

PRESENT AND FUTURE OF PSYCHOSYNTHESIS: A CONVERSATION WITH PETRA GUGGISBERG NOCELLI

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Petra Guggisberg Nocelli, a new generation scholar, is probably the one who, more than any other, has contributed in creating an organized synthesis of Assagioli's work. In her books¹ she has ordered the model, theory and practice of Psychosynthesis in order to create a work that summarize what has been done so far in this field of study and research. It filled a gap that had made it difficult for Psychosynthesis to establish itself as a structured psychological direction. Now those who want to understand deeply and in an organic way *what* Psychosynthesis is, *what it does* and *how it does it*, can read *The Way of Psychosynthesis*, from a theoretical point of view, and *Know, Love, Transform Yourself*, with regard to therapeutic practice and operational techniques.

These two works by Petra Guggisberg Nocelli constitute, in my opinion, both the point of arrival of what has been done so far, and the starting point of the future evolution of Psychosynthesis. For this reason, I thought it important to talk to you about the present and the future of Psychosynthesis.

The following conversation took place in the morning of April 11, 2019, by Skype.

FdF: *Good morning Petra, first of all I would like to ask you: what brought you into the path of Psychosynthesis?*

PGN: It wasn't a tough choice. Life made me meet Psychosynthesis in the middle of my university studies, in a period in which I found myself, as Dante said, "lost in a dark forest". At that time my mother was attending a training course in Psychosynthesis in Switzerland with Renzo Rossin and, following his advice, I started to attend some courses at the Institute in the Centre of Milan with Enzo Liguori and then with Sergio Bartoli and his coworkers in Città della Pieve. Afterwards I specialized in psychotherapy at SIPT (Italian Society of Therapeutic Psychosynthesis) in Florence. This first meeting with Psychosynthesis was for me like the beginning of a great love story that is still going on today.

FdF: *What are the characteristics of Psychosynthesis that you consider as more important and more differentiating than other schools?*

PGN: **What, in my opinion, most characterizes Psychosynthesis is its systematic, systemic and synthetic vision of the human being and his existential path.** This vision is at the same time a bio-psycho-socio-spiritual one, that is inspired by the **guiding principle of all psychosynthesis: the principle of integration-organization-synthesis.** It is an integral vision of the human being, considered in all aspects and, above all, in the relations between these different aspects.

In this topic Assagioli was a true pioneer. He anticipated by several decades the reflections in the psychological field and borrowed from the paradigm shift that is taking place in other scientific disciplines. I am referring in particular to the changes that the quantum paradigm is bringing to our way of looking at reality, to the emerging science of complexity, to the systemic models that study

¹ P. Guggisberg Nocelli, *The Way of Psychosynthesis - A complete guide on origins, concepts and fundamental experiences with a biography of Roberto Assagioli*, Synthesis Insights, 2018 and *Know, Love, Transform yourself - Theory, techniques and new developments in Psychosynthesis* – Vol. I & Vol. II, Psychosynthesis Books, 2021 & 2022

above all the interconnections between the parts, to the interdisciplinarity that is increasingly necessary to understand a phenomenon as complex and wonderful as the human one.

This systemic and systematic vision is mainly represented by the **two fundamental diagrams** of Psychosynthesis, the Egg diagram and the star of psychological functions, and in the **seven fundamental experiences** of the path: disidentification, the self, the will, the ideal model, synthesis, the superconscious and the Self. These seven experiences are considered to be the central nucleus that form the essence of Psychosynthesis by Assagioli himself in a document he dictated in 1974², a few months before his death, and which represents, to some extent, his spiritual testament.

FdF: *I also would like to ask you how, according to you, Psychosynthesis integrates with other psychological approaches. This is a supplementary question to the previous one. In fact, from my point of view, every psychological school, in order to make its way, should be characterized by peculiarities that distinguish it from the other ones and at the same time it should be able to dialogue and integrate with other schools, in an interdisciplinary way.*

PGN: That's a good question! Let us return to the guiding principle of Psychosynthesis I mentioned earlier, the principle of integration-organization-synthesis. It also applies to **the relationships that psychosynthesis has with other schools**. Precisely because of this systemic and complex vision of the human being, lately **I like to think about the potential that Psychosynthesis has as a general psychological model, as a meta-model**.

