs.

So what is the risk of living a life deeply? We risk rocking the boat. We risk breaking the rules. We risk stepping outside of the safety of our own backyard. We are well trained to stay small, to live within certain rules, to be good (whatever that means). We are conditioned to:

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Be certain ways;  
Do some things and not others;  
Think this way and not that;  
Feel this... or maybe don't feel anything;  
Be the way men should be, women should be, good people should be;

The rule book is written before we are born and we are taught those rules from the day of our birth. The rules are full of *should's* and *must's* and *have to's* and *do's* and *don'ts* and *cant's* and *wont's* and awful consequences and great rewards. And your rule book isn't the same as mine. That's why we can be so hostile, so polarized, feel so righteous while facing off against an opponent who feels equally righteous. We're following THE rules. We are GOOD republicans or democrats, GOOD citizens of this country or that country, GOOD "whatevers" we are trained to be.

Living deeply is looking closely at the rule book and deciding, for ourselves, in the quiet of our own soul, what the Call of our Self is. What is true for you and how can you live that authentically? What is true for me? For each of us? The answers don't come as one-time maps or simple answers. They come as feelings and intuitions and as a sense of purpose guiding us one way and not the other. The answers come as a clarity of values, in a sense of meaning, as a deep knowing. Sometimes the answers are crystal clear, sometimes they are barely discernable pulls; a nudge from the universe; a thought or feeling; a sweetness; a resonance; a Call that we do hear.

And whenever we step outside the familiar, the comfortable, the place where we think we are safe, we take a risk. The risk, however, is not to life and limb, it is a risk to the old self as the new one emerges. This is a risk worth taking. ◼



*This is reprinted from Didi Firman's [psychologytoday.com](#) blog, 2011. Didi's most recent book, *Engaging Life: Living Well with Chronic Illness* is dedicated to all those whose lives become risky business, by the fact of an illness. Didi is director of training at The Synthesis Center in Amherst, MA.*

I've heard the old adage,  
"is the glass half empty, or half full?"  
In my world, I'm happy I have a glass!!  
With gratitude!  
(Shamai Currim)





## **Freedom**

The awareness that life is endless  
And known though its expression  
Of boundaries

Set by us to finite  
The infinite

To harness the Self  
Through the self

Freedom is deeply felt  
In the physical pit  
Of humanity

A place of extremes  
And limitless  
Experience

With gratitude

Shamai Currim  
March 22, 2015

# The Vulnerability Model and Psychosynthesis

Richard Schaub

*Why* do we get into vehement arguments over nonsense, defending ourselves with crazy logic and cruel comments? *Why* are we so easily hurt, our minds filling up with fantasies of revenge or running away? *How* is it that we emotionally go from zero to one hundred over a mild criticism or a certain tone of voice? *Why* do our instinctual reactions of fight or flight get so quickly aroused? It's not as if we're living in the wilderness fighting or fleeing scary predators—our fight or flight instincts suddenly rise up in us at the office, in school, at our kitchen table during a conversation. What is the reason for this hair-trigger fear and vulnerability?

It would seem obvious to conclude that deep down we must see the world as a threatening place. But just the opposite is true: we are so sensitively attuned to any threat because we're intense lovers of life. We want to be here, we want to stay here. We love life, and we don't want anything or anyone to take it away from us. The root of our fear is love of life. And we share this love with all of the living beings on our planet who are also poised for danger and ready to defend their lives. Once you grasp this, you will be able to see how love and vulnerability are at work everywhere in everyone. In this radical appreciation of the love of life that is at the heart of our fears, we have the beginnings of some answers to fear.

I began to look for new ways to deal with fear when working with people in recovery from alcohol and other addictions. Over and over again, I'd hear my clients' characterizations of how vulnerable they felt: "I'm too thin-skinned; everything gets to me; I don't have a heat shield; I never got the book on how to live; life is too much for me."

I examined eleven separate theories that attempt to explain the cause of addiction, and in every theory there was some recognition of an extra-sensitivity to fear. In recovery and no longer using alcohol and/or drugs to numb that fear, my clients were now facing the challenge of finding healthier ways to deal with their vulnerability. This led me to search for holistic approaches for calming down fears, including meditation, acupuncture, non-addictive herbs, physical training and spiritual development, but at the core of it was still the search for an answer to vulnerability itself.

