

NOTES FROM AN ARCHAEOLOGIST'S DIARY

Prologue - 1993

I am working as a manager for a mental health charity supporting patients who at times experience severe psychological disturbance and fragmentation from consensus reality. As part of my training for this work I come across psychosynthesis and discover another way of being with this disturbance, another way of seeing and experiencing that acknowledges the psyche, the soul that exists even in the most unsettling of human conditions. It is a soul that seeks to free itself from the disturbance caused by the biological and psychological past and that seeks to live at ease with itself. This discovery eventually leads me to further training in psychosynthesis.

52

September 2023 – Situated Knowledge

It is a cold, dark, wet, and very windy early morning in Edinburgh as we board a flight to Florence. The plane shakes, buffeted by the wind, as we take off. 30 years have passed since that first job in mental health. Since then, I have completed training in psychosynthesis psychotherapy, clinical supervision and a foundation in group analysis and taught for 10 years at the Institute of Psychosynthesis in London. I no longer teach but I continue to have a full private practice but now with less unsettled patients than in my earlier years and offer supervision to psychotherapists and counsellors. I have embarked on research into the concepts of Roberto Assagioli and Wilfred Bion through a postmodern lens.

We land in bright sunshine and the heat warms us as we step onto the airport apron. The contrast with Scotland couldn't be greater. I notice the different trees, gardens, architecture, the dusty park where children kick a ball. I arrive at a grand Italian villa where lunch has just been served and join a small group of 24 people all here for the 10th International Gathering with its theme of Freedom. It is midday and, still catching up with myself, I am shown into the garden and am asked to state my purpose as I add a stone from Scotland to a bowl. I have seen this garden before in a YouTube video interview with Roberto Assagioli. It is different from what I have in mind. It is drier, fewer plants, more sunlight, and

annoyingly mosquitoes. I notice the yellow villas up on the hill, the cypresses pointing to the blue sky above and go back inside.



Why am I here? A short sojourn into PhD research introduced me to postmodern thinking that places the researcher in a web of multiple and intricate relationships, not just with other human beings or the ecology but with the material world as well. This has been called *situated knowledge* (Haraway, 2016) and it suggests that what we know and how we know is determined by where we are and who and what we are with. Rather than looking for information or knowledge from Assagioli's writing in the Archives I wanted to discover what new thoughts would come to me by placing myself here where psychosynthesis was born.

For a while I sit in Assagioli's study and notice the bookcases, the faded spines of books with some surprises in amongst them, Carlos Castaneda, Chögyam Trungpa, Suzuki, and Krishnamurti, old favourites of mine. I sit on the chair next to the big, dark wooden desk with a book and objects on it. Diffracted light comes in through the half-open shutters. There are some faded prints by Nicholas Roerich on one wall, another old friend, and on the wall across from the desk some photographs including Nella, his wife. I notice the worn brown couch in front of it and ask myself 'is this for the patient?' In the warmth of the afternoon while quite tired from my long journey here my thoughts start to drift.

THAT ULTIMATE REALITY CANNOT BE KNOWN, IT CAN ONLY BECOME

First, I find myself thinking about the young men and women who came to study with Assagioli in the 1960s and 70s. Seekers, eager to be with and learn from this wise man who by then was well into his seventies. I saw myself travelling East in those years and similarly looking for spiritual teachers who might offer me a different perspective from the one I had grown up with. I noticed the boxes tied with green ribbons in bows to close them, containing individual little yellow folders which fold open to reveal faded, discoloured scraps of writing on yellowed paper. Some of these yellow pages and little notes have just a few words on it, others short paragraphs, quotes from other writers, references to books and page numbers. Some are written in Italian, others in English or German. All is held in great reverence, and I am reminded of the libraries in Tibetan monasteries I had visited in India close to 50 years ago, reminded of the time spent translating texts and wrapping scriptures in red cloth to protect them for the future. Both then and now, everything preserved, everything holding importance, almost sacred.

