

ONE

THE LIFE AND WORK OF ROBERTO ASSAGIOLI

He was very early. Who was there to hear such a large and balanced statement? Not many . . .

—from a eulogy for Roberto Assagioli, *Synthesis 2*

In 1909, C. G. Jung wrote to Sigmund Freud about a young Italian psychiatrist in training, Roberto Assagioli (1888–1974), who seemed to be a promising candidate to develop psychoanalysis in Italy. Jung wrote of Assagioli as

a very pleasant and perhaps valuable acquaintance, our first Italian, a Dr. Assagioli from the psychiatric clinic in Florence. Prof. Tanzi assigned him our work for a dissertation. The young man is very intelligent, seems to be extremely knowledgeable and is an enthusiastic follower, who is entering the new territory with the proper *brio*. He wants to visit you next spring. (McGuire 1974, 241)

If one reads *The Freud/Jung Letters* (McGuire 1974), it is clear that Assagioli was indeed “an enthusiastic follower” deeply interested in the early psychoanalytic movement. He contributed the article “Freud’s Theories in Italy” to the *Jahrbuch für Psychoanalytische und Psychopathologische Forschungen*, the psychoanalytic periodical conceived by Freud and edited by Jung; was published in the journal *Zentralblatt für Psychoanalyse*, listed with the likes of Karl Abraham, Ludwig Binswanger, A. A. Brill, and Jung (Berti 1988); was a member of the psychoanalytic group, formed by Jung in 1910, whose elected president was Ludwig Binswanger, later famous for *Daseinsanalyse* or *existential analysis*; and received psychiatric training under renowned psychiatrist Paul Eugen Bleuler—who coined the terms *schizophrenia*, *ambivalence*, and

autism (Gay 1988)—at the Burghölzli Hospital of the University of Zürich, where Jung also had trained.

However, when Assagioli did complete his doctoral dissertation at the University of Florence, he had entitled it not “Psychoanalysis” but rather “Psychosynthesis” (“*La Psicointesi*”). So even at this early date, Assagioli was beginning to move beyond Freud’s psychoanalysis:

A beginning of my conception of psychosynthesis was contained in my doctoral thesis on Psychoanalysis (1910), in which I pointed out what I considered to be some of the limitations of Freud’s views. (Assagioli 1965a, 280)

In developing psychosynthesis, Assagioli sought not only to employ *analysis*—analytic insight into the human personality and its dysfunction—but *synthesis* as well, an understanding of how human growth moves toward increasing wholeness, both within the individual and in the individual’s relationship to the world at large.

Assagioli agreed with Freud that healing childhood trauma and developing a healthy ego were necessary aims, but he held that human growth could not be limited to this alone; he sought an understanding of human growth as it proceeded beyond the norm of the well-functioning ego into the blossoming of human potential, which Abraham Maslow (1954, 1962, 1971) later termed *self-actualization*, and further still into the spiritual or transpersonal dimensions of human experience. A quotation from the *Textbook of Transpersonal Psychiatry and Psychology* follows:

Whereas Maslow explored fundamental issues in transpersonal psychology, Roberto Assagioli pioneered the practical application of these concepts in psychotherapy. Assagioli proposed a transpersonal view of personality and discussed psychotherapy in terms of the synthesis of personality at both the personal and spiritual levels. He dealt with the issue of spiritual crises and introduced many active therapeutic techniques for the development of a transcendent center of personality. (Scotton, Chinen, and Battista 1996, 52)

In other words, Assagioli envisioned an approach to the human being that could address both the process of personal growth—of personal healing, integration of the personality, and self-actualization—as well as transpersonal development—that dimension glimpsed, for example, in *peak experiences* (Maslow) reported during inspired creativity, falling in love, communing with nature, scientific discovery, or spiritual and religious practice. Assagioli (1965a, 1973a) called these two dimensions of growth, respectively, *personal psychosynthesis* and *spiritual or transpersonal psychosynthesis*.

