

What is Psychosynthesis?

By Sarah Powers, February 2014

I was asked this question by my favorite aunt who has a long history of spiritual practice and was many years ago an avid student of Carl Jung. Although it was not always true, my aunt and I now have an easy time sharing our feelings, thoughts and beliefs, and she often looks to me for support and friendship.

When she asked me this question we were lounging on her terrace in the woods of Mendocino, sipping warm fresh peppermint tea on a crisp fall day. I paused before responding, assessing how interested she really was and whether this was a good time to *really* go into this subject I loved so much, yet had discussed with her so little. During my hesitation, she jumped up and ran in for some more tea, which let me know her degree of interest. Yet as she settled back down, adding some burnt looking cookies she had recently made to the table full of tea, she asked me again, 'so tell me, what is psycho... what is it called?'

"Psycho-synthesis. I would say it is a heart-centered paradigm that takes a radically inclusive perspective of the human experience, offering various methods for moving toward psychological and spiritual wholeness, which has some cross over with Jungian concepts as well. Do you remember Jung's definition of self-realization as 'a fidelity to the laws of one's own being'?"

"No, it sounds like an insurance cliché."

"Well, psycho-synthesis posits that psychological disturbances arise out of core wounds we carry as a result of being out of harmony, or out of alignment with our deeper being, which I know you know already. The theory is that this adult inner discord stems from empathic failures we've endured in our youth (and continue to encounter), which proceed to operate internally as self-invasive and/or self-abandoning habits. We copy or internalize these ways of being from often well intentioned, but often non-empathic others. I am sure like your mom and dad often were."

"Yes, but my spiritual practice goes beyond these early wounds as you say and takes me right to the heart of what's true, to love and wisdom."

I was reminded why I had not had this discussion with her in so long, but we had no need to hurry and my Hara (internal power center) was still feeling

relaxed and wide, so I replied, “I agree, and yet even with all the inner work you have been involved with over the years, you know how easily time spent with Stuart can trigger your inner demons, and disconnect you from him, from me, from yourself. I know you know the heights of spiritual connection, and yet the depths of personal disconnection can still be left untouched by these penetrating perceptions, don’t you agree?”

“Oh yes honey, *for sure*. But Stuart is not interested in the spiritual life and this will always be a source of frustration for me as he can be so negative and not even know it, or want to know it.”

“I know. I really like Stuart as you know, and I can feel how hard this aspect of him must be for you as I have witnessed this in him myself. But when your relationship is going well, which is at least some of the time, it seems it is because you are able to stay with yourself in a simple and caring way even when things get difficult, and this allows you to give him room to be himself, without attacking him and running away. In psycho-synthesis, this would be a critical healing capacity arising in you of empathy. I love seeing this genuine compassionate quality growing in you. In psycho-synthesis, you would consciously cultivate this capacity for staying connected with yourself, not only in the face of being annoyed with Stuart, but when you are experiencing any feeling, including the negativity of self loathing.”

“Oh, I often get all tied up inside about what I said, or didn’t say, what he meant, or seemed to mean, and yes, I would say I don’t like myself a good deal of time, unless I am alone. Then I feel so easily happy and at ease.”

“Well, it seems Stuart is a good partner for learning some important relationship issues. Since we are talking about it, psycho-synthesis says that most of our suffering arose in interpersonal relationships and as such, will need to be healed in interpersonal dynamics. So don’t you think he is also part of your spiritual practice?”

“I am seeing it more that way all the time.”

“That’s great. And even though he does not seek answers to deeper questions, in psycho-synthesis they say, ‘there is a primal wounding present that has been suffered within significant relationships, and there exists an essential human spirit within these disturbances seeking liberation.’ In other words, we are all spirits inhabiting this personal journey we’re on. So he and everyone else are as spiritual as you or I, they just may not be consciously awakening to this dimension in the same way. You may be his spiritual

touchstone this time around, and in the mean time, you two are working out a lot of essential personal material... If I was to put it in psycho-synthesis terms, Stuart is still in stage 0.”

“Oh no”... She laughs.

“Yeah, well, it’s true. The 0 phase is where the personality has been truncated due to the early emergence of survival mechanisms dictated by the demands of early wounding. As a result of ubiquitous violations to the spirit or to one’s sense of significance or belonging, one’s early inner dialogue begins to recite, ‘don’t feel, don’t voice your needs, be perfect...’ You have said he was not well treated early on, and the survival personality forms quite young. This put him out of touch with himself and his environment a long time ago. It happens to all of us with insecure attachment patterns. We become addicted to this way of being and know no other way. I am sure he does not even know how his cynicism affects others.”

“Well, I know you and I have talked about this a lot, but each time he feels constricted, I try and engage him on another level, and when I can’t get through, I just leave the scene, which as you know means we usually break up, again. Oh, Sarah, sometimes I just need to hurry away from him, like I am being suffocated. I crave getting back to my practice where the light shines again. Tell me about the other stages. I want to know if there’s hope for Stuart and me.”

“I think it is a healthy form of self care that you do get away and go spend time with yourself, practicing and feeling at ease again. But maybe you don’t have to so fully reject him each time and go through a full break up. I do think there is hope for you and Stuart, as I see you both a little more willing to embrace each other each time you re-connect after a break up.

