

THE PANDEMIC: AN OPPORTUNITY TO CULTIVATE A BOLD VISION

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“When there is no vision, people perish.”
Ralph Waldo Emerson

*“A very great vision is needed, and the man who has it
must follow it as the eagle seeks the deepest blue of the
sky.”*
Crazy Horse, Sioux Chief

*“When you see the earth from the moon, you don’t see
any divisions there of nations or states. This might be
the symbol, really, for the new mythology to come. That
is the country that we are going to be celebrating. And
those are the people that we are one with.”*
Joseph Campbell

*“One must have a trifocal vision.
That is to see and keep in mind the distant goal, the
purpose; then to have a vision of the intermediate
stages that go from the starting point to the point of
arrival; finally the immediate perception of the next step
to be taken”.*
Roberto Assagioli

PLANETARY INTERCONNECTION AND INDIVI- DUAL RESPONSIBILITY

*“The land is one country. We are waves of the same sea,
leaves from of the same tree, flowers of the same gar-
den”.*
Lucius Anneus Seneca

Among the many things highlighted by the Covid-19 health emergency, two in particular struck me:

the now undoubted reality of the globalization process, characterized by the strong and progressive increase in interconnection;
the power and responsibility that each individual, willing or not, has been called upon to assume in this scenario.

We are experiencing the ability we each have to determine and influence the global situation concretely through our behavior and actions. What we do (in this case, leave the house only when necessary, respect certain hygiene rules, etc.) has very specific effects on the spread of contagion.

The pandemic (from the Greek *pan*, meaning “all” + *démios*, meaning “people”) concerns, indeed, “all the people”, all of the inhabitants of planet Earth.

The fact that, to put it in Seneca’s words, “*the earth is one country*” and “*we are waves of the same sea*”, has always been a reality.

However, this epidemic has forced us to a collective, sudden, unexpected, and therefore potentially traumatic, realization.

The well-being of the global community has always been the responsibility of each of us. It will continue to be so even when we can (if we can) forget about it again, that is, even when the links of cause and effect between our personal actions and their outcomes on a planetary scale are less obvious and immediate.

It will continue to be so every time we choose which values form the support for our decisions: how to educate our children, whether and how to vote, the cultural offerings we support, our preferred means of transport, the activities to which we devote ourselves, the projects we promote, how we separate our waste, the inner attitudes we cultivate, our holiday destinations, the food and clothes we buy, the financial institutions to which to entrust our money, the different ways we invest and so on.

THE MANY RESPONSES TO THE PANDEMIC AND THE MULTIDIMENSIONALITY OF THE HUMAN SOUL

As we have seen, the ways in which individuals have responded to the pandemic situation have been, and are, very different. Some have felt understandably lost, alone, adrift and deeply uncomfortable, others have savored the restrictive measures as a welcome break. Some have emphasized with great enthusiasm the benefits of the emergency by affirming the dawn of a new world. Others have become disillusioned and disenchanting and still others have announced a dangerous collapse of our democratic society.

One of the possible keys to understanding these different reactions is to consider the multiplicity that characterizes our bio-psychological constitution. The egg diagram proposed by Psychosynthesis (see figure below) proves, in my opinion, very valid for this purpose. It represents, in a multidimensional and integrated way, our different psychological levels related to different psychological times (past, present and future) while preserving their specificity. The different dimensions that make up our being and our different parts, in fact, work according to different modalities and laws. Let's see which ones.

The oldest and most primal aspects of the psyche, corresponding to a pre-personal dimension, react according to genetically and biologically pre-determined adaptive patterns (think, for example, of the automatic fight-flight-freeze/submit responses that are activated in threat situations) and according to our past history, especially traumatic ones.

Other responses on the other hand, come from more mature aspects, from a level that we can define as personal. This level is responsible, in the present, for carrying out the normal tasks of daily life, elaborating lived experiences, preparing future activities, reflecting on our thoughts, feelings and actions, etc.

