

I SEE, I FEEL, I SPEAK, AND ...

(Translation by Mike Malagrecia)

One step after another, we have reached a crucial stage of our journey. We have explored the stages of the *secure base* or *holding environment* of the early months and years of life, and we have considered the great crisis of identification during puberty and adolescence. Now, we will consider one of the most fundamental rights of any human being, the right of the Soul to affirm its potency, its strength – the right that expresses the will-to-be and to assert itself, to find its own space in existence.

18

Keeping in mind all the considerations presented in the previous articles in this series, we can think of this next stage as an *adult* existential dimension that includes the various levels and functions of the individual; it coordinates and integrates the various planes that constitute the building blocks of the personality.

First, the ability to perceive the external reality as an “object,” distinguishing it from the personal self, is related to **the function of seeing** or, rather, *observing*. This has to do with mental functioning and with the ability to distinguish and discriminate the self and the outside world. This is a function related to the brain’s subcortical region, although, strangely enough, is mainly concerned with purely bodily functions. The well-known studies on “mirror neurons” confirm the psychodynamic theory of object relations. The function of effective mirroring, the ability to empathize, distinguish and appreciate the borders of the self by visually recognizing those of the other (the mother) translate into the inner construction of the self-image, i.e.: the ability to perceive and understand the meaning of any given action that is the precondition for the development of inter-subjectivity (Racalbuto, 1994).

Second, in any consideration of empathy, what we are actually looking at is **the function of feeling** – a further step into awareness. In particular, this implies

the discovery of the uniquely human ability to be in a relationship – feeling our inside world allows to feel somebody else’s world. This is possible when the individual has had the early experience of feeling the heat, the voice, the smell, the loving gestures of another individual, the adult-mother, through whom we can begin to feel one’s self as a *being-in-the-good*.

This is the primary experience of identity and the prerequisite for the ability to self-identify. This experience lets us appreciate the Soul is within us and, at the same time, it is something that encompasses us.

Another way we could consider this is by taking into account the energy of Eros, simply and beautifully described by Roberto Assagioli as: “the primordial vital impulse, the tendency that originates all the basic instincts, later differentiated into the various human impulses and desires, refined in feelings, sublimated in aspirations: pulsating life, overwhelming flame, propulsive force, heat, fire.” (Assagioli, 1993).

Third, and finally, **the function of the word**, or the dynamics of Logos that include the right to expression and the ability to guide and direct Eros. This function originates in the conceptualization of the need and of the pleasure principle – the fundamental instances that become recognized, expressed, and “narrated” first with the recognition of one’s capacity to love, then with the wish to be an active vehicle for love, and finally through the ability to exercise the right to be genuine, honest, and meaningful.

In “The Soul’s Bill of Rights,” Massimo Rosselli indicates: “truth and knowledge are the basis of this right that involves the search for meaning in existence, along with a need for deep honesty in all manifestations of life. It would seem that the Soul is at home in the truth and in the various forms it takes.” (Rosselli, 2008).

We live in a society and in an age that exacerbate the outer form of life. Fragmentation and separation of the self is evident in family, in work and social roles, and in the interrelations among them, leading to dramatic forms of isolation that might trigger fear of living.

These are, in turn, amplified by the current (we might say, *permanent*) socio-economic crisis and result in an increase of the suicide rates, the use of psychotropic drugs and psychotropic substances, domestic violence, femicide, homophobia, and the anguish of loss.

In particular, within the family unit, the mother-child relationship is often overwhelmed by the role of education or, rather, by a commitment to the standard form of education we feel we should comply with. This becomes an unbearable burden when is added to the initial role of caregiver. The emotional investment is projected and actively looked for “outside,” in the many forms of narcissistic individualism that have now become the norm. The most recent clinical research studies indicate the widespread myth of materialistic gratification, the euphoria for any kind of external fulfilment, and the obsession with achieving personal goals based on consumerism’s demands. In addition, there is the progressive dissolution of the father figure, that is, the *pater* model (*pater* = patrimony) that is capable of taking responsibility and harmonize a genuine sense of personal success with the fostering and promotion of the common good.

The opportunity of a phase of crisis is that it helps us to focus the attention on what happens “inside.” What shall we find there? What vision lies ahead for us?