I soon began to appreciate that learning to live with vulnerability applied to a far wider range of clinical issues than just addiction recovery. My wife, Bonney, also working in addictions recovery agencies, had begun to formulate *The Vulnerability Model* to identify the path of this new learning. The question for us became: how do people move from fear to the discovery of the love of life that is behind their fear?

As you read this, ask yourself how you do this for yourself. Here are three examples of how other people have walked on this path.

## Work Anxiety

Though she had an important meeting early the next morning, Carol couldn't fall asleep. She pleaded with herself at midnight to calm down so that she'd have a good night's rest and be alert for the meeting—but sleep wouldn't come. The alarm clock's glowing red numbers stared back at her: 1:00 a.m., 1:30. . . She began to feel panicky and told herself not to look at the clock again, but then she did: 2:00. She tossed and turned, got up, went to the bathroom, got back into bed, tossed and turned, telling herself, *Don't look at the clock*. At some point she must have dropped off, for the next thing she knew, the alarm was going off, waking her at 7.

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When Carol finished telling me her story, I asked her, “How did the meeting go?”

“Fine,” she said.

—So what was the fear that had kept her up most of the night?

She was worried that she might have to speak at the meeting.

—What was scary about that? Hadn’t she spoken at other meetings?

Yes, of course; she’d been in the business for ten years and had spoken at countless meetings. But each time it was torture anticipating the moment when she’d have to speak up.

—What was so bad about it?

Carol thought for a moment, then said, “I might look nervous.”

—And what would happen then?

She answered at once: “I’d look like I didn’t know what I’m talking about.”

—Even though she’d been successful in her job for ten years?

“Yes—I’d look bad. It’d be embarrassing.”

—And then?

Carol paused, her face beginning to reflect a deeper concern. “They’d wonder if I’m right for the job.”

—And what would happen *then*?

One by one, we peeled back the layers of Carol’s fear. She’d be demoted, and then she’d be fired. Without a good recommendation from her employer, she wouldn’t be able to find another job. She’d run out of money, lose her apartment, and end up living on the street. She laughed, nervously, as her darker catastrophic fears began to come out into the light.

Finally we’d arrived at the root of Carol’s sleepless fears—feeling vulnerable in this world. The start of her “recovery” was to have a quick way to reduce her anxiety whenever it got too disturbing. I taught her a simple technique: the phrase, *Carol, let go*. The instruction was to repeat the phrase over and over again in the privacy of her mind for at least thirty seconds. I first taught this *Let Go* technique to my Manhattan clients in the post-traumatic aftermath of the World Trade Center bombing of 9/11 so that they could reduce their anxiety when they felt afraid of getting on an elevator or going into a subway. For Carol, the *Let Go* technique was a way of breaking off the attention and mental energy that would typically get drawn into her dark catastrophic thoughts. In the terms of psychosynthesis, the *Let Go* technique is a form of disidentification.

Carol’s second transformational step was gradual. She had to stabilize the understanding that her anxiety and fears were, at their root, an act of protection based in love. When she was experiencing fear, she could learn to turn toward it with gratitude and compassion for working so hard on her behalf. To help her do this, I taught her a variation of mindfulness meditation.

Mindfulness is a strengthening of the observing aspect of your brain/mind. In psychosynthesis terms, it is the strengthening of the I-space. As you develop a greater ability to observe what you are experiencing, you have a greater choice in how to respond to your needs in that moment. And the reward for responding to your fears in a compassionate way is that they calm down, giving you increasing periods of inner peace.

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This is not just a nice idea. It is backed up by the latest neuroscience and brain research. According to neuroscientist and researcher Rick Hanson (author of *Buddha's Brain*, 2009, New Harbinger publishers), each time you become aware of fear and turn toward it with compassion, you are exercising the executive center of your brain. The executive center, located in the prefrontal cortex of the brain and responsible for modulating fears and deciding what to do with them, actually grows new neurons and gets stronger when it is exercised by the acts of compassionate awareness.

Carol loved the *Let Go* technique and found herself using it often. The second step of mindfulness and turning toward her fears with gratitude and compassion took more time to benefit from because she didn't fully buy my idea. When I later told her about the brain research, it helped her scientific mind to believe more fully in the compassion technique, and she took up the mindfulness method with more enthusiasm. She became calmer and more skillful in dealing with the frightening thoughts, and they began to lose their power over her.