Next, my thoughts drift to the patients who might have entered the room to visit the good doctor behind the desk looking for a cure, for healing on the couch, who came to visit *“the doctor who worked miracles”*. Later on Pierro Ferrucci, who studied with Assagioli in his later years, would tell us with warmth about his experience of seeing depressed and gloomy patients enter and leaving lighter and uplifted by being in the presence of Assagioli after just one visit. What I hear in this is the unique experience the patients had when meeting Assagioli the doctor and man rather than the slowly developing relationship between psychotherapist and patient that most of us work with. I look at this warm room and find myself rearranging the furniture, moving the big desk to the side under a window, replacing the couch with two comfy chairs closer together. I imagine how I would be practicing here in Casa Assagioli, not being separated from the patient by a desk or even having a desk so dominant in the middle of the room. I find my thoughts carry me forward in time and place, thinking about my room in grey, cold Edinburgh and the patients who come to see me there in 2023. I think about the different

quality of the relational experience that is co-created between me and my patients compared to the one of Roberto Assagioli and his patients 50 to 100 years ago.

In his notes Assagioli has suggested that ‘the role of the psychotherapist is a representative of the Self, the link to the Self.’ He wrote that *‘the goodness of therapy is the goodness of the relationship’*. The first statement perhaps unique to psychosynthesis while the second relates to any psychotherapeutic approach. He also touches on spiritual instruction with a manuscript reference that says, *“there must be a complete transference or delegation of one’s problem to the power from which help is desired. Spiritual power works by putting ideas into the hearts of men.”* Reading these documents I am struck by the entangling of the spiritual with the psychological and the psychotherapeutic in Assagioli’s way of working. It makes me think about the transference relationship where early life experiences can get re-enacted between psychotherapist and patient and this being coloured by the complexity of the spiritual teacher and disciple relationship.

A couple of days later we saunter up the road in glorious early morning sunshine to visit San Domenico’s Church and Monastery just outside of Florence. As I enter the sacristy and see the priest’s vestments laid out, I have a strange visceral experience. I am reminded of the times I spent as an altar boy still in primary school and how I was part of the transformation that takes place when an ordinary man puts on robes and through this becomes the channel between the congregation and the divine. It was a mysterious ritual that I was part of but that was never fully explained to me. From a religious perspective I was expected to trust what was taking place and to have faith in it. Here in a church, I think of Assagioli’s comment that the psychotherapist is the link with the Self and similarly that the priest is the link with God. Although psychosynthesis is not a spiritual path the language it uses is close to that spoken by spiritual teachers.

Later we venture out into the monastery olive grove where Donatella leads us through a guided meditation. I walk in amongst the trees while reflecting on the visceral

experience and this blurring of the psychotherapeutic with the spiritual. Dried olives lie in amongst the trees. I can hear bees buzzing as they bring the nectar to their hives. In one corner of the garden an apple tree has shed its fruit onto the stony ground. Slowly I get a greater sense of peace, stillness than the church, religion and the memories of rituals could offer me.

Back at Casa Assagioli, sitting next to Assagioli's desk I wonder again about the psychotherapist-patient relationship and how different that was in Assagioli's time. In those days psychotherapists tended to be doctors and psychiatrists who were often held in great esteem creating a specific transference dynamic. Doctors were seen to hold knowledge, authority, and wisdom while patients were more likely to follow up on their guidance and instructions. Over 100 hundred years have passed since Assagioli first formulated his ideas and his way of practising psychotherapy. I think about the different world we live in now, a world of much greater diversity and polarisation, a world perhaps even more unsafe and more uncertain. We live in a world where authority is questioned and where we are suspicious of authority figures.

In the days that follow, Gordon Symons presents a new translation of one of Assagioli's papers called Unity in Diversity which in part addresses my wondering and yet there is something about the language that seems to come drifting in from the past. It is a language that for me is filled with connotations and images of a different time from the complex diffracted world we live in now.

These past few years I have started to consider a different way of working that sees psychotherapy as a co-created relationship where both psychotherapist and patient sit in the not knowing. Bion (Bion, 1970) suggested that the psychotherapist's capacity to let go of memory and desire opens the possibility for transformation from O, ultimate reality, to take place. In my reading of Bion, specifically his later writing, I found him touch on concepts close to Assagioli's. Bion also made references to Martin Buber, eastern philosophy and an undefined knowing that has not come into form yet. Bion suggested that Ultimate Reality cannot be known, it can only become (Bion, 1970). I would add that this is close to a postmodern

perspective on the process of becoming; a process in which the psychotherapist is not the wise doctor who works miracles but is part of change just as much as the patient. It is a process that includes the material world as well, including the room, the building, and the material environment in which becoming takes place.