Assagioli himself, in 1964, on the occasion of the VI International Congress of Psychotherapy, wrote a particularly enlightening passage concerning this theme: "*The first thing would be to establish relationships of appropriate collaboration [between the various schools]. This means first of all, admitting that every point of view or partial system is right because it offers something positive, and it is wrong because it excludes and denies. We must admit that each school, movement, point of view or technique has its own credits and limits; therefore, it is appropriate to know, appreciate and use the greatest number of them*"³.

But how do we actually proceed with this work of integration? I believe that there are **two important** points that can help us to find our way around:

1. First of all, we must connect the different forces of psychology (behaviorism and the schools derived from it, psychoanalysis and psychodynamic orientations, humanistic-existential psychology and transpersonal psychology) to the different psychic aspects represented in the ovoid diagram keeping in mind also their connection with distinct phases/aspects of the psychosynthetic process;
2. Secondly, it is very important to be able to distinguish, within each of these forces, three different operational levels: the technological one, the methodological one and the theoretical one.

Let's start with the first point.

The **first force of psychology**, or "*surface psychology*" (when Assagioli wrote, it was behaviorism and now we can consider all those path that have assumed and developed the same theoretical approaches and methodological procedures) recalls the first phase / aspect of the psychosynthetic path that concerns the investigation of conscious aspects of personality. In the Egg diagram we can refer this first point to **the field of consciousness**, to what is directly observable in the here-and-now.

² R. Assagioli, ANNEX A – *Training in Psychosynthesis*, Notes dictated in English by dr. Roberto Assagioli on 19 May 1974

³ R. Assagioli, cit. in P. Guggisberg Nocelli, *The Way of Psychosynthesis*, cited work

The **second force of psychology** or "*deep psychology*" (the psychoanalytic approach and the psychodynamic derivation) corresponds to the second phase / aspect of the psychosynthetic process, that is, the exploration and integration of the unconscious contents into the conscious personality, especially those that in the Egg diagram are represented by **the middle and lower unconscious**.

The **third force of psychology** or "*human psychology*" (humanistic-existential psychology) mainly focuses on the unveiling of the human person, on the experience of identity with its corollaries of freedom, intentionality, ability to assume responsibility and to give meaning (intended both as meaning and as direction) to its existence. This concerns the third aspect of the psychosynthetic method, the long process of disidentification - self-identification that leads to the gradual deepening of two central experiences, which are also central in the Egg: **the "I"**, or personal self, **and the will**, its privileged function.

The fourth and last phase of the psychosynthetic path is represented by the work of psychosynthesis itself, which can take place both on a personal level and on a transpersonal level. At this second level we are concerned with integrating and organizing in the conscious personality the contents that in the Egg diagram are represented by the **higher unconscious** and with deepening the **relationship between the "I"**, or personal self, **and the transpersonal Self**, more and more. This aspect is specifically described by the **fourth force of psychology**, or "psychology of heights" (transpersonal or spiritual psychology).

Can you see how Psychosynthesis really has the potential to be a general model? A model which is able to integrate in a harmonious way the contributions from the various psychological directions? But how can we achieve it? *And here I'm coming to the second point. The integration process must be carried out in a scientific, rigorous manner.* It's not like making soup! In fact, one of the criticisms that is occasionally directed at Psychosynthesis is precisely that of being a sort of heterogeneous eclecticism. This is not at all true, and to well understand this fundamental point, we must cultivate a trifocal vision and distinguish very clearly these following different levels of operation:

- *technology* (techniques and exercises)
- *methodology* (general approaches and methods)
- *theory* (doctrines and beliefs)

With regard to **the first of the three levels, that of techniques**, we can say that, in principle, any technique and exercise which proves to be useful for relieving human suffering and promoting greater harmony and development in individuals and groups can be used in the psychosynthetic process. Always keeping in mind that the technique par excellence, the crucible of all techniques is the relationship between the therapist and the patient/client. Of course, each professional chooses the best tools to be used according to his or her personal inclinations and, above all, according to the current characteristics of the person or group with whom he or she is working.