## The Midlife Crisis

*Midway on the journey of our life, I woke to find myself in a dark wood.*

— Dante

Joe did not seem to be someone who would be suffering from fear and anxiety. On the surface, his life seemed privileged, even blessed. As a boy he had loved sports, and now he was a successful executive in the sports industry, dealing with well-known athletes on an almost daily basis. His two children, both healthy, were impressed with the stars their father met and loved the special events they got to attend through his connections. His wife was attractive and supportive and a good mother.

What was wrong with this picture? Nothing—and there was no history of abuse in Joe's childhood, no drug or alcohol addiction, no dark secrets. Yet here he was, on a cold winter night, sitting in a psychotherapist's office, trying to figure out what was happening to him.

He remembered the night his anxieties began. He woke at that inauspicious hour of 3 a.m. from a nightmare of being trapped in a building that had no exits. He was relieved to find that it was just a dream, but he had a hard time going back to sleep. He finally dozed off at 5 a.m.

When the alarm rang at 7, Joe noticed feelings that he'd never had on any other morning. Usually he was glad to get up—on a weekday, because he enjoyed his job, and on weekends, because he looked forward to hanging out at home. But now he felt anxious; his stomach was jumpy, uneasy. He decided it was the result of a bad night's sleep, or maybe he was just coming down with a mild flu.

But his bad night's sleep and his morning nervousness were the beginning of a journey for Joe. His symptoms became more frequent, showing up even when he was resting at home. He began to feel unpredictable to himself. That's when he decided to look for an answer by calling his doctor. A battery of tests and visits to two specialists revealed that nothing was physically wrong with him. Not particularly liking it, he was given the annoying diagnosis that "It's all in your head." The referral to me, the psychotherapist, was then made.

As he told me more about his search for an answer to his anxiety, he joked that maybe it had to do with his fiftieth birthday. He wasn't laughing.

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Turning fifty. I have seen such symbolic birthdays bring on the crisis of vulnerability all by themselves. Turning fifty sends the message that we have lived more than half our time on earth. Life no longer stretches out into an endless horizon of possibilities. Any leftover adolescent assumptions about our immortality don't hold up in the face of reality.

By now, Joe had had enough life experience to see that even the good things in life come and go. He'd gotten enough phone calls in the middle of the night with the shocking news of someone's tragedy; he'd seen enough relationships end, projects collapse, and companies go bankrupt, and even two wars begin. He knew that life was filled with uncertainty and that wanting it to be otherwise was wishful thinking. He had intellectually accepted these observations about life as truth, but truth in the abstract. Until now, he had successfully avoided applying this truth to himself.

Now he was beginning to do so. Something had gotten through to him. Perhaps it was some combination of his symbolic birthday, of hearing about difficulties and suffering in his peers, or of moments when he felt less energy and strength than he used to. Whatever it was, his own vulnerability had become real to him. It had first shown up in that bad dream of being trapped in a building with no exits, but now it was part of his waking life.

Joe needed a philosophical shift. He needed to give new meaning and purpose to his now undeniable realization that our time here is limited and that life is lived in a state of uncertainty and vulnerability. He could use the same techniques as Carol's—*Let Go* and *turning toward anxiety with compassion*—but he also needed an attitude change, pragmatic philosophy or spirituality that embraced his fifty year old vulnerability as a plain fact of life.

One of the principles of *The Vulnerability Model* is that you gain some answers to vulnerability not only by turning toward yourself with compassion but by turning toward everyone with compassion. That may sound like a tall order, but I showed Joe a simple way to experience this. It is called the *Walk Around the Block* technique.

A walk around the block sounds harmless enough, but this walk is actually very provocative. Fully described in our 2009 book, *The End of Fear*, the mini-version of the technique is to decide that you will take a walk in a busy neighborhood while holding in your mind that each and everyone you pass lives in exactly the same state of vulnerability as you do.

Can you imagine walking around a single block or in a shopping mall holding this reality in your mind? Try it and see. Despite his protestations, Joe did, and he came back with tears of love in his eyes. He felt so moved by seeing face after face and realizing that, behind their eyes, absolutely everyone he passed on his walk was dealing with the same vulnerability that he was. In his walk, he had learned a way to free himself from his self-absorbed fears and to instead compassionately connect with everyone around him. All he had to do was remember to practice it.

