

BOOK REVIEWS

WHAT WE MAY BE: The visions and techniques of psychosynthesis
by Piero Ferrucci. Turnstone Press 1982 pp.250 £4.95

This is well-written and accurate account of what psychosynthesis has to offer, from an author who had frequent personal contact with the founder, Roberto Assagioli, over a period of many years.

As such, it raises all the problems which the transpersonal psychologist and therapist (guide) has to encounter. It also raises all the problems which come to anyone who tries to write a book about things which are essentially experiential.

For an example of the latter, let us look at the first exercise (there are forty-two of these altogether at intervals throughout the book) which faces the reader:

Close your eyes and visualize the following:

A pen slowly writing your name on paper.

A single-digit number. Then substitute a two-digit number, then a three-digit one, and so on until you reach the limit of the number of digits you can retain. Keep that number in front

of your inner eye for two minutes.

Various coloured shapes: a golden triangle, a violet circle, a blue five-pointed star, and so on.

Now that is a horribly difficult exercise. It may take a person two years of assiduous practice before he or she can hold anything at all in front of the inner eye for two minutes. This seems to me quite an unrealistic exercise to set for the innocent reader. As with all these experiential exercises, it makes a lot more sense in a workshop, where people can give feedback and have the task adjusted to their current abilities, and so forth. But of course for anyone running a workshop, this book is an excellent compendium of exercises, and well worth the money for that alone.

But the much more interesting difficulties come with the other kind of question - questions about what the transpersonal is and how it is to be described and understood.

Identification with the Transpersonal Self is a rare occurrence - for some individuals, the culmination of years of discipline; for others, a spontaneous extraordinary experience. It was described in ancient times with the Sanskrit words **sat-chit-ananda**: being-consciousness-bliss. (45)

This is clear enough. Sat-chit-ananda is the state of complete freedom which is aimed at in Yoga - a high and very rare spiritual state. As Chaudhuri (1975) describes it -

This is the most exalted mystic experience in jnana yoga. Being is experienced as the superpersonal spiritual mystery, or as God beyond God. This God beyond God is not any determinate mode of existence but the indeterminable non-temporal ground of all determinate forms of existence. (264)

Now I don't believe that this is what people are encountering in transpersonal work at all. It seems to me that what they are encountering is the higher self, a much more modest step on the spiritual path. But what misleads Ferrucci, as it misleads so many people in the growth movement, is the nature of the peak experience. Ferrucci speaks of superconscious experiences thus:

In spite of all their variability, there seems to be a recurring factor in the transpersonal experiences of people from many cultures, times and walks of life: a rare glimpse of, or even a full contact with, a **timeless essence**; a living entity which

is perceived as unchangeable, silent, pure being. In psychosynthesis we call this entity the Transpersonal Self. (131)

Now this is the classic mistake. The experiences he has just been talking about are all examples of peak experiences, and the peak experience has two important characteristics: firstly, it is very common and easy to obtain; and secondly, it is extremely easy to confuse with much deeper mystical experiences.

As for being easy to obtain, the evidence is all there in the book by Hay (1982) which quotes both American research and also the work of the Religious Experience Unit in Oxford to show that about a third of the population has had some experience of this kind at some point in their lives.

And as far as being easy to confuse with mystical experience is concerned, this is so well known in Buddhist meditation literature that it has been named as the pseudonirvana (Goleman 1977) or the false satori (Kapleau 1967). The part of the Abhidhamma text called the Visuddhimagga gives these ten characteristics of the pseudonirvana, according to Goleman:

- the vision of a **brilliant light** or luminous form
- **rapturous feelings** that cause goose flesh tremor in the limbs, the sensation of levitation, and the other attributes of rapture
- **tranquility** in mind and body, making them light, plastic and wieldy
- **devotional feelings** toward and faith in the meditation teacher, the Buddha, his teachings - including the method of insight itself - and the sangha, accompanied by joyous confidence in the virtues of meditation and the desire to advise friends and relatives to practice it
- **vigour** in meditating, with a steady energy neither too lax nor too tense
- **sublime happiness** suffusing the meditator's body, an unprecedented bliss that seems never-ending and motivates him to tell others of this extraordinary experience
- **quick and clear perception** of each moment of awareness: Noticing is keen, strong and lucid, and the characteristics of impermanence, nonself and unsatisfactoriness are clearly understood at once
- **strong mindfulness** so the meditator effortlessly notices every successive moment of awareness; mindfulness gains a momentum of its own

- **equanimity** toward whatever comes into awareness: No matter what comes into his mind, the meditator maintains a detached neutrality
- a subtle **attachment** to the lights and other factors listed here and pleasure in their contemplation. (28)

These are called "The ten corruptions of insight" in the text, and all we have to do is to substitute "psychosynthesis" for "meditation" to get the message.

What I am saying, then, is that peak experiences with one or more of these ten elements are very common, and come quite easily to anyone who looks for them. They can be very important for spiritual development, and they can give a whole new meaning to a person's life, but they are the beginning rather than the end. And there are many steps in between, as Wilber (1980) spells out in detail.

What Ferrucci is doing, and what many people in the growth movement also do, is to have a system of counting like that of a savage tribe whose system is "One, two, many". Or in this case, one (lower unconscious), two (middle unconscious), three (higher unconscious), infinity (sat-chit-ananda). It is as if once we leave the ordinary materialist ego consciousness, we immediately go to the ultimate. I see this as self-promotion and presumption rather than the truth of the matter. Psychosynthesis is perfectly good at bringing people into the lower reaches of spirituality and putting people in touch with their higher self. This seems a very worthwhile thing to do, and eminently achievable. Ferrucci gives a number of very convincing and moving case histories of people doing just this.

