

PSYCHOSYNTHESIS AND THE HEARING OF VOICES

by

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Psychosynthesis, as developed by Assagioli and Ferruci (1)*, belongs mainly in the domain of transpersonal psychology. It is presented as a way for non-psychotic people to grow towards self-realisation and their true spiritual essence. I would like to propose the investigation of a possible additional use for psychosynthesis, as a useful adjunct in psychotherapeutic work with people who feel possessed, who are hearing voices or who have been diagnosed as 'schizophrenic'.

Each person, as humanistic psychotherapist John Rowan puts it, is a group, consisting of a half dozen or more sub-personalities (2). And in the complex modern world, adds Norwegian ecophilosopher Sigmund Evaloy, one needs to be able to move flexibly between one's multiple personalities (3).

Psychosynthesis can encourage a feeling of peaceful co-existence between these warring inner selves. For the person who feels possessed, it could perhaps become a way of helping integrate one's dark shadow selves, so as to explore the extent to which the voices are really those of interior sub-personalities, rather than exterior demonic forces, a way

of beginning to 'own' one's own experience and to take responsibility for it.

I will illustrate something of the possible potential of this approach with the story of someone I shall call Brigitte. Brigitte was unable to become a regular client of mine for practical reasons, but we did use psychosynthesis during a single three hour session. Brigitte was then aged 29, the youngest child in a family where the father had died and the mother lived abroad. As a child she had felt unwanted, having overheard her father, drunk as usual, tell her mother: "I only gave you children so as to stop you leaving". At puberty, Brigitte was criticised by her father one time when he caught her flirting with boys, and she decided thenceforth that she would turn from sex to work. From the ages of 13 to 18 she was anorexic, going down to 5½ stone in weight. Since then, though not a virgin, she had had no glimmer of sexual feelings for others, and no desire even to masturbate. But at night she had had erotic dreams and orgasms, although the eroticism in these dreams was often concealed - for example, she would dream of jumping up and down in a swimming pool, "as if on a pogo stick".

* 1) Numbers in brackets refer to notes at the end.

In her twenties, Brigitte had become something of a travelling drug-taking hippie, but later she decided to give up dope-smoking, and she felt gradually as if her world were narrowing in on her, as if, as she put it, "my elastic were being drawn in".

The first symptom of trouble was her sensation of a blue beam coming into her eyes, and her feeling that her soul might leave her, that she might die in her sleep. From then on she started waking up in the early hours of each morning. She started hearing voices saying things like "you're going to hell" or "you must serve me". She began to read the bible a great deal, and even headlines in the newspapers seemed to be personal messages to her.

In the end, Brigitte went to see a priest, hoping for exorcism and to be rid of the spirits possessing her. The priest told her that she was not possessed, but that she had schizophrenia. She went to see her GP who gave her triptolol, and for the time being, the voices, she told me, were quiescent, although she still could only sleep a few hours at night. Her ambition was to be rid of the voices for good, and to return to being normal and to sleeping well. She did not think that the voices were anything to do with her - they were so nasty and one was like that of an evil God.

We explored together the personalities of each of the voices - there were seven altogether, it transpired: a trickster, a cruel victimiser, an accusatory one, a false spiritual one, a lazy one, a sadistic beater-upper and a deep one that was "hard to understand". We

then listed what she felt her own sub-personalities were - the hurt suicidal one, the flirting one, the silly nutty one, the dreamer, the lover, the actress, the active crazy one, the religious one, the vulnerable one and the aesthete. Finally we added to the list her erotic night-time self.

I explained to her: "for the purposes of this psychosynthesis exercise, assume that all your list, including the voices and the erotic night-time self, are part of you, are sub-personalities that you have access to". After taking Brigitte through a relaxation procedure, I gave her the introduction to the psychosynthesis fantasy: "Imagine", I told her, "you are on a sandy beach on a hot day with the warm sea behind you. A coach approaches down a road leading to the beach. The coach comes to a halt. The door of the coach opens, and one by one your sub-personalities come out. Now you continue from there . . ."

Brigitte reported visualising a rather pleasant day on the beach, full of long swims and lazy "but not meaningless" conversations. The flirt danced and had tan oil spread all over her. The suicidal one felt less despairing. Sandwiches were shared. Then on one of the swims, the voices sub-personalities became "naughty ones". "They pretend they are sharks", Brigitte said, "and they come after us, the trickster and the others. I hardly want to know them at all. But the long swim makes us all feel amazing and after as the sun goes down, we light a fire and link arms". Later Brigitte had them all set off in a sailing boat on a long journey, and she concluded: "I don't

know quite what to make of trickster and co. They aren't really like that. As they talk, they become more grown-up, you see, they know what they're doing, as if they were totally lost before . . . They're children now, and they've said they're sorry, and they're breathing very deeply because they must have been suffocated. They're playing now. That's the only way I can see them now, as children, because they were so cruel".

And so our session together drew to a close. It seemed to me that despite Brigitte's evident wish in the fantasy to keep everything nice and pleasant and idealistic - (she was obviously not ready or willing to look at anything very negative) - it had nevertheless been a useful exercise. She had begun to make friends with her voices, to play with them instead of being manipulated by them. No doubt in some respects the voices **are** in reality exterior to her, perhaps representing those in her past who had made her feel bad and unwanted, from her prenatal existence onwards. In the exercise she was beginning to feel that the

cruelty of the voices was like that of little children pretending, rather than that of a false and evil God.

As Ferruci says, psychosynthesis exercises of this type allow the sub-personalities to transform themselves and to reveal hidden potentials, with less distorted aspects growing from within gross and degraded forms (4). "All sub-personalities are expressions of vital elements of ourselves, however negative they may seem to us at first" (5). The unceasing conflict between sub-personalities is like "a jumble of voices", Ferruci writes, which, as further progress is made, "gradually gives place to the kind of harmony created by a choir, in which each voice blends with all the others to express the theme of the musical work at hand". (6)

My own experience is too limited to draw any firm conclusions, but I would very much like to hear from any other therapists who care to try (or have already tried) using psychosynthesis as a tool in work with those that hear voices or who feel possessed.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

- (1) Assagioli, R. (1975). **'Psychosynthesis: A Manual of Principles and Techniques'**, Turnstone Books, London. And Ferruci, P. (1982). **'What We May Be, The Visions and Techniques of Psychosynthesis'**, Turnstone Books, London.
 - (2) Rowan, J. (1983). **'Person As Group'**, in Blumberg, H.H. et al. (eds.), **'Small Groups and Social Interaction'** (Volume 2), John Wiley and Sons, Chichester.
 - (3) Kvaloy, S. in **'The Universe Within'**, in Resurgence Journal, (Ford House, Hartland, Bideford, Devon), Sept/Oct 1984.
 - (4) As No.1 above, page 55.
 - (5) As No.1 above, page 52.
 - (6) As No.1 above, page 54.
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