Any cognitive processes (from the Latin root meaning *born together* or *born with*) is primarily an emotional experience, and hence a bodily experience. In other words, any educational and formative process is associated with the acquisition of new content knowledge (both about oneself and about the outside world), and is filtered by the relationship with the other. This is why it is essential to develop the ability to learn from experience and give one’s creative, constructive contribution to the world. This is possible when we develop the ability to tolerate and hold within the inevitable anxiety and uncertainty triggered by the experience of “not knowing,” “not understanding.” We can only develop this ability with the other, a “thou” that is fully present within the formative relationship.

Oftentimes, unfortunately, what we encounter while working with young adults is, instead, a deep sense of failure and inadequacy. If the primordial experience of holding and mirroring is absent, there develops a sense of failure of the relationship, with a direct impact on the emotional world, one’s inner parts.

Oftentimes, while undergoing therapy or counseling, people often spend their time talking about “others” to avoid the difficulties of addressing what is happening in their inner world – is this not the basic socializing and anti-panic function of gossiping? This is particularly the case with teenagers grown in isolation, within the context of a virtual communication, video-centric, culture. They often suffer from what might be called “emotional illiteracy:” they cannot describe why they feel offended or hurt by friends; they do not know how to explain why they love this particular friend, or the reason why they love someone who does not love them back; they cannot describe why they hate a specific teacher, or a parent. This condition can greatly amplify the suffering, making it overwhelming and devastating, especially if one is lonely and isolated.

Emotional isolation is a defense mechanism against the irruption of emotional, unknown contents perceived as dangerous (and oftentimes linked to trauma) and that might activate “avoiding” and “denying” sub-personalities. Instead, *alexithymia* (i.e. lack of words to express an emotion) is a pre-existing condition that indicates the failure of the holding and mirroring relationship between the “good enough” mother and the child. It reveals the violation of the primary Soul rights, resulting in the failure of the mother-child rapport, noticeable during the developmental phases and personal growth in the form of injuries and wounds.

In this relational dimension, the body is at the very center, insofar as it is a direct expression of the Self’s rights and needs.

If the mother does not “digest and reconstitute” those needs with her body (sight, voice, touch, etc.), hence creating a bond with the body of the child, everything remains at

the level of proto-emotions (or “beta elements,” to use Bion’s term) – uncommunicable psychological elements that cannot be expressed (Solano, 2001). This is also the origin of the so-called “somatizations:” symbolic (as well as neuro-biological) representations of the needs and expressions of the Self that are an attempt to integrate the discomfort into the field of consciousness and, therefore, constitute an attempt towards adaptation.

According to Daniel Siegel, the American psychiatrist that have developed the *mindsight* (presence mindful awareness) approach, there is a “window of tolerance” consisting of *adaptive function* and *harmony*, which opens and expands when the initial mother-child attunement succeeds. Beyond the borders of this window, we become dysfunctional and move either into chaos, confusion and dispersion, or towards rigidity, isolation and contraction (Siegel, 2013).

The maternal function (the “alpha” function) is precisely that of a unifying center that lets the child’s body become harmoniously integrated, a genuine witness, assertive and expressive of herself, even throughout her future cognitive development, hence experimenting the adaptive function and harmony. This function grants the ability to move towards the borders of the window where dysfunction and danger are perceived, where safety “is never enough” – that is, where change is possible.

In the event of failure of the primary mother-child attunement, can the “alpha function” be recovered? The answer is yes, insofar as it is a *function*, it is not the exclusive monopoly of any single individual capacity. In fact, this recovery can happen in a relationship with substitutive figures (friend, teacher, parent, coach, animals, nature, etc.) that function as external unifying centers. It can also happen in the therapeutic relationship, where the therapist may initially play a maternal role or the function of *rèverie* – the ability to take in pre-verbal or verbal communications and to process them, restituting them to the person, usually repaired in the form of symbols that provide structuring and holding. In this sense, the wide range of imaginative techniques, so central in Psychosynthesis, are of primary importance.