At **the level of general methodology**, it is important to be able to use the most appropriate approach. And here the distinction between the different forces of psychology we mentioned earlier turns to be particularly useful. We must constantly ask ourselves: "where is this individual, or this group, in the present moment? what does he/it really need? a cognitive-behavioral approach? a psychodynamic intervention? some existential or transpersonal level work?" Of course, the method chosen will be different if "in the figure" there are contents and dynamics of the pre-personal level (psychodynamic disorders or discomforts), of the personal level (existential issues, noogenic neurosis) or of the transpersonal level (disorders related to the process of self-transcendence). Assagioli warned that if, for example, we use a psychoanalytic methodology to treat a self-transcendence related issue we will mess up everything, but we would do the same even if we used a methodology suitable for self-transcendence to treat a psychoneurosis, related to pre-personal suffering. What's the problem? It stays in the fact that our development does not proceed in a linear way - from a pre-personal to a personal and then transpersonal level - and that these different levels are all always present at a potential level. The practitioner of Psychosynthesis must therefore be able

to calibrate, to identify which approach is the most suitable in each moment. This is not easy and requires good preparation and experience, but it is really very useful, it has a great potential!

Finally, these first two levels (the technical and the methodological) must be integrated with the third, **the theoretical level**, which, as I said, is mainly illustrated in the two fundamental diagrams of the Egg and the star of psychological functions and in the seven fundamental experiences that constitute the core of psychosynthetic teaching.

The clear distinction between these three operational levels allows us to constantly update our model, making it programmatically open to the integration of the best innovations in the field of techniques and methods (I'm thinking just to give a couple of examples, to the many interesting stimuli that come from the field of neuroscience, from the field of trauma treatment, from *Mindfulness*, etc.), without losing our theoretical identity and therefore without falling into a heterogeneous eclecticism.

FdF: *Some of the things you told me are related to one of the sentences Assagioli said in one of his last interviews. When asked what the limits of Psychosynthesis might be, Assagioli replied that Psychosynthesis was perhaps also too inclusive and this made it difficult to establish what its boundaries were: fixing what is and what is not Psychosynthesis. For this very reason, in my thesis I have tried to outline, more than the limits, the founding characteristics of Psychosynthesis, at the level of theory, methods and techniques. This serves to distinguish what part of Psychosynthesis from what is part of other schools. I have tried to illustrate that at the base of Psychosynthesis there is both a solid psychodynamic theory, with the map of the psyche constituted by Assagioli's Egg diagram, and specific methods and techniques. Finally, I tried to show both the points of contact with other schools (psychodynamic, cognitive-behavioral, humanistic, trans-personal) and the specificities of psychosynthetic practice.*

PGN: What did you identify as specificity?

FdF: *First of all, the model of the psyche based on the two maps of the ovoid and the star of the psychic functions. Then, the centrality of the will as a central function with which the "I" is identified.*

PGN: Actually, in Psychosynthesis **the will** is one of the two components of the individual identity. The "I" is the center of pure self-awareness and will. It would therefore be more correct to say that the "I" is "will", and not that it "uses will". We are living beings, vital and therefore dynamic. I like to define the will as **the free and natural movement of the being who wants to express himself in the world**. The "I" in Psychosynthesis is that variable amount of self-awareness and will that we can experience in the here and now. The "I" is not an object to be grasped, it is a process, thanks to which we experience self-awareness, will and also, self-transcendence, that movement that puts us in relation with the Self. It is interesting to note that in some relatively recent scientific articles about the understanding of the biological mechanisms of *mindfulness*, talk about three fundamental dimensions: *self-awareness*, *self-regulation*, *self-transcendence*, which correspond precisely to the characteristics ascribed to the "I" in Psychosynthesis⁴.