Archaeology of a man

Sitting in the different rooms at Casa Assagioli I am struck by the quantity of writing that the Archives contain, over 3000 books in the library collected by Assagioli and others until he died in 1974. In another room are even more books related to psychosynthesis that have been published since his death. While another contains filing cabinets with all his teaching notes in various drafts and final forms. A third room contains binders of his esoteric writings and in his study, more bookcases, some containing the boxes of short notes, scraps, magazine articles. I see my new colleagues for these few days silently and intently leafing through the pages and notes. From outside the noise of traffic passing on the road out of Florence up to Fiesole drifts into the room.

In the library I randomly take a book off the shelf by the Russian sociologist Pitrim Sorokin 'The American Sex Revolution' published in 1956, and on the dustcover, I read a review stating that he *warns that our world leadership is threatened by the possibility of complete sex anarchy*. I leaf through the pages of the book and put it back on the shelf with a smile, wondering what Sorokin would think now. This book had a personal dedication to Roberto Assagioli, and I wonder what happened to the sex anarchy that world leaders had to be worried about eighty years ago. There are other more familiar books, "The Way of the White Clouds", "Meditation in Action", and "The Three Pillars of Zen." I search the online catalogue and come across an Italian edition of "Wilfred Bion's Experiences in Groups" (Bion, 1980) and imagine a conversation the two could have had if they had met. Bion's O, the ultimate reality, seemed to me so close to Assagioli's concept of a Transpersonal Self.

Leaving the books in the library I start to explore Assagioli's teaching notes and as I read these, I think of Deleuze and Guatari's (2020) concept that language creates a specific territory that limits our experience of ourselves and the world we live in. Assagioli's is a didactic language, a spiritual language that instructs, directs, and guides. It offers insight into how to lead a meaningful and harmonious life. Assagioli was steeped in this language from birth, through the family and the culture he grew up in. It is interesting to read the psychosynthesis motto "the only way out is the way up" which in this language of height, points our gaze upwards as if in a church or temple. Later, on my flight home I am reading "Creating Harmony in Life" (Assagioli, 2022) with its emphasis on spiritual, practical self-development of the individual that can be attempted without the need for a "competent" other. This contrasts with the language of psychotherapy which I would say is a language that inquires, a language that explores into the inner world. The language of psychotherapy tends to reflect and go deep. A language that does involve another, hopefully competent psychotherapist. Its motto might be "the only way out is the way in".

It is the language that is created in the space between psychotherapist and patient, between self and other. Interestingly Assagioli does refer to this as well by suggesting that there is an approach in psychosynthesis "derived from psychoanalysis". It includes psychoanalytical phases, and this psychoanalytical element/investigation can be returned to throughout treatment "whenever symptoms or forms of resistance have to be eliminated." (Assagioli, 2022). Nonetheless, the emphasis in most of his writing seems to be on the language of self-development, a didactic and instructive language. I am aware of the broad brushstrokes I am painting here of the two distinct applications of psychosynthesis, one for self-development where another is not needed, and the other for psychotherapy which involves two people. I am also aware that these two different types of language and their interweaving seem unique to psychosynthesis as a psychospiritual approach and in this it contrasts with that used in other relational psychotherapy literature.

As the days pass a thought arrives as I look at my colleagues bent over books and papers. I notice how absorbed we are, how enthusiastic and intently we look at notes in the margins of books, words underlined, the little phrases on a scrap of paper and the messages it seems to hold. Each seems a priceless gift from the past. It makes me think of archaeologists and their enthusiasm and excitement when they discover a fragment of bone, a chip of pottery, a shard of glass. I wonder about these archaeologists and how they piece together a life gone by, a period of the past and what they can reveal from it, what knowledge they can glean from it.

We seem to be involved in a similar project in trying to discover more about Roberto Assagioli the man, the wise doctor, the psychotherapist, astrologist, esoteric explorer. We seem to try to add not only to our own understanding but also to what he had left behind as unfinished thinking, ideas, and writing. Here on the shelves in the different rooms of the Archives lie the remains of one man's thinking legacy and our group of archaeologists try to reconstruct and expand on this knowledge. We try to uncover something new from it. Each little piece of writing could contain a gem, a shard of wisdom.