To finish about psycho-synthesis, in stage 0 we are living in a kind of trance until we begin to explore the personality. This investigation marks the beginning of stage 1. And even though Stuart is not really conscious of this, because of his relationship to you and your demands of communication, he has had to explore his personality and begin to take responsibility for his part in your dynamic together, so he has started some of the work in stage 1. Much like you experienced in Jungian therapy, in stage 1 we begin connecting to our personal history, our family of origin, our intergenerational patterns, as well as our ethnic, class and national constructs. Remember I talked a lot about this after the Hoffman Process as well. You know, it is so much easier to stay either ‘slaves of unrecognized complexes’ and not question our shame and

blame, or to attempt to jump over these issues through a spiritual tradition that views it all as illusion, so why focus on it. But in psycho-synthesis, it is essential that we invest time and care towards our-self in this way. At this stage we will need to have come to a 'dawning realization that life is far more wonderful and painful than we ever imagined.' At this point we will also need an empathic guide who can act as an external operating center while together we traverse the shaky ground within. They allow us to 'hold our brokenness and our wholeness, our wounds and our gifts' while helping us develop an internal unifying center within ourselves."

"Now this does sound some like Jungian therapy, although I don't remember much anymore, just that we spent a lot of time unpacking my dreams each session. I remember a wolf kept appearing in the oddest places; at the beach, in the bathroom, at the market. I think it was my ex-husband, ha ha... Does psycho-synthesis work with dreams much?"

"Sure. Psycho-synthesis uses any method that brings us closer to empathically meeting the hidden, or what is called the lower unconscious material and wounded parts of ourselves, while also learning to taproot authentic expressions of our essential selves.

One method I have found really life changing is learning to isolate which self-identity I am adhering to and connecting with what they would call this sub-personality directly. I have learned to facilitate an inner dialogue with various parts of myself that re-connects me with embedded vulnerabilities and often camouflaged fears. Initially the therapist often asks pointed yet simple questions in order to uncover cues of which direction the client needs to go to contact a prevailing aspect of one-self. Then, often using inquiry, visualization, and dialoguing with these inner parts, the therapist catalyzes the client's ability to become more present energetically. Often, the obstacle within reveals itself as an unmet want or need, that when turned toward, reveals our innermost sacred longings... like the natural yearning to feel respected, cared for, significant just as we are, to feel loving, lovable, loved.

As we become more aware of the facets of our-self, stage 2 will naturally arise. This is the blossoming of the healthy will, or the emergence of 'I' which is a gentle guiding capacity of consciousness which 'balances and constructively utilizes all the other activities and energies of the human being, without repressing any of them.'"

"Ugh! I never developed this. You know I was from a family and era where women such as myself were meant to be useful at home, and social and

ornamental in the world. I never had the chance to ask what I wanted, let alone needed, until much later, too much later for my kids and my relationship to you when you were young, oh I am so sorry I was so caught up all those years, I so wish..."

"I understand, really I do, and as we talked about in-depth after the Hoffman process, (and I really want you to feel me here), I do not harbor any of your, or my Mother's past with resentment. I too wish it could have been different for you, for your kids, for all of us, but we have us now, and having resolved the blaming perspective in relation to my early years, now is really where I attempt to live most of the time."

"I'm sorry honey, were you through? Are those all the stages?"

"It's ok, there is more, but I won't go into it too much now, just that there is stage 3 which is about contacting our aware self, which can only be accessed in the immediacy of now-ness, as we were just speaking about. And the last one is stage 4, which is the fundamental axis of the journey of self transformation; it is living in direct relationship with deeper being, which is 'available, present and active at any level of experience whether sublime, mundane or traumatic.' At this stage psycho-synthesis would say we feel 'held in being throughout the entire range of our human experience and are able to follow the deeper promptings from this I-Am-Ness, remaining faithful to our deepest sense of truth while in right relationship with ourselves and all others. Through the growing capacity for recognition, acceptance, inclusion and synthesis of our higher and lower realms, an authentic ground of being emerges."

"Well this last part sounds similar to my path of light and sound, although I have only been able to contact this when alone so far, and completely lose it when with others. Which stage do you feel you are in now honey?"

"I would say they were at first sequential, and now they feel like a spiral to me, or a mandala, and are all intrinsically interconnected. I may have a day where I am resting in aware self (stage 3), and feeling like my choices come from this I/Self interdependence (stage 4), and then later that day, or that week, some old fear will bubble up, such as happened on my last retreat around personal safety and I will dive into stage 1 material with interest and wonderment at its seeming bottomless-ness."

“Hum, yes, I can see how I could have really benefited from some work like this, as I did when you gifted me that session with Jennifer Welwood. Wouldn’t you say her work is similar?”

“Yes, she uses some different terms but she has an analogous psycho-spiritual constellation.”

“You haven’t touched the cookies honey?”

“Oh, well they look really burnt!”

“No! Are they? I forgot they were in the oven until you rang the door, and well, if you want to know the truth, I am forgetting almost everything lately. But I don’t want to scare you, although it is beginning to scare me! Well, would you like more tea?”

“No, lets go for a walk along the headlands now, it’s such a beautiful afternoon, and I want you to tell me more about this forgetting, and your fears...”

“Yes, let’s go walking honey.”