Other responses, finally, come from a transpersonal dimension. The latter is the repository of the future evolutionary potential of individuals and species: the

highest feelings and values, impulses to ethical and humanitarian action, states of enlightenment, aesthetic experiences and artistic creation, great scientific insights, the tension towards the new and the unknown, etc. It is a dimension that is able to see "beyond" and therefore also to move, at least in part, both "beyond" the pre-personal dimension and "beyond" the personal one. Added to these three dimensions is a fourth dimension, that of self-awareness and will. In the diagram it is represented by the "I" (or personal self), the transpersonal Self, and the dotted line that connects them. This dimension is fundamental because it guarantees the possibility of building a conscious relationship with all the contents of our different psychic levels, of observing and welcoming them lovingly, of containing and understanding them in depth, and, finally, of regulating and managing them by choosing to give expression to responses that most correspond to our authentic being.

"FREEDOM IN JAIL"

"He who has a why to live can bear almost any how."
Friedrich Nietzsche

The co-presence of all the different psychic dimensions represented in the egg diagram has been witnessed in an exemplary and evocative way by Roberto Assagioli, the founder of Psychosynthesis, in a passage of his well-known autobiographical writing entitled "Freedom in Jail". Assagioli was Jewish and was persecuted in various ways during Nazi-Fascism. In 1940, he was arrested on charges of being a pacifist and an internationalist and imprisoned for some time. He wrote about his experience of imprisonment in his book, "Freedom in Jail":

"I realized that I was free to take one or another attitude towards this situation, to give one or another value to it, to utilize it or not in one or another way [dimension of self-awareness and will," A/N.].

I could rebel internally and curse; or I could submit passively vegetating; or I could indulge in an unhealthy pleasure of self-pity and assume the martyr's role [pre-personal level, A/N.]; or I could take the situation in a

sporting way and with a sense of humor, considering it as novel and an interesting experience (what Germans call an ‘Erlebnis’). I could make of it a rest cure; or a period of intense thinking either about personal matters, reviewing my past life and pondering on it, or about scientific and philosophical problems [personal level, A/N.]; or I could take advantage of the condition in order to submit myself to a definite training of psychological faculties, to make psychological experiments upon myself; or finally as a spiritual retreat [transpersonal level, A/N.].

I had the clear sure perception that this was entirely my own affair and that I was free to choose any or several of these attitudes and activities; that this choice would have definite and unavoidable effects, which I could foresee and for which I was fully responsible. There was no doubt in my mind about this essential freedom and power and the inherent privileges and responsibility: a responsibility toward myself, toward my fellow mankind, and towards life itself or God [dimension of self-awareness and will, A/N.]”

BROKEN PROMISES

A frequent response in the face of calamities is to solemnly promise to change things, to build a different, better world, with more humane and just values. We intend to come out of it transformed, more supportive and attentive. Yet we return just as easily to the usual habits, inertia and indulgence.

In Europe, having recently entered the so-called “phase 2” of the Covid-19 emergency, we can already see at work the desire to restore the previous world as soon as possible. Despite the proliferation of calls for a profound reform of the objectives, values and crazy economic system that characterize our planet, for many the pandemic seems to be, instead of an opportunity for change, rather a brief nightmare from which to wake up as soon as possible. Why? Because in the face of a stressful event (but also in the face of existence in general) it is not at all easy to access the freedom to choose, from among the various possible

responses, the most mature and creative ones.

Despite this, it is urgent to understand if and how this can be done. In fact, only from an inwardly free place will we be able to respond in the best possible way to the precious opportunity offered to us. The realization of this inner freedom is by no means a foregone conclusion. There are many variables at stake here, many difficulties of which we must be aware.

WAITING FOR SALVATION

*“One of the most difficult things is not to change society,
but to change yourself.”*

Nelson Mandela

Such freedom is not gained once and for all. It must be regained again and again, every day, every minute. To **truly change is hard work**. We must not underestimate the psychic tendency toward homeostasis. **We enjoy dreaming of a better world as long as it is others who will make the effort to build it**. We like to imagine that someone will come to heal us, to free us, to save us, to magically solve our problems without us having to pay the price. We want someone who will save us from the effort of growing up and becoming adults, from the frustration of limitations, and from the pain of disempowerment.

