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In Search of Meaning

Catherine Ann Lombard

*We seek the meaning of life, wondering if any meaning can be left.
But that is something each one of us must settle with himself and with God.*
—Etty Hillesum (1996, p. 29)

Psychosynthesis is one of the few psychologies today that contains the “notion of a Higher Self or soul” (Hardy, 1987, p. 47). Roberto Assagioli, the founder of psychosynthesis, assumed in his writings that “many people, at sometime in their lives, will search for the transpersonal” and “for meaning through himself or herself in the context of the soul” (Hardy, p. 47). We search for meaning, according to Firman and Vargiu (1977), in our personal existence and in life itself. They call these two orientations the “personal dimension” and the “transpersonal dimension” of growth respectively. Most people “tend to be more in touch with one dimension [or the other], experiencing it as more real, more important” (p. 129), but each of us needs to integrate the two orientations:

In order to realize more and more of our essential humanness, we need to include both the personal and transpersonal dimensions...Therefore, self-realization, the realization of our Transpersonal Self, involves the progressive unification, at higher and higher levels, of the two dimensions of growth (p. 131).

By equating self-realization with the “realization of the Transpersonal Self,” Firman and Vargiu infer, in a psychosynthesis context, that the experience of the Self (which is an unchanging, enduring reality, a stable center of life) occurs when the ‘I’, the center of personal will and consciousness, can identify with it and is temporarily absorbed into it.

Assagioli (2000, p. 21) states that there are actually two ways that personal consciousness can expand into the Self. The first is ascent by the personal ‘I’ into the Self— “a magnificent endeavor, certainly a long and arduous one, and not everybody is ready for it.” The second way is via descent by the Transpersonal Self when it spontaneously and suddenly descends upon the personal self, often providing an illumination which is felt by the ‘I’ as a “pull or call” (Assagioli, 2002, p. 113).

Most of us have experienced a call from our Transpersonal Self, for example, the feeling of wonder and oneness as we watch a stunning sunset. Such instances are referred to as “peak experiences” by Maslow (1968, pp. 74-83). Throughout our busy lives “spiritual wake-up calls” usually go unheeded. There can come, however, a time when we feel the need to answer the call of the Self to discover true meaning in our lives. Usually these times are marked by crisis. In the personal dimension, the crisis can be existential—“the crisis that challenges the meaning of one’s very existence” (Firman and Vargiu, p. 134); on the transpersonal level, the crisis can be one of duality—“awareness of ...an unbridgeable gulf between oneself and the transcendent goal” (p. 146).

In this brief essay, I describe Assagioli’s four critical stages of spiritual development as described in his seminal article “Self Realization and Psychological Disturbances.” While exploring each of the four phases of spiritual growth, I also reflect on their relevance in today’s world. Interwoven with this exploration is the examination of Firman and Vargiu’s concepts about the two dimensions of growth. I then examine how this context of spiritual development might relate to our world, in general, and to us, in particular. Finally, I draw my conclusions.

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Stage 1: Crisis Preceding the Spiritual Awakening

Assagioli writes that the first stage of spiritual development is the “crisis preceding the spiritual awakening” (2000, p. 36). Most people are living their lives as they unfold, without questioning or reflecting on its apparent meaning. Their “operational belief is that the only reality is that of the physical world which [they] can see and touch” (p. 37). This way of living corresponds to Firman and Vargiu’s personal dimension of growth. Each accomplishment in the physical world throughout our lives helps us to “experience our lives as having greater significance and value” (Firman and Vargiu, p. 129). Hence we continue to pursue such worldly goals through which we enable ourselves in the material world to manifest and integrate our talents, creativity, and unique human essence. A person who continues to grow along the personal dimension is what Maslow referred to as a “self-actualizer” (Maslow, 1968, pp. 25-27).

However, there may come a time when such pursuits are no longer satisfying in and of themselves and we become “disturbed by a change—sudden or slow—in [our] inner lives” (Assagioli, p. 37). Sometimes this inner disturbance comes as a shock, such as the death of a loved one, loss of career, or severe illness. “But sometimes it occurs...in the full enjoyment of health and prosperity,” bringing with it a feeling that something in life is missing (p. 37). “Paradoxically, the greater the success, the more one is faced with the experience of finding that what was expected to be highly satisfying turns out to be uninteresting and empty” (Firman and Vargui, p. 134). This “crisis preceding the spiritual awakening” or “existential crisis” is beautifully illustrated by Leo Tolstoy in *Confession*, his autobiographical tale of spiritual midlife crisis (Tolstoy, 1983, pp. 27-58).