The great strength of psychosynthesis is its use of guided fantasy, and in this book there are many examples of Ferrucci using guided fantasy in bold and imaginative ways. Any therapist who uses imagery in their work would find this book both interesting and valuable.

John Rowan

References

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This review was sent to Piero Ferrucci for his comments and he wrote as follows:

Florence november 21,1982

Dear John Rowan,

Thank you very much for the attention you gave to my book and the opportunity you offer me for responding to your review.

The main issue you raise, it seems to me, is the following: what is the value of transpersonal experiences which are intermediate between ordinary consciousness and nirvana or ultimate liberation?

Spiritual traditions of various kinds have been answering through the ages in two opposite ways: some have seen all intermediate experiences, however high and beautiful, as illusory, and ultimate liberation as the only "real thing". In this view, illumination is immediate and discontinuous with ordinary consciousness. Others have insisted that any experience can be a step towards liberation, and therefore true and worthwhile. Sometimes a hierarchy is made, usually of states leading from multiplicity to unity ("samadhi" means "synthesis"), from form to formlessness, from time to timelessness, and from the finite to the infinite. From this perspective, liberation may come as a gradual dawn, not only as a lightning flash.

Psychosynthesis tends to agree with the second point of view. Therefore it considers no state of consciousness as "pseudo", but rather acknowledges, studies, and validates it. I don't believe I claimed in my case histories that any of my clients had reached nirvana or Buddhahood. Some of the experiences described, however, contained a glimpse of the Self, however remote and coloured by personal attitudes. In any case, however "common" a peak experience may be, I think its meaning may be made clearer if it is seen in the context of a greater journey - which is why I talk about the Self. In other words, there are small hills and there are Himalayas, as Assagioli used to say. But all peaks have in common the fact of being landmarks in human evolution.

Regarding the classification of all the peak experiences of all the people who ever did transpersonal work: I find it hard to put them all in one same category. Personally, I have seen anything going from states of emotional exaltation all the way to moments of deep spiritual understanding about life and the universe - occurrences which have strengthened my belief that the Spirit manifests in infinite ways, ever creative, surprising, and new.

Yours sincerely,

(signed) Piero Ferrucci

MULTIPLE CHOICE QUESTIONS IN PSYCHIATRY by G. Glew. Butterworth 1978

If you want to know the full horrors of the examination system, read this book. It is written by a gentleman with the initials after his name MB, BS, MRANZCP and MRCPsych, and is intended to provide practice for exams in basic psychiatry such as the Preliminary Test of the Royal College of Physicians.

Even considered as a multiple choice test, the thing is appalling. Instead of having one correct answer and four incorrect answers, which gives something which can be submitted to statistical analysis, these papers have sometimes two correct answers, sometimes three, four or even five correct answers out of five. This makes any kind of statistical comparison of the various questions virtually impossible. And some of the questions are about statistics!

In an apparent attempt to appear human, the author introduces a number of jokes into the answers. Thus **Extinction** means **loss of libido by the therapist**, according to one answer; **Transference** means **the process of changing one's therapist**; **Agoraphobics** typically have a **specific fear of snakes**; **Prostaglandins** are **increased in prostitutes**; the **Camberwell Register** is a **list of Maudsley graduates**, and so on. But these heavy-handed attempts do not really lighten the burden of the method.

Really the only point of multiple-choice tests is to make life easier for the examiner. The papers can even be marked by a lowly-paid assistant, and the scores then appear as some objective incarnation of the truth.

As for the content, there is some brief mention of behaviour therapy and psychoanalysis, but nothing about humanistic psychology. Just as well really - who would want to get mixed up with this sort of thing?

If this really represents what is being taught in our halls of psychiatric learning, it is a poor look-out for the future of psychiatry in this country.

Frank Galton

**EXPLORING INDIVIDUAL AND ORGANIZATIONAL BOUNDARIES:
A Tavistock open Systems approach** by W. Gordon Lawrence (ed),
John Wiley 1979 pp. 256 £10

This is a collection of papers and a sort of *festschrift* for Pierre Turquet, after his death in 1975. Many of the papers, and all the worst ones, deal with the weirdnesses and idiocies of the Leicester-type conferences on "Authority, Leadership and Organization" run by the Tavistock and also by the Grubb Institute.

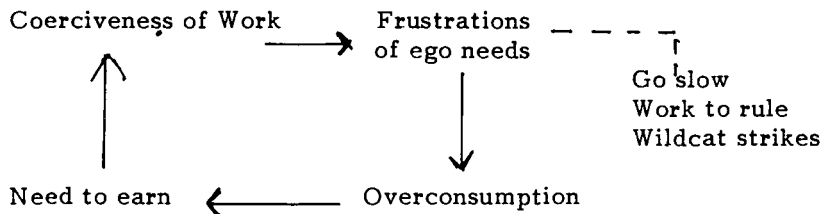
But there are in fact three good papers in this collection. The first of these is by Barry Falmer, which explains Gregory Bateson's ideas about Learning I, Learning II and Learning III, and relates them very well to group relations. This gave me something which I feel I can now use myself.

The second is a chapter by Eric J. Miller about some consultancy work he did on rural development in Mexico. He says at the end:

My point is that, although many people may wish otherwise, organizational development cannot be effective without also being a political activity, involving changes in the distribution of power.

This is a conclusion which seems to be borne out by a great deal of research in underdeveloped countries, and which also applies in British companies.

The third good paper is by Gordon Lawrence himself, and is entitled "A Concept for today: The management of oneself in role". This is a sensitive, precise yet firm essay on a concept which is important to anyone who plays a role from time to time - as few indeed of us do not; he has a nice diagram of our present culture:



None of this would be particularly new for a Marxist, but for a Tavistock man to get this far seems progress indeed.

O. Void