As we shall see, subsequent evolution of Assagioli’s thought has understood the personal and transpersonal dimensions as distinct developmental

lines within the larger process of what he called *Self-realization*. In his concept of Self-realization, Assagioli recognized a deeper *Self* operating supraordinate to the conscious personality. This Self not only provides direction and meaning for individual unfoldment—both personal and transpersonal—but operates as a source of *call* or *vocation* in life. Such call invites us to discover and follow our deepest truth, the most essential meaning and purpose in our lives, and to live this out in our relationships with ourselves, other people, nature, and the planet as a whole.

Psychosynthesis is, therefore, one of the earliest forerunners of humanistic psychology and transpersonal psychology—the third and fourth forces in the history of psychology—which emerged in the 1960s to join the first two forces, behaviorism and psychoanalysis (see Scotton, Chinen, and Battista 1996). Assagioli's conception of personal psychosynthesis has an affinity with humanistic psychology and other approaches (such as existential psychology) that attempt to understand the nature of the healthy personality and the actualization of unique, personal selfhood. Similarly, his conception of transpersonal psychosynthesis is related generally to the field of transpersonal psychology with its study of mystical, unitive, and peak experiences in which the individual moves beyond a sense of independent selfhood to experience a unitive and universal dimension of reality. Accordingly, Assagioli served on the board of editors for both the *Journal of Humanistic Psychology* and the *Journal of Transpersonal Psychology*.

So what were the influences on this man who developed a system that so early foreshadowed these important movements in psychology?

ROBERTO ASSAGIOLI AND HIS INFLUENCES

Any discussion of influences on a person's life begins most naturally with personal history. However, Assagioli was notoriously reticent about discussing his life. He felt that it was a mistake to focus too much on his own personality rather than on the development of his work. He seemed concerned that such a focus on personality might lionize him, perhaps even encourage the view that he was a spiritual teacher or guru rather than the practicing clinician and psychological thinker he was. Such a distorted perception of himself might have, in turn, distorted the perception of psychosynthesis, leading people to mistake it for a spiritual teaching or a philosophical doctrine rather than the open-ended, evolving, psychological system he had created. In light of this, it makes sense, too, that Assagioli was not interested in leading some sort of movement or organization, and thus he staunchly refused any administrative control over the development of psychosynthesis as a whole.¹

We accept the idea that spiritual drives or spiritual urges are as real, basic and fundamental as sexual and aggressive drives.

—Roberto Assagioli

It was only toward the end of his life that Assagioli finally did—yielding to pressure from his colleagues—choose a biographer, the Boston psychotherapist, Eugene Smith. But Assagioli died shortly thereafter, and Smith was left with little direct information from Assagioli himself and thus remained largely dependent on Assagioli's friends and colleagues for biographical information (Rindge 1974). But even this biography has never seen the light of day, so it is no surprise to find that there exists little in the literature about Assagioli's life.

While we may lament this dearth of material—along with those who pressed him for a biography—this lack happily follows Assagioli's own personal wishes. He obviously believed that psychosynthesis should be evaluated on its own merits rather than on the pedigree or personality of its creator. Perhaps we can keep this in mind as we explore the biographical data we do have and move through this to examine psychosynthesis itself as the most valid field for uncovering the influences on Assagioli.

BIOGRAPHY

Roberto Assagioli was born Roberto Marco Grego in Venice, Italy, on February 27, 1888. He was the only child of Elena Kaula (1863–1925) and Leone Grego (?–1890). Leone died when Roberto was about two years old, and his mother then married Dr. Emanuele Assagioli.²

The Assagiolis were “a cultured upper-middle-class Jewish family” (Hardy 1987), and to this Judaism was added Elena's later interest in Theosophy. The family spoke Italian, French, and English at home, and during his life Roberto also was to study German, Latin, Greek, Russian, and Sanskrit. Clearly, richly diverse currents of philosophy, culture, and religion ran through Assagioli's life from his earliest years.