To change, to achieve our essential freedom, we must give up that childish attitude of looking to the future with naïve hope and expectation that others will take action. To change and be truly free, as Galimberti wrote, we must realize that *“the future is not the time for salvation, for waiting, or for hope. The future is a time like all the others. There will not be a providence that comes to meet us and solves problems in our inertia. Let us hope, is a verb of passivity. Let us stand still and the future will provide, that is not the case.”*

That is why in the facile enthusiasm of “everything will be all right” there is something forced and artificial that can be deeply troubling. It is not the case that everything will be all right. If we don’t commit ourselves to radical change, everything will not be all right.

CONFRONTATION WITH PAIN AND REACTIONS TO TRAUMA

“Trauma is a fact of life. It does not, however, have to be a life sentence.”

Peter A. Levine

During the Covid-19 emergency, we saw extraordinary demonstrations of solidarity, dedication and humanity. We applauded the heroism of the health workers and many other ordinary people. We discovered new perspectives in the ways of working, of producing, of being in relationship. We have enjoyed more relaxed times, clean air and clear skies, nature walks, the return of wildlife, silence and empty roads.

However, we cannot forget that the pandemic has also confronted and will continue to confront many of us with the pain of losing loved ones, with loneliness and isolation, with professional and economic difficulties and uncertainties, with the fear of contracting or transmitting the virus. The pandemic has frustrated many of our desires and “freedoms”; it multiplies responsibilities, it pushes us to reflect, to define priorities, and it brings us face to face with difficult choices. Moreover, all these situations, already difficult in themselves, can easily reactivate experiences and memories linked to past traumas, previous experiences in which we were deprived of our freedom, in which we felt trapped and in danger, alone and abandoned, in which we were not in control of the situation. This is an important point to bear in mind. In such cases it is highly recommended to find the help of a competent professional as soon as possible, who can support and guide us in the elaboration of our experiences.

THE KEY TO FREEDOM: HAVING A CLEAR VISION

“No man will ever be himself if he hasn't had a vision.”
Ojibway proverb

Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote, “when there is no vision, people perish.” Perhaps in this very idea of “vision” lies one of the possible keys to accessing the inner freedom

so well described by Roberto Assagioli. In extreme situations, individuals who have shown themselves able to access the freedom to choose the most courageous and creative responses, the most mature responses, seem to have one important characteristic in common: they were all supported and guided by a broad, clear and inspiring vision.

From the testimonies of Gandhi, Mandela, Frankl, Hillelsum and others, we know that those who are animated by a bold and meaningful vision are more likely to survive and to live positively even in very intense crises. Having a vision that gives meaning to our experience is therefore very important, especially in difficult times.

THE POWER OF A CLEAR VISION

“The best ideas do not come from reason, but from a lucid, visionary madness.”

Erasmus of Rotterdam

Having a clear vision is powerful because the language of imagery is symbolic. Images and symbols gather or accumulate energy; they are incredible containers of certain energies. They are transformers and conductors, or channels, of psychological energies and they promote the integration of those energies. Images and symbols are able to set in motion intense creative and transformative processes in the unconscious. We know that trying to influence the unconscious with rational processes is ineffective and unsuitable. To do so we must instead use the language of the unconscious: the symbolic one. Only a clear vision is able to convey symbolism as effectively.

The use of imagery is powerful because it guides us “beyond”: “beyond” the automatic and predetermined responses of the pre-personal level, “beyond” what we already know on the personal level and towards new possibilities, new lands to explore. A clear vision is like the stars are to a sailor: it orients us, guides us and accompanies us along our journey. A clear vision helps us to find and find again our way and gives us the strength to persevere despite moments of discouragement and loneliness, obstacles and failures. A vision moves us. It awakens our desires, evokes the corresponding emo-

tions and feelings, inspires our dreams and gives us the energy to strive to make it a reality.

VISION VS. DAYDREAMS

“In Heaven to learn is to see: on Earth is to remember.”
Pindar

As Zygmunt Bauman pointed out, a vision is powerful because it leads us to experience, on an individual level, the gulf that exists between what we continue to do and what we should do, and on a collective level, between what matters to those who decide and what is really important to the future of the planet.

The global transformation we need requires boldness, integrity and courage. It will not happen without the commitment of each one of us. It requires real and radical awareness.