FdF: *I then pointed out the typical Psychosynthesis processes of dis-identification from one's own psychic contents, of self-identification at the level of the self, of the ideal model and of Self.*

⁴ David R. Vago e David A. Silbersweig, *Self-awareness, self-regulation, and self-transcendence (S-ART): a framework for understanding the neurobiological mechanisms of mindfulness*, *Front. Hum. Neurosci.* 6:296. doi: 10.3389/fnhum.2012.00296, 25 October 2012

In the field of psychosynthetic practice I have highlighted the importance of symbolic and meditative techniques. From my point of view, even if Jung was the psychologist who most talked about and wrote about symbols, it was Assagioli the one who used them most in therapeutic practice. He made symbols a door, an interface between the worlds of the concrete language of the conscious mind on the one hand, the unconscious and the superconscious on the other.

In this way I wanted to point out the identity of Psychosynthesis, showing that not everything is Psychosynthesis; that Psychosynthesis is not a fruit salad, but it possesses a strong identity, which includes a theoretical structure, a method and a series of techniques. And here I must say that, for me, the bible of the practical methods of Psychosynthesis is your book, "Know, Love, Transform yourself", an essential work for those who want to approach the techniques of Psychosynthesis in an analytical and in-depth way.

In the final part of this interview I would like to take a look into the potential future of Psychosynthesis. What are the possible and desirable developments for you, so that you can go even further than what has been done so far? I'm asking you this because, from my point of view, one of the great risks of all schools is the crystallization within what has been written by the founder. Your books, instead, besides being a synthesis of what has been done so far in the field of Psychosynthesis, can also become a starting point for the future. Before your books, in Psychosynthesis there was everything, but it was chaotic; now the material is organically ordered.

PGN: I hope that these two books, together with other texts by other colleagues, will form a common basis on which to build, reflect and create new developments. On the one hand, it is important to **update the language** used by Assagioli. In fact, the content of his message has never been so valid and meaningful, proof of which is that many of the ideas of Psychosynthesis are now also part of the usual practice of other schools and orientations. Perhaps Assagioli's dream was to create a psychology, so to speak, of planetary scope capable of distilling and synthesizing the best of European, American, and oriental psychology. The language he had available and used was, however, that of the nineteenth century, which must therefore be looked at in transparency and renewed in form and terminology.

Then it is important to engage in **publication and clinical research** in order to actively promote scientific acknowledgement of the work done. For example, I look with great interest at what is being done in some areas, for example in the aforementioned *Mindfulness*, but not only that. We must learn to observe with attention and curiosity the avant-garde, both in psychology and in other fields, inspiring us not so much about the contents (those already exist), but mainly about the way of proceeding, and the methods of research and dissemination that are adopted to be known and valued in the most appropriate way.

FdF: *From a more theoretical and speculative point of view, in the field of Psychosynthesis much has already been done in personal psychology, much remains to be done in transpersonal psychology. For example, one can develop the seven paths of human self-realization. These are paths that, in a first phase, are of individual realization, but going forward in human evolution, assume transpersonal characteristics, of group realization in favor of the common good. Until a few years ago, the human race was probably not ready to study these developments. Most of people went to psychologists mainly looking for some relief from their disorders and pathologies. Today, more and more people consult a psychologist also for existential discomforts, to discover the meaning of their existence. Psychosynthesis could then be better equipped than many other schools to offer answers to these questions.*