The family moved from Venice to Florence in 1904 so that Roberto could study medicine at the Istituto di Studi Superiori, and “from 1905 on his friends in Florence were the young philosophers, artists, and writers who were

In 1911 I presented my view on the unconscious in a paper at the “International Congress of Philosophy” in Bologna.

—Roberto Assagioli

responsible for the cultural and literary review *Leonardo*” (Smith 1974). He trained with Bleuler in Switzerland, as noted above, studied psychoanalysis, made the acquaintance of C. G. Jung, and became especially interested in the work of William James and Henri Bergson. He received his medical degree from the University of Flo-

rence, with specializations in neurology and psychiatry. He wrote in 1910 the dissertation, “Psychosynthesis,” which contained a critique of psychoanalysis.

Upon entering practice as a psychiatrist, he also in 1912 founded the bimonthly scientific periodical, *Psiche (Psyche)*, editing and writing for this until it folded in 1915, due to World War I. This journal published “the first

of Freud's writings in Italian, translated by Assagioli and approved and authorized by Freud himself" (Berti 1988, 25).

During World War I, Assagioli was a "lieutenant-doctor," and after the war he married Nella Ciapetti, a Roman Catholic and Theosophist. He and Nella were married for forty years and had one son, Ilario (1923–1951). Roberto's mother died in 1925, and a year later he founded what became the Istituto di Psicopsintesi in Rome, "with the purpose of developing, applying and teaching the various techniques of psychotherapy and of psychological training" (Assagioli 1965a, 280). The following year, the Institute published the book, *A New Method of Treatment—Psychosynthesis*, in English.

In the 1930s, Assagioli produced perhaps two of the most seminal articles in psychosynthesis to this day. First written and published in Italian, they also were translated into English and appeared in the *Hibbert Journal*. These two articles eventually became the lead chapters in his later book, *Psychosynthesis* (1965a), under the titles "Dynamic Psychology and Psychosynthesis" and "Self-Realization and Psychological Disturbances." The first article outlines two fundamental constructs in psychosynthesis—the basic psychosynthesis model of the person and the stages of psychosynthesis—and will form the framework for the next two chapters of this book as well. The latter article concerns the tumultuous experiences that may attend a spiritual awakening, and it has been republished many times over the years, from a *Science of Mind* journal (Assagioli 1978), to a popular intellectual journal (Assagioli 1991a), to an important book in the field of spiritual emergency (Grof and Grof 1989) and, finally, to a compendium dealing with depression (Nelson and Nelson 1996).

World War II proved to be much more of a disruption in the life and work of Dr. Roberto Assagioli than was the first war. His institute in Rome was closed by the Fascist government, which was critical of his "Jewish background, his humanitarianism, and his internationalism" (Smith 1974). The government then accused him of being a pacifist, because he claimed that true peace could only be found within, and not by violent, political, or legal means—and consequently he was locked in solitary confinement for a full month. But Assagioli made use of his imprisonment by making it what he called a "spiritual retreat," focusing on meditation and his inner life, and he recorded the following transpersonal experience during this time:

A sense of boundlessness, of no separation from all that is, a merging with the self of the whole. First an outgoing movement, but not towards any particular object or individual being—an overflowing or effusion in all directions, as the ways of an ever expanding sphere. A sense of universal love. (in Schaub and Schaub 1996, 20–21)

There are varying accounts of Assagioli's activities after his release from prison, one author writing that he joined the underground north of Rome

(Smith 1974), and another that he and his son, Ilario, were forced to hide in the Italian countryside, with Ilario possibly contracting tuberculosis from which he eventually died in the early 1950s (Hardy 1987).

After the war, Assagioli founded the Istituto di Psicointesi at via San Domenico 16, in Florence, where he lived and worked for the rest of his life. He wrote, "from 1946 onwards courses of lectures on psychosynthesis . . . were given in Italy, Switzerland and England; and further articles and pamphlets were published in various languages" (Assagioli 1965a, 280). By the 1960s, psychosynthesis institutes had been founded in the United States, Greece, England, Argentina, and India, and several international conferences had been held.