What makes a vision truly such, what distinguishes it from a momentary fantasy, is its transformative power. Authentic vision is rooted in the here and now, in the real. It produces change. The vision leads, it induces action: it activates our will, it moves our being in a precise direction. Otherwise, it is just a daydream, an illusion that perhaps satisfies our understandable need for consolation, but does not produce personal integrity or transformation. Worse, it is a lie, a way to deceive ourselves, to tell ourselves that we are doing something, that we are committing ourselves, when this is not true at all.

That is why, as Assagioli warned, the vision must be trifocal. That is, it is necessary *“to see and keep in mind the distant goal, the purpose; then to have a vision of the intermediate stages that go from the point of departure to the point of arrival; finally the immediate perception of the next step to be taken”*.

THE CHALLENGE: TO ACCEPT THE GIFT OFFERED BY THESE UNCERTAIN TIMES

“We know what needs to be done;
all that is missing is the will to do it.”
Nelson Mandela

I pointed out at the beginning of this paper that the current pandemic situation has highlighted two particularly significant and closely related aspects:

the reality of the process of globalization and interconnection that now characterizes Life on our planet; the power and responsibility each of us has in determining the well-being of the global community. The awareness of this state of affairs is the opportunity, the precious gift that these uncertain and tempestuous times are able to offer us. This is an awareness of which we are in great need and which Joseph Campbell has synthesized in this exemplary way:

“When you see the earth from the moon, you don’t see any divisions there of nations or states. This might be the symbol, really, for the new mythology to come. That is the country that we are going to be celebrating. And those are the people that we are one with.”

I also pointed out how the possibility of this realization presented itself to us with connotations of the shadow, in a sudden, unexpected and therefore potentially destabilizing way. Because of its traumatic roots, and also because of the natural tendency of the psyche to shy away from change, the pandemic is therefore for many people something to forget as quickly as possible. This is understandable and important to take into account.

The so-called “return to normality”, to old behaviors, to inertia and habits, responds to a fundamental need of ours: the desire for safety and security. It soothes the anguish of our most primal parts and offers the illusion, because it is an illusion, of having control of the present situation. This is why there is a very high risk of throwing out the baby with the bathwater. Together with our pain and suffering, with our fear and frustration, we turn away from (or throw out) the opportunity given to us.

Will we be able to distill from this painful experience the gift it is able to offer us? Will we be able to

draw from it a positive vision that can inspire us? A vision that we can continue to cultivate in a free and conscious way even when the shadow of the pandemic has loosened its grip? Will we even be able to love, to belong to this vision? Could we feel the warmth and comfort of sharing it with many other travel companions, perhaps distant in space and time, but close in heart and intentions? Will we be able to draw from it the energy and determination to seek a better balance between the satisfaction of our infinite desires and our care for the greater good?

One question above all: will we be able to access the freedom - so well witnessed by Roberto Assagioli and others - to choose, among the various possible responses to this planetary crisis, the most courageous and creative ones? Or will we give in to the urge to return as quickly as possible to the security of the already known, to so-called "normality"? Will we perhaps feel justified in making up for lost time and therefore produce more, consume more, and pollute more in order to preserve the crazy economic system on which our so-called "well-being" depends?

We must courageously take up this urgent challenge and question ourselves deeply. Because, ultimately, our answers to these questions will determine the outcome of the pandemic, and above all the quality of life on the entire planet, if not our own survival and that of many other animal and plant species.

CONCLUSIONS

I conclude by relying on the beautiful and enlightening words of Edgar Morin: "**Planetarization now means a community of destiny for all mankind.** Nations consolidated the consciousness of their communities of destiny with the incessant threat of the external enemy. Now, the enemy of humanity is not external. It is hidden within it.

The consciousness of the community of destiny needs not only common dangers, but also a common identity which cannot be the only abstract human identity, already recognized by all, which is not effective in uniting us; it is the identity which comes from a paternal and maternal entity, made concrete by the term homeland,

and which leads to the fraternity of millions of citizens who are not at all blood relatives. This is what is lacking, in some way, for a human community to be fulfilled: the awareness that we are children and citizens of the Homeland Earth. We still cannot recognize it as the common home of humanity."