Finally, the *adolescent group*, the clan, but especially the personal and spiritual growth group can perform this alpha function, because they act proving the support of borders and of holding. The group becomes the representation of the inner world, varied and complex, limited and defined by a sort of “*I-skin*.” That is, the group allows the experience of having a space and time to get in touch with one’s emotional world, to make it even conceivable at the mental level and to promote the expansion of feeling, the expansion of the heart.

The significance of this lies in the possibility of re-processing our increasing trust in contacting our wholeness from the most intimate and simplest center within, which is a reflection of the presence of the Soul, and an ability to assert the Soul’s rights. The person becomes capable of being present, simply and wholly, in the world.

This article about the cycle of experience must have an open end because beyond this point we enter the psychological dimension of the super-conscious and the region of the Higher Self, which entails Its ability to communicate, to let energy flow, and to being. According to Roberto Assagioli, this dimension is a *paradoxical fusion of individuality and universality* (Assagioli, 1973) that, we might humbly add, leaves us “speechless.”

Indeed, the experience of the Self is personal, unique and original; it may manifest in different ways: through the appreciation of beauty, poetry, art, love, nature, knowledge, altruism, social commitment, spiritual growth, meditation, etc., all of which originate in the same sense of universality, permanence and unification that are part of the existential experience of each of us.

What humans being can and really wish to experience, insofar as we are represented in the *living I* (Assagioli, 1977), can only take place through a gradual unfoldment that reveals itself to the light of consciousness and progressively comes into realization. Each momentary and partial synthesis brings with it the reality and value of our conflicts, struggle and pain as possible dynamic elements that lead us to take the next step. It also carries

within the attractive energy of our center of consciousness reflecting the Principle of Universal Love – unchanging, instinctively projected into ongoing action and full manifestation.

In order to experience and enjoy such a reflection of the Higher Self in the center of consciousness (at least in one of its many possible forms), it is necessary to recognize the function of *external unifying centers*. These help to keep alive the spark of desire and, along with it, the possibility that any event bring to life new meaning, purpose and design.

More precisely, as Roberto Assagioli indicates, the external unifying center is “*an indirect but strong link, a point of connection, between the person and the Higher Self, which is reflected and represented in that object...*” (Firman, Gila, 2004).

Without the spark of desire the will is not ignited, and without the will dreams remain sidereal ghosts (*desideris*). They remain mere idealized aspirations, a synthesis conceived only “in the mind of Zeus,” but not *in-spired*, not brought down to earth and incarnated in the human personal experience. As such, these are useless in the construction of any life project that is based in the constant research for actions willed by a *living I*.

The sense of what our life experience may become, the fullness of meaning that can be achieved, can also provide hope for the new generations, hungry as they are for new perspectives, projects and purpose. In this sense, we can become models that might restore the sense of *being present*, *being* “despite all odds,” opened to the new with creativity; *being present* in the world with our wounds, losses and discomfort; facing suffering with courage, trust and love.

PAIN AND JOY

(Translation by Kylie Drew)

“Transform pain”: this phrase was pronounced by an elderly lady during a condivision following a lesson on Panikkar; for me it was the beginning of a long process that allowed me to arrive at a realization and a desire to share it with others.

The lady was referring to her mother-in-law who’s life had been a succession of mournful events, to which she reacted by moving them to a higher level of conscience that permitted her to overcome the trials to which she was periodically subjected. “My mother-in-law was able to transform pain” she said, seriously absorbed, and at a certain point, convinced, as though she wanted to steal a secret from another person that she had never really understood in depth.

I would have wanted to hear more, to know how a woman born at the beginning of 1900, without the possibility of analytical or psychosynthetic studies, was able to pass through pain attributing to it a sense, or transcending it in some way; but then the speaker changed argument and I remained suspended and incapable of listening to what the others were saying. “An elderly lady probably without instruction, without having done therapy, was able to live fully despite various incidents”. It has always been like that, I said to myself, that simplicity, wisdom and an uncommon vitality allow some people to become stronger than others. As usual all of this produced in me amazement and enchantment.

During the evening, the phrase stuck in my brain, like a seed blown in the wind and planted in the soil waiting to manifest itself.

The following day I remembered what I had studied on resiliency motivated by the necessity to fortify the spirit in the light of certain personal events.

Today there is much more discussion about resiliency. What is it? The word derives from latin “resilire”- to jump, bounce back. Adapted to physics, the word