International Conventions on Psychosynthesis were held at Villeneuve near Montreux, Switzerland, in 1960 and 1961, and in Rome in 1967.

—Roberto Assagioli

Assagioli always took spiritual matters seriously, both personally and professionally. He was known to practice hatha yoga, raja yoga, and various types of meditation, and he also was involved in Theosophy (discussed

later). In both his own practice and his work, he placed particular emphasis on service, understanding this as the most natural expression of Self-realization. For example, in the 1950s, he founded the Italian Union for Progressive Judaism, which was "based on an attitude of openness, and of understanding and collaboration with other peoples and religions" (Berti 1988, 38).

Over the years, Assagioli's interest in different spiritual and philosophical traditions led to contact with such notables as Jewish philosopher Martin Buber, esotericists P. D. Ouspensky and Alice Bailey, sage Lama Govinda, Indian poet Rabindranath Tagore, astrologer Dane Rudhyar, Sufi mystic Inayat Khan, Buddhist scholar D. T. Suzuki, logotherapy founder Viktor Frankl, and humanistic psychologist Abraham Maslow.

Assagioli died on August 23, 1974, at age eighty-six, in his villa in Capalona, Arezzo, which he had named after his beloved son Ilario. Shortly after his death, one eulogy pointed out with wonder how early Assagioli had conceived of psychosynthesis, and how long he had to wait before its more general acceptance:

He was very early. Who was there to hear such a large and balanced statement? Not many people in the twenties, not in the thirties, not in the forties, not in the fifties, were ready. It was only in the late sixties that, with the suddenness born of deep and massive need, his books and other writings were taken up by thousands. Almost sixty years needed to elapse, so far was he ahead of his time. (in Vargiu 1975)

By the time of the publication of the *International Psychosynthesis Directory 1994–1995* (Platts 1994), there were 107 institutes operating in thirty-two countries, and international conferences were being held on a regular basis.

INFLUENCES REVEALED IN ASSAGIOLI'S WORK

Assagioli seems to have written and edited his entire professional career, writing more than 150 articles and essays during his life, although many were reportedly lost when the Fascists ransacked and dynamited his home during the war (Smith 1974). There appear to be no complete unpublished manuscripts, although the institute he founded has a wall of boxes filled with small notes he made during his professional life. His two major English-language books still remain *Psychosynthesis* (1965a) and *The Act of Will* (1973a), although a posthumous collection of articles, *Transpersonal Development* (1991b), also was published.

In agreement with Assagioli himself, we believe that it is to his writings more than to his biography that we must turn to recognize the influences he brought into his work. His major books bristle with references to leaders of Western psychology, from Freud, Jung, Adler, and Rank to Maslow, William James, Richard Bucke, Viktor Frankl, and Rollo May. But he drew from disciplines beyond psychology as well, referring also to Bach, Mozart, and Beethoven; St. John of the Cross, St. Catherine of Sienna, and St. Dominic; Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle; Dante, Emerson, and Thoreau; Nietzsche, Teilhard de Chardin, and Evelyn Underhill; Patanjali, Radhakrishnan, and Vivekananda; Ghandi, Schweitzer, Buber, and Martin Luther King; and the Buddha and Christ. Further, Assagioli discusses experiential states from diverse traditions such as the dark night of the soul, samadhi, prajna, satori, and cosmic consciousness, as well as subjects such as yin and yang, Shiva-Shakti, and the Tao.

Clearly, Assagioli's psychological work, while remaining true to his psychiatric training and clinical experience, also embraced an appreciation for many diverse cultures and traditions. In our teaching at the Institute of Transpersonal Psychology, each year we realize anew the breadth of Assagioli's thought as graduate students respond to their introductory course in psychosynthesis. These are students keenly interested in the connection between psychology and spirituality, and they come from many different spiritual traditions. As they study psychosynthesis, they often recognize principles from their own tradition in aspects of psychosynthesis, and so they infer that their tradition has been an important influence on Assagioli.