I hold in my hands his paper on "The Construction of the Personality," the typed notes on faded paper and see the imprint of the metal keys of the old typewriter, the distortion of e's and o's hammered into the page. I notice the scoring out of paragraphs with a pen, words added in blue handwriting, red numbering. Other sections of the document are meant to be deleted. Seeing this I imagine the type writing process. I can hear the bell as the carriage reaches the end of each sentence, the rattle as the carriage returns to the left while the roller moves the paper up for the next sentence to be typed. No doubt even before this document was typed up there would have been short notes, scribbles, scraps of paper. Prior to Assagioli making his handwritten notes he would have done his reading, which in research terms, would have been called diffractive reading. It is obvious from his library that his thinking was derived from reading his spiritual, psychological, philosophical, and scientific

AN EVEN HIGHER FORTH PSYCHOLOGY, TRANSPERSONAL, TRANSHUMAN, CENTRED IN THE COSMOS RATHER THAN ON HUMAN NEEDS AND INTERESTS, TRANSCENDING THE HUMAN CONDITION

books, and that this reading would have given rise to new thoughts. Now, close to a hundred years later, I am holding this typed document, a document of its time, not just in what it says but also in how it was produced.

While holding the paper I think about us as archaeologists who are so busy trying to find that arrowhead of Assagioli's thoughts from the past and yet perhaps the greatest discovery would not be a word, phrase or paragraph written by Assagioli, but a new thought unearthed from the great unknown, the thoughts that descend from the Source, the mysterious as Assagioli puts it. By doing this we would unearth and uncover the future.

Archaeology of the future

56

Over a week later I am on my flight back north. The snowy tops of the Swiss Alps way down below reflect the sunshine back up to me, a strange upside-down sensation where I must look down to see the tops of mountains. Thinking about my work as a psychotherapist I realise that I am more often in the valley or going into the dark wood rather than reaching for the tops of mountains. Most often the way out is the way in or the way down and my task is to be there alongside the patient as we uncover and discover together. I am aware that many people may come to psychosynthesis as a way of personal growth and self-development and in this they reach for mountain tops. However, it is much more Assagioli's 'psychoanalytical phase' (Assagioli, 2022, p. 142) rather than the self-development phase that brings people to my door.

I travel north towards winter while leafing through the *Psicosintesi* magazine and come across the Assagioli for the Future article that speaks about a psychology for the future, "an even higher Forth psychology, transpersonal, transhuman, centred in the cosmos rather than on human needs and interests, transcending the human condition". (Assagioli, 2023, p. 62) For a few years now I have been wondering about what would influence Assagioli's thinking if he were alive now. What new thoughts would come into the world through him? He suggested that modern physics would inform such a new force in psychology and specifically the physics of energy. This

is precisely where postmodern philosophical thinking has placed itself in its inclusion of relational quantum physics theory. Is this then part of the archaeology of the future? Am I hearing Assagioli answer my question regarding what would influence his thinking now?

It also takes me back to the beginning of this article and Donna Haraway who suggested we are living in a time that 'is made of ongoing multispecies stories and practices of becoming-with in times that remain at stake, in precarious times, in which the world is not finished, and the sky has not fallen – yet. We are at stake to each other (Haraway, 2016, p.55). She suggested that these multispecies stories and practices involve the human and more than human world in which everything is linked to something, nothing is independent and in which the human is no longer at the centre. Here perhaps is the future psychology Assagioli was writing about. Here is the situated knowledge that arises through interconnectedness, an unfolding process of discovery.

Postscript Scotland December 2023

It is the middle of December, and I am in my consultation room in Edinburgh. I have turned the heating up and am waiting for the first patient of the day to arrive. The past couple of months I have tried to summarise my thoughts about this extremely rich and inspiring experience of the 10th International Gathering in Florence. The theme of Freedom springs back to mind and I am grateful to have been part of this. The freedom to dip in and out of what was on offer during the event and the freedom to find outer and inner space for new thoughts to arrive. I hope it will give the reader a little flavour of what it was like for me. I wish to extend my gratitude to Francesco Viglienghi, Donatella Randazzo, and all the Gruppo Alle Fonti for making this experience possible.

Grazie Mille a tutti.

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