So, what is the vision that orients and guides your life? What destination do you see in the distance? What intermediate stages can lead you there? What will your next step be today? For those who wish to do so, here is a meditative exercise to deepen the reflection:

WEAVING THE NET OF LIFE

Psychosynthetic meditation for planetary interconnection

This exercise aims to foster the experience of interconnection that characterizes life on our planet and a reflection on our possible contribution.

We assume a comfortable position, neither too rigid, nor too relaxed... a position that favors the feeling of being present, here, now... of being welcoming and vital...

We close our eyes, or we keep them open ... we choose according to what puts us most at ease.

We bring attention to the breath, on the air that enters our nostrils and on the air that comes out... and while we exhale, we let go of any possible muscle tension and allow ourselves all those small movements of the body, especially in the neck and shoulder area, that makes us more and more comfortable... Exhaling we let go, of muscle tension, also distractions, worries, all that at this moment is useless... Exhaling we free ourselves from the superfluous, at least for the space of this exercise.

Now let's move the attention from exhalation to inhalation and, as we inhale, we enter more and more deeply in contact with ourselves. Inhaling we take root in our body, sitting here, now, in our body that breathes... Inhaling, we enter more and more deeply in contact with ourselves, with our inner center. Inhaling, more and more present, welcoming and vital.

Now let it resonate and meditate for a few moments on

the following statements by Joseph Campbell:

“When you see Earth from the Moon, you don’t see any division of nations or states.

This might be the symbol, really, for the new mythology to come.

That is the country that we are going to be celebrating.

And those are the people that we are one with.”

Let’s deepen the meditation and let the image of the planet Earth form in our mind. We observe its spherical shape illuminated by the light of the sun... We notice all the shades of blue of the oceans, here and there the white of the clouds, that of the perennial snows, the bright greens of the forests, the gold of the deserts and the silver of rivers and lakes. We also imagine the abundance of life forms that our planet supports so generously: the varieties of plants and flowers, the countless animal species, us human beings.. all these beings interconnected with each other in the wonderful net of Life.

We imagine our mind, and all the minds of human beings, more and more enlightened, inspired by this vision... and we imagine the Earth surrounded by Light. Let’s deepen our meditation and let our heart be touched by the splendid image of planet Earth traveling in space with all its passengers on board. Let us feel the vitality of our connection with it and with all the forms of life it hosts. We can feel in our hearts a strong sense of love and belonging to this Shared home. We recognize its preciousness, its delicacy and also the urgency and responsibility to take good care of it.

We imagine our heart, and all the hearts of human beings, increasingly involved in this vision... and we imagine the Earth surrounded by Love.

Now we feel the presence of other people next to us, all committed together observing the Earth surrounded in Light and Love... people who live all over the globe, people who lived in the past or who will live in future, and who share the same commitment in favor of the common good in different fields of activity: politics, education and health, sociality, art, science and philosophy, religions and spirituality, sports, economics, services and organizations of various kinds. We realize that there are really many who commit themselves every

day, and by tuning us in to the powerful energy of their intentions, we really feel encouraged.

We imagine our will, and the will of all human beings, increasingly guided by recognition and participation in the Common Good... and we imagine the Earth surrounded by this Purpose.

Before concluding, let’s take a moment to reflect on how we want and can collaborate in this vision. Let’s ask ourselves:

What can my long-term contribution be? What general orientation do I want to give to my life? What values and goals do I choose as a guide?

And then what can be my medium-term contribution (in a few weeks or months)? What decisions do I want to make? What initiatives, projects and objectives do I undertake to support, to achieve?

Finally, how can I contribute in the short term? What can I actually do today? What actions, behaviors and attitudes do I decide to put in place? Let’s try to identify a small step that we are able to take by this evening.

We reactivate ourselves.

A guided version of this exercise will be available on YouTube. Link to the version already available in Italian: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=83QFeuVFRRY>

And you - do you have a vision? At the bottom of the article you will find a meditation exercise to deepen your reflection. A guided version is available on the Youtube channel of the Associazione Sul Sentiero APS: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XhgKHBudoBc>

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