For example, one student demanded to know why Assagioli did not reference Ramana Maharshi, since psychosynthesis obviously drew upon the thought of that Hindu sage. Another wrote in his term paper that psychosynthesis was so coherent with his meditation practice that Buddhism must have been a strong influence on Assagioli, while a Christian student wondered why psychosynthesis had not been taught in her seminary, since it so clearly was founded on Christian principles. A longtime practitioner of Jewish mysticism claimed that he could see the Kabbala in the models of psychosynthesis; a teacher within a shamanic tradition said that her tradition and psychosynthesis

were viewing the same reality from different directions; and a Rosicrucian wrote that her attraction to psychosynthesis derived from its similarity to that system.

Such speculations about the possible influences on Assagioli are not reserved to those new to psychosynthesis. Some in the field apparently believe that psychosynthesis is the “exoteric expression” or a “stepped-down version” of Theosophy, particularly as developed by Alice Bailey, with whom Assagioli worked—even though psychosynthesis was conceived in 1910 or earlier, and Assagioli did not join Bailey’s group until 1930 (Berti 1988, 33). Assagioli was indeed active within the Theosophical movement subsequent to his creation of psychosynthesis, but even then, he strove to keep what he called a “wall of silence” between these two spheres of his work, ever cautioning against confusing the two. He wrote clearly that psychosynthesis was to remain neutral toward religion and metaphysics, and that it should not be confused with them (more later on this).

IN CONCLUSION

What, then, may we conclude from this vast range of possible influences on Assagioli and psychosynthesis? Precisely this: Whether such influences made any direct explicit impact or not, Assagioli has succeeded in developing an approach that, while firmly rooted in Western psychology, is yet consistent with widely disparate traditions. Thus it is a psychology suitable for use within a broad range of different traditions.

Unlike Freud’s psychoanalysis, for example, psychosynthesis does not adopt a reductionistic view of religious and spiritual experience but quite the reverse—it embodies a profound respect for the fundamental spiritual nature of the human being and a supportive attitude toward the development of this dimension of human experience. This is not to say that psychosynthesis is itself a spiritual path, a metaphysical philosophy, or a religion. Rather, its purpose is to remain a psychology, a “nondenominational” psychology, so to speak, and thus available to any and all spiritual paths. According to Assagioli:

At this point the question may arise as to the relationship between this conception of the human being [psychosynthesis] on the one hand and religion and metaphysics on the other. The answer is that psychosynthesis does not attempt in any way to appropriate to itself the fields of religion and of philosophy. It is a scientific conception, and as such it is neutral towards the various religious forms and the various philosophical doctrines, excepting only those which are materialistic and therefore deny the existence of spiritual realities. Psychosynthesis does not aim nor attempt to give a metaphysical nor a theological explanation of the great Mystery—it leads to the door, but stops there. (1965a, 6–7)

Having surveyed this vast array of influences, it can yet be said that psychosynthesis, while doubtlessly born and developed among these influences,

remains distinct from them all. It remains a psychological approach, “neutral towards the various religious forms and the various philosophical doctrines,” which can therefore be employed with the utmost respect for the spirituality, philosophy, culture, ethnicity, and worldview of the unique, individual person. In short, it remains a profoundly empathic discipline that does not ignore or pathologize the central experiences and meanings of people’s lives but rather recognizes and values these. Psychosynthesis is not a doctrine or teaching in which to believe, nor a religion or spirituality to be practiced; it is an open, developing psychology that seeks to facilitate human growth within the context of a person’s *own* deepest aspirations and life path.

The next two chapters elaborate two of the most fundamental constructs of psychosynthesis thought—the basic model of the human person and the stages of psychosynthesis—presented by Assagioli in the first of his two seminal articles, “Dynamic Psychology and Psychosynthesis,” mentioned above.

It is first and foremost a dynamic, even a dramatic conception of our psychological life . . .

—Roberto Assagioli