For an individual who is growing exclusively along the transpersonal dimension, this lack of meaning may be felt as an “unbridgeable gulf between oneself and the transcendent goal” and is referred to as a “crisis of duality” (Firman and Vargiu, p. 146). Such individuals might find it increasingly difficult to experience unity with the transcendent or their higher experiences may stop altogether. Without a balance of growth along the personal dimension and engagement with the world at large, those experiencing a “crisis of duality” are confronted with the fact that the goal of reaching and maintaining transcendent unity by oneself is either impossible or without meaning. The reality is that we all need others to reflect who we really are and provide us with the opportunity to act as our true human selves and to our full potential.

Stage 2: Crisis Caused by the Spiritual Awakening

Assagioli (1993, p. 141) defines spiritual awakening as:

...that first blinding flash of new spiritual consciousness which transforms and regenerates the whole being...[It] is an event of fundamental importance and has an incomparable value in the inner life of man.

The first and most frequent characteristic of the soul awakening is “an extraordinary dazzling sense of light” (p. 145). Other manifestations include the experience that everything seems suffused with an aura of glory, new truths are evident, powerful new feelings emerge, and the universe is seen as a living Whole (pp. 146-148). Firman and Vargiu (p. 137) state that, more often, spiritual awakening occurs gradually and involves our conscious and purposeful participation.

This opening between the ‘I’ and the Self can often produce a wonderful release from the inner strife preceding the awakening. But more frequently, “the personality is unable to rightly assimilate the inflow of light and energy” (Assagioli, 2000, p. 39). This can cause a crisis and result in a wrong interpretation of the experience. The individual whose ‘I’ container is not adequately developed will typically blur the distinction between the Self and the ‘I’ and fall victim to the illusion that the qualities and powers of the Transpersonal Self belong to their personal

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self. There are also cases where the influx of new energies causes individuals to express themselves in uncontrolled behaviors like shouting or crying. For others, spiritual awakening can also initiate parapsychological perceptions which, without clear judgment and discernment in their interpretation, can further exalt the personality of the individual (pp. 39-41).

Similarly, Firman and Vargiu (p. 137) emphasize the need for newly awakened souls to use discrimination and to examine their motives as they reorient their growth to include the transpersonal dimension. In pursuing one's spiritual path, one needs to practice discrimination in interpreting inner messages, selecting spiritual directors, and heeding the advice from family and friends. And one's motives need to be genuinely spiritual as opposed to selfish or self-centered.

Those individuals who are shifting their orientation from the transpersonal to the personal dimension also typically face a number of difficulties. "Expressing a transpersonal vision requires considerable skill and experience, as well as a well-integrated personality" (pp. 147-8). Often these individuals want to express their vision to the world by themselves and by next week. When others do not immediately follow their wise approach, they can become more zealous and even belligerent to the point of fanatic.

Stage 3: Reactions Following the Spiritual Awakening

Assagioli (2000, pp. 41-44) describes various reactions that can follow an individual's spiritual awakening:

- 1) The individual achieves a state of exalted joy that brings with it insight into the meaning and purpose of life, which infuses and permanently transforms the personality. This outcome is relatively rare.
- 2) Only some of the regressive tendencies and patterns in the personality are fully transformed while most are temporarily neutralized. The individual is, however, left with an ideal model and sense of direction to take towards complete transformation.
- 3) No transformation of the personality takes place, but the individual does become aware of the hidden blocks and patterns that he or she needs to overcome for transformation to occur.
- 4) A combination in various proportions of the previous three reactions.

In addition, Assagioli points out that, in some cases, strong reactions by the personality can cause the individual to deny the experience and suppress it, producing a state of depression and even suicidal tendencies. This reaction is referred to as "repression of the sublime" by Frank Haronian (1972) and is part of our psychological defense mechanism against change. "We fear growth because it means abandoning the familiar for the unknown, and that always involves risks" (Haronian, p. 122).

Stage 4: The Process of Transmutation

The process of transmutation begins at the point when the individual recognizes and decides to accept the emerging energies of the Transpersonal Self and actively transform the personality. It is a "rewarding period, full of changes, of alternations between light and darkness, between joy and suffering" (Assagioli, 2000, p. 45). During this transitional period, the individual seeks to remove any behavior obstructing the inflow of Transpersonal energies, develop higher functions in the personality, and to continue to be receptive to guidance from the Higher Self.

Finally the work of self-realization really begins and this is the most complicated and longest part of the journey. Firman and Vargiu (1977, pp. 153-156) emphasize the need for us to continually "establish the right conditions, the right orientation in our personality" towards the Transpersonal Self and to *trust* that the Self will release the

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necessary and desired energies for self-realization to occur. The dazzling light of the Self also illuminates the shadows of the personality, which can leave the individual feeling acutely aware of his or her inadequacies. Firman and Vargui (p. 140) actually find these dark, arid, and uncertain periods valuable and necessary: “They are brought about by the Transpersonal Self in order to facilitate the eventual fusion between our personal and transpersonal natures.”