## **A Serious Diagnosis**

The examples of Carol and Joe offer us two common struggles—work anxiety and the midlife crisis with its awareness of aging—that reveal the vulnerability we all live with. Our third example is Jenny, whose vulnerability was made powerfully real when she received a Stage Four cancer diagnosis. When I met her, she had already undergone surgery and extensive chemotherapy and was awaiting the results of a test to determine if the tumors were still active in her. Two days later, she would find out that they were.

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In her early sixties, Jenny had adult children and little grandchildren and wanted desperately to stay in this world. She was ready to go forward in a determined and matter-of-fact way with whatever new medical recommendations she received, but her fear kept surging, fluctuating from low-level anxiety to sheer terror. She was given calming medication, which she took when the fear was too much, but she knew she needed something more: “The end of my life is staring me in the face. What do I do about it?”

Our personality, no matter how strong and confident, can't deal with its own end. That is the emotional crisis brought on by a serious diagnosis: the life we love is no longer in our personal control. *The Vulnerability Model* therefore counsels that part of the answer to Jenny's degree of vulnerability has to be transpersonal. Meaning *beyond the personality*, transpersonal is a more neutral way of referring to the innate spirituality in human nature. Transpersonal/spiritual practices became part of my daily practice when I worked with many clients at the height of the 1990s HIV-AIDS epidemic, and one of those practices was used with great results for Jenny.

The practice is a meditation on letting go of the body. At first, you may have a knee-jerk rejection of the idea. Jenny, after all, is determined to stay alive, and her fear is exactly that she will lose her body and leave this world of children and grandchildren. But this is precisely why the practice works, because it is a turning with awareness and compassion toward the fear of letting go. It is the same basic principle that worked with Carol and Joe.

To enhance the practice, Jenny stretched out on the office couch and closed her eyes. She was guided to bring her attention to her feet and legs and to consider all they had done for her throughout her life. She was then asked to thank them for all their work and to tell them that they could rest now. She was systematically guided in the same way throughout her body, with the last suggestion being to thank her mind for all of its work through the years. As you read this, can you imagine all of your mind's efforts on your behalf to protect you and preserve the life you love?

When the meditation was over, Jenny was very quiet on the couch. About five minutes later, she spoke, saying she had entered “a field of love” and never wanted to leave there. I still hear from her, and she refers every time to that transpersonal/spiritual field of love which has given her the courage to carry on with more peace and less fear.

## Conclusion

The guarantee of change and loss in our lives—the very root of our vulnerability—can be the source of a greater love and greater compassion for everyone, including ourselves. Since your vulnerability will always be part of your life, you will be given a lot of chances everyday to practice the transformational practices of turning toward fear with awareness and compassion. You can be the living proof of the results: a less fearful, more loving life. ■



Richard Schaub (with Bonney Gulino Schaub) is co-author of *Healing Addictions - The Vulnerability Model of Recovery*; *Dante's Path - Vulnerability and the Spiritual Journey*; *The End of Fear - A Spiritual Path for Realists*; *The Florentine Promise - A Seeker's Guide*; *Transpersonal Development - Cultivating the Human Resources of Peace, Wisdom, Purpose and Oneness*. They are now training professionals in Transpersonal Coaching as a way of promoting the work of psychosynthesis and Dr. Roberto Assagioli. They can be reached at [drrichardschaub@gmail.com](mailto:drrichardschaub@gmail.com) or the website, [www.huntingtonmeditation.com](http://www.huntingtonmeditation.com).

**The Sage Encyclopedia of Theory in Counseling and Psychotherapy** is now published in the US, editor Edward Neukrug, publisher Sage Publications, Inc., isbn: 9781452274126

It's not something to buy for yourself because it's expensive, but it can be ordered through colleges, libraries etc. There is an excellent online version as well as a printed one (which is two large, magnificent volumes)

The article on Psychosynthesis, written by Will Parfitt ([www.willparfitt.com](http://www.willparfitt.com)), is on pages 838-842. The first paragraph of the entry follows:

Psychosynthesis is a humanistic and transpersonal approach to psychotherapy and counseling. Whilst it has a set of core principles, Psychosynthesis is an open approach that continues to be developed by practitioners as new understanding of the human psyche and effective methods of psychotherapeutic intervention are discovered. Whilst early stages of Psychosynthesis psychotherapy have similarities to Psychoanalysis, it posits that a client is more than reactions to past conditioning and childhood development and has a discrete, realizable core self, contact with which enables them to be self-directive, have a sense of purpose and an active impulse towards service. Finding this core self within enables a client to reach the heights as well as the depths of the psyche, contact a deeper Transpersonal Self which is universal to all life, and realize all experiences as part of a larger, collective expression of an inner spiritual nature. A Psychosynthesis psychotherapist facilitates conditions in which a client may become more centered on this core self, develop the ability to control previously divisive elements of their behavior, restructure the personality around this new core self, and realize the essential goodness in all life. The development of will and imagination are essential components in the practice of Psychosynthesis, as is engaging in a non-denominational and personally relevant spiritual practice. Whilst primarily used in psychotherapy, Psychosynthesis is also applied in education, social work, medicine, business, parenting and all human interaction and endeavor. Some of its techniques, particularly subpersonality work, have influenced and been incorporated into various other therapeutic models





## *A Week without Judgment?*



We just completed *S.E.L.F. System for Embodied Living and Freedom*'s first spring offering, *Week without Judgment* (WWJ). Though a week without judgment is ultimately as impossible as a week without thinking, exploration was the aim, and the experience was rich!

In psychosynthesis we are familiar with the judging (often haranguing) voice of the inner critic/judge subpersonality. Bringing awareness to this critical judging part of us was the first step in my WWJ challenge, because familiarity with this part's tendencies, triggers, 'voice', and perspective is an important step in relinquishing its control over our thoughts, feelings, and behavior.

In the four-step path presented over the week, the first step was: *awareness* or consciousness of our *lack of presence* as Eckhart Tolle teaches. When we are caught up or identified with thinking and judging, we cannot be present to *now*. If we seek to become more fully present in our day-to-day lives, we must learn to bring the light of awareness to the thinking, judging critical voice within, and as we do so we realize this judge/critic is driven by fear.

Judgment is quite simply *fear*. In the aim of keeping my article short, I will not discuss the ego/ small self's use of judgment in its defense against fear. Suffice it to say the tactics are imaginative, crafty and downright nasty and attacking. As *A Course in Miracles* explains in its mind training program with extensive text and 365 lessons, "*Judgment and love are opposites. From one come all the sorrows of the world. But from the other comes the peace of God Himself.*" (ACIM workbook lesson 352).

A personally profound exploration of life can be triggered by this statement, and as part of the practice we arrive at the second step of my four step path: *disidentification*. Assagioli taught whatever we identify with has power over us; whatever we dis-identify from allows us to reclaim personal power and make a new choice. Simply put, this asks us to understand that with awareness and will we are no longer at the mercy of our

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judging, critical mind, directed against others or ourselves. This is easier said than done, and experiencing the difficulty was one of my objectives in launching the WWJ challenge. To look at our incessant, harsh, and critical judging and attack of situations, people and ourselves **without judging ourselves for doing it**, requires constant hourly, moment to moment **awareness, will, and compassion**.

These first two steps in the four-point path are a lifetime practice, and no easy accomplishment!

In the process of bringing light to our use and purpose around judgment, we learn to use feelings as a barometer or compass for keeping us on the path. When we feel angry, righteous, jealous or hateful, we know we have lost the light and our ability to be present. In the chapter on *The Illusions of the Ego*, the Course asks us to “watch your mind carefully for any beliefs that hinder (the ability) to shine your ego away, releasing the strength of God into everything you think and do. Judge how well you have done this by your own feelings, because this is the one right use of judgment.” The entire aim of the Course is to remind us we have a mind and a *choice* to listen to the Voice of God or Spirit, or the loud selfish demands of ego. This echoes Assagioli’s teachings in psychosynthesis to develop will to the degree we can focus attention at a loftier level and be guided by Higher Self, Spirit, or Source.

Our realizations and desire brings us to step three in the four-step path: **empowered choice**. Only when we realize there is indeed a Higher Self or Source of wisdom and love to guide us, and that we have free will and *the ability to choose* the voice for fear or the voice for love to guide our decisions and choices in life, can we arrive at *empowered, conscious* choice. Without consciousness we are blindly driven by ego beliefs in scarcity, injustice, guilt, fear, and attack, based on an erroneous use of judgment.