PGN: Yes, well said! In fact I too believe that **Psychosynthesis is better equipped than other schools to respond to the many needs of individuals**. It has a broad, very comprehensive view. But I would be careful not to distinguish too rigidly between these two categories of people: Psychosynthesis starts from the idea that each individual is a multiplicity. This means that each of us

carries within these different aspects or psychic levels. In my clinical practice I observe people who experience psychological issues, maybe serious ones, at a sub-personal and/or personal level and then are driven by this discomfort to open up to other dimensions of research, let's call them more transpersonal. I also observe people who are very dedicated to transpersonal, spiritual research who use it to protect themselves from deep wounds that would need to be recognized and welcomed. This is very important. We are a *unique*, integrated system, and what is **most significant is the quality of the relationships between the various aspects or levels that make us up**. Of course, didactically the distinction between personal and transpersonal psychosynthesis is very useful, because it makes evident qualitatively different processes, but we must also always keep in mind the simultaneous co-presence of these processes, and their constant interactions.

FdF: *In a sense, as these people's needs grow, opportunities for development in psychological research are created. Psychological studies often go hand in hand with the needs expressed by people. Today perhaps there is a greater presence in people of needs aimed to resolving the immediate disorder, expanding their potential and entering the transpersonal world. These are requirements that are sometimes made explicit by the client, in other cases they must be understood by the psychologist.*

PGN: Of course, it is. If you allow me, in order to conclude this interesting conversation, I will widen a little the context of this last important statement of yours. We are living in an **era of transition**, characterized by the profound changes that the unstoppable process of globalization brings with it. We are facing not only several "hot" issues, many of which are not new - wars, terrorism, mass migration, climate crises, serious socio-economic and gender inequalities, child exploitation, alienation and loneliness, etc. - but above all we are facing the new global scope of these issues. It is this global impact, I believe, that is the substantial difference from the past. Obviously, this state of affairs also has a profound effect on individuals. It reshapes our old needs and constellate new ones.

Psychology (like the other scientific disciplines) has the ethical task of confronting itself, of questioning itself deeply on this state of affairs, in order to offer visions and articulated, meditated and effective answers. It is no longer just a question of the individuals' good and health, but of the good and the health of the entire human group, and of all the living beings who inhabit this planet.

And it is here that **Psychosynthesis reveals today, perhaps even more than in the past, its extreme topicality, its solid foundation, its being a precious gift**. In my books I have always tried to point out the importance of existential experience instead of pure intellectual knowledge, which is certainly very useful but not sufficient. This is important to me: ideas and words should not stray too far from deeds and actions. Psychosynthesis strongly emphasizes this. It gives great importance to the psychological practice so much so that Assagioli himself defined it as a "life practice". Its purpose is truly the transformation of our daily lives, of our consciences.

Let's go back to the centrality of the "I" and of the will we were talking about before. At the heart of Psychosynthesis are two truly fundamental RMA questions: "*Who are we really? What do we really want?*" (which doesn't seem very different from asking "*What do we really love? What's moving us? What makes us alive, vital and joyful?*"). Concretely, the journey that each of us undertakes to seek our answers to these fundamental questions has the final aim of leading us to the fuller and deeper realization of our true identity, of the Self, that is, to **broaden our understanding of the interconnection, of the substantial interrelation of all things (within us and outside us)**. Within us: between the body, the psyche and the spiritual dimension (remember that the full name of "Psychosynthesis" is "Bio-Psychosynthesis"); between the various levels of the unconscious and between these and consciousness; between the psychological functions (sensation, impulse-desire, emotion-feeling, thought, imagination, intuition) and between these and the self and will on a personal level, and finally with the transpersonal self and will. Outside of us: in ever wider circles, between the individual and his family, friends, colleagues; with the groups to which he or she belongs

(professionally, politically, culturally, socially, spiritually...), and gradually with the whole of humanity, with all other living beings, nature, the planet that is our home and even more.

Fostering this experience has never been more urgent and significant than in this particular historical period. **The shift of attention from the "parties" to the "relations between the parties", clarifies and expands our vision of the Common Good** and our ability to act accordingly. Psychosynthesis leads us to action, to an action that is an ever-clearer expression of the awareness of the profound interconnection of all things, an action that has its roots in our true being, therefore guided by love.