Assagioli calls on us to consciously cooperate with the sufferings and hardships that might arise. He even encourages us to face such crises with acceptance and love. “The Spirit itself imposes this work in a tough, inescapable fashion [and] the soul is obliged to enter that ‘dark night’ experienced and described by St. Teresa of Avila [and] St. John of the Cross” (1991, p.113-114).

Relevance of Self-realization in the World Today

What do these four stages of self-realization mean for us and for the world at large? In today’s world, Assagioli’s concepts are critical on three different levels—for individuals, communities, and globally. For individuals such as ourselves, the stages of self-realization are a context in which we can understand the meaning of our suffering, take responsibility for redeeming it, and, ultimately, achieve our highest human potential. As the Dutch mystic Etty Hillesum (1996, p. 56) wrote: “The only measure you have is yourself. And the only responsibility you can shoulder in life is responsibility for yourself.” And as Dorothy Sayers (1949, p. 19) writes in her introduction to Dante’s *Inferno*:

For most of us it may be easier to understand Hell as the picture of a corrupt society than as a corrupt self. Whichever we start with, it is likely to lead to the other.

In our communities, understanding these stages of self-realization can help us, as well as others, better serve humanity in our various roles of parent, teacher, counselor, religious leader, and social and medical personnel. Once we understand, accept, and endeavor to engage with the stages of self-realization, we automatically replace “ignorance, prejudice, and active opposition” with a more enlightened view of the human journey (Assagioli, 2000, p. 51). An excellent example of this is the eloquent study by Susan Holliday (2007) of women who have suffered what is generally known as “post-natal depression.” Using psychosynthesis concepts, she aptly renames the condition as “post-natal disturbance,” inferring that these new mothers are experiencing reactions to a deep and powerful spiritual awakening.

On the global level, familiarity with these stages of soul-development can become a template in our attempt to assess and resolve the crises facing us today. As stated by Donald Keys (1975, p. 8) “the stages of this process are essentially the same for individuals and for nations.” Jung also saw “very clearly the relationship of the personal journey to the process of the human race as a whole” (Hardy, p. 206). Globally, we are experiencing an existential crisis. Nearly all of our world problems—hunger and homelessness, disease and war, and the destruction of the environment—lead back to greed and consumerism. Never have we had so much food or material goods in the history of humankind, and never have our lives been so empty, confused, exhausting and fraught with desperation. We know no limits in our outer world and yet remain largely ignorant of how our inner unconscious and luminous Higher Self function—never mind who we really are. As Assagioli (2002, pp. 4-6) wrote already in 1972:

The wide gulf between man’s external and inner powers is one of the most important and profound causes of the individual and collective evils which afflict our civilization and gravely menace its future...

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Only the development of his inner powers can offset the dangers inherent in man's losing control of the tremendous natural forces at his disposal and becoming the victim of his own achievements.

Understanding and employing Assagioli's stages of self-realization individually and collectively is one of the first steps towards overcoming evil as it is manifested in the world today.

Conclusion

The four stages of spiritual development towards self-realization described in this brief essay only briefly outline the journey we must all make as individuals in search of the Self. The actual human process is a lifetime endeavor as rich as Dante's poetic voyage through the fires and ice of Hell, the purification of Purgatory, and the light and beauty of Paradise. The point is that "Self-realization is a natural process, and it occurs spontaneously. We can learn to better understand the process and thereby cooperate with it and facilitate it" (Firman and Vargiu, p. 131). Our progress depends on our willingness to allow these processes to take place within us and to accept the call or will of the Higher Self. To live a spiritual life and seek the Divine in all things is not easy, but in the words of Assagioli (1993, p. 213)

It is also a clear duty, because when spiritual light is focused on the most complex of individual or collective problems it produces solutions...and spares us much suffering...The spiritual view of life...is extremely revolutionary, dynamic and creative.

We only must dare to heed the call and begin our journey. ■



Catherine Ann Lombard, M.A. has been counseling clients since 2008 and is a published writer, poet and artist. Catherine has also offered numerous workshops based on her psychosynthesis training, including "Know What You Want" and "Communicating Across Cultures."

She and her husband, Dr. Kees den Biesen, will be leading a two-day workshop at the EPSS this summer 2014 called "Crossing Thresholds: Traveling the Portals of Change with Dante." For more information about Catherine, see catherineannlombard.com.

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Dawn

Day's sweetest moments are at dawn;
Refreshed by his long sleep, the Light
Kisses the languid lips of Night,
Ere she can rise and hasten on.
All glowing from his dreamless rest
He holds her closely to his breast,
Warm lip to lip and limb to limb,
Until she dies for love of him.

Ella Wheeler Wilcox



"Mollala Dawn" by Yonti Kelly