Well...it was an eye-opening week! If you couldn’t join us, there’s no time like the present. Start your own exploration of judgment this spring. Get to know and befriend Mara, as the Buddhist’s call this critical, judging mind construct. And, join us in taking a step further and deeper in my upcoming month-long **Freedom and Forgiveness** exploration, starting June 29th. This exploration picks up at my fourth point. If we want to feel free in life and light to soar the loftier experience realms of joy, love, fulfillment and true happiness, we must free ourselves from judgment and the unfinished business of our past. This is about release and **forgiveness**, and if you feel you’ve done forgiveness work, this exploration will explore forgiveness with a new take, not a traditional teaching. Join us June 29th for a liberating month to find out what this means.

Abigail De Soto

**S.E.L.F.\_System for Embodied Living and Freedom**

<http://www.abigaildesoto.com>

For more information on the **Forgiveness and Freedom** program,  
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AAP member discounts available





Dear Friends and Psychosynthesis Colleagues,

The Institute of Psychosynthesis of Italy, together with the Italian Society for Psychosynthesis Psychotherapy in Florence (S.I.P.T. - Società Italiana di Psicosintesi Terapeutica), is happy to announce the International Congress of Psychosynthesis that will be held from the 2nd to 5th June 2016 in the splendid setting of Taormina, Sicily.

Participants will be welcomed by truly mythical surroundings, immersed in the light of the Mediterranean and cradled in the glory of a culture reaching back over thousands of years. The sea and the ancient rock, with one of the most famous amphitheatres in the world, complete this setting, perfect for merging with the beauty of nature and continuing that dialogue of human creativity begun at our international congress of 2012 in Rome, at Rocca di Papa. There, in fact, as many of you will remember, the psychosynthesis community felt the urge to re-unite and recognize itself, and we witnessed this through the astonishing number of different contributions from so many psychosynthesists from all over the world. On that occasion "World" was precisely the word we questioned. It stimulated us in a congress that sowed many seeds for study and work together, even though they were scattered across immense geographical distances.

Today, along with our call to this congress, we want to launch that invitation again and observe with what new vision and renewed instruments we have worked, both in the single national psychosynthesis communities as well as in the worldwide psychosynthesis realities. Many links were created between centers of psychosynthesis in different countries and continents and we feel that the time has come to taste the fruits from the first crop harvested after the germination of the seeds that were sown, and to reflect upon the paths of the goals along the evolution of Humanity. We shall question ourselves on the contribution that psychosynthesis can offer those goals, with its transpersonal vision that integrates and goes beyond the conscience of nations, to the level of international attitudes and even further, within a planetary network.

What signs have we captured of something new already advancing, in the many areas of our planet? In what way can psychosynthesis contribute to building a just and beautiful Future, and how can it perceive the Future coming towards us? What is the nucleus of psychosynthesis that we will continue to share, even through the transformations taking place?

We shall take a look at the Future of psychosynthesis.

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These are the elements inspiring the 2016 International Congress.

We intend to continue with the interesting experience of the Co-creative Groups, introducing a new sector on "The Advancement of Things New," and we propose a series of topics along which to develop relations and Group work.

A session of the Congress will be dedicated to the innovations made by psychosynthesis friends to the map of the egg and the position of the Transpersonal Self. We believe that it is important to discuss this point together and know that the air and atmosphere in Taormina will remind us of our love for the culture of dialogue, so dear to the Greeks and to Magna Grecia, and that we will be sustained and nourished. Our different opinions will allow for the union of opposites, capable of accomplishing "the miracle of living between the two, achieving the *nous* without losing the soul; entering into freedom as deeply as possible without annihilating nor humiliating the life of our guts" as the philosopher Maria Zambrano so well puts it. We will know how to dialogue, and from our multiplicity move towards unity with the precious quality of humility, with the courage to dream truths not as yet manifest, aware of being born to the world to complete our existence as unique, original souls, and to participate in the realization of a fully humane society.

On the wave of these reflections, it is our wish that enthusiastic biopsychosynthetic work be prepared and shared between us all. Together with this letter you will receive the invitation to the members of the various Scientific and Organizing Committees, with instructions on how to co-create a Good Congress.

With very best wishes to you all,

Maria Vittoria Randazzo.  
President, Institute of Psychosynthesis, Florence

Carla Fani  
President, SIPT, Florence,

You are invited to visit our website for full details:

[www.psicosintesi.it/congresso2016](http://www.psicosintesi.it/congresso2016).