

The Golden Mean of Roberto Assagioli

An interview conducted with Dr. Assagioli by Sam Keen that was published in the December 1974 issue of *Psychology Today*

A *Psychology Today* editor journeys to Florence to decide for himself whether psychosynthesis is a marriage of the best in modern psychology or an eclectic mishmash that boils down to a game of words

More than half a century ago, when Freud was creating psychoanalysis in Vienna, Roberto Assagioli, MD., was developing psychosynthesis in Italy. Until recently his work was not much known either in or outside Italy, but in the last decade institutes of psychosynthesis have been blossoming around the world and Assagioli's books are being translated into many languages

Estimates of his accomplishment vary widely. Some believe he has returned the fact of will to psychology, elaborated a viable notion of the transpersonal self, and assembled a therapeutic technology that reflects the best wisdom modern psychology can offer. Mike Murphy and Stuart Miller of Esalen think psychosynthesis provides a comprehensive vision that is likely to effect a marriage between humanistic, transpersonal and research-based psychology. Others see Assagioli's idea of will as a Victorian throwback, his transpersonal self as a thinly disguised borrowing from idealistic theology and his techniques as an eclectic mishmash. **A Miasma of Moderation.** On first reading I found *Psychosynthesis* and *The Act of Will* inclusive, ponderous and soporific. Assagioli's analyses were so balanced, his diagrams so inclusive and his solutions so global that everything bogged down in a miasma of moderation. Aristotle's golden mean may produce a mellow life but it makes for undramatic prose. The vision of "a complete and harmonious development of the human personality" and the "elimination of all conflicts and obstacles that might block this development" seemed optimistic at best and naive at worst

And what do you make of a psychotherapist who borrows the best insights and techniques from a dozen competing varieties of psychology? On the American therapeutic scene we are accustomed to psychological warfare regular shortcuts at the "you're-not-OK" corral between members of the American Psychological Association and the Association for Humanistic Psychology. (Is it all right to touch? Is shock therapy more humane than sleeping with a client?) Balance and harmony seemed tepid fare compared to primal screams, M&Ms, and free (\$\$) association. I wondered what an aristocratic gentleman with a spirit of conciliation could say to us aggressive ones. Psychosynthesis did sound grand and methodical but a little too heroic. Shouldn't psychotherapy be more modest? It might be better to avoid grand visions and concentrate on the glory of coping. I had my doubts about psychosynthesis. But the alternatives are even less promising

An Invisible Glory. A few weeks and a transcontinental flight later, I found it hard to remain critical and objective. The Renaissance oozes from every inch of Florence that is not covered by Fiats and tourists. Michelangelo's *David* testifies to the classical vision of proportion. Botticelli's *Venus* is still rising from the sea with almond-shaped, olive eyes not unlike those of a salesgirl in a small shop on the Ponte Vecchio. Il Duomo stands as a monument to an invisible glory that was once at the heart of the city. Before I entered the Institute for Psychosynthesis at 16 Via San Domenico. I was vulnerable to any hope of a majestic psychology to support the modern spirit

Assagioli's office is a small room in his apartment, which is above the headquarters of the Institute. Books line two of the walls: Ralph Waldo Emerson, Herman Keyserling, Abraham Maslow and Carl Gustav Jung seem to be favorites. On the next to the bottom shelf *Jonathan Livingston Seagull* is perched between Rollo May and Erik Erikson. The desk is antique and covered with objects and papers (talismans of the shaman), fresh cut flowers (like tiger lilies I knew in Tennessee); a barometer; a clock; a kitchen timer; scales; a flag of the United

Nations; a star globe; two word-cards—ENERGY and GOOD-WILL. The walls, once white, have now yellowed like old bones. A stuffed Victorian love seat squats in one corner of the room.

Assagioli rises to greet me. He is old, fine-boned and frail, but the liveliness and delight in his face make his presence vigorous. His pointed goatee and salmon-colored-velvet smoking jacket lend an air of old-world authority.

Roberto Assagioli: I must ask you to write the questions that you would like to ask me because, as you know, I do not hear.

Sam Keen: *(This is going to be a strange conversation. I will have to carry on two separate dialogues: one with the tape recorder and one with Assagioli. In order to keep track of his answers I will have to read my written questions onto the tape. I will also have to record my elaborations, meta questions, doubts and occasional voices. It will be hard to capture nuances because he can only respond to specific questions. But, then, most people are deaf to the metaconversation, the thoughts beyond the words. There are four parties to every dialogue. Two are silent.)*

Keen: What are the major differences between psychosynthesis and psychoanalysis?

Assagioli: We pay far more attention to the higher unconscious and to the development of the transpersonal self. In one of his letters Freud said, "I am interested only in the basement of the human being." Psychosynthesis is interested in the whole building. We try to build an elevator which will allow a person access to every level of his personality. After all, a building with only a basement is very limited. We want to open up the terrace where you can sun-bathe or look at the stars. Our concern is the synthesis of all areas of the personality. That means psychosynthesis is holistic, global and inclusive. It is not against psychoanalysis or even behavior modification but it insists that the needs for meaning, for higher values, for a spiritual life, are as real as biological or social needs. We deny that there are any isolated human problems. Take sex for example. There is no sex *per se*. Sex is connected with every other function. So-called sexual problems are often caused by power conflicts between two persons and can only be solved by unraveling the complex interactions between them.

Keen: The features you have mentioned so far are largely theoretical. Is your therapeutic technology any different than psychoanalysis? *(It was always a shock to the reader of the rhetoric of logotherapy and existential psychotherapy to discover that they introduced no noticeable innovations in therapeutic practice—which may mean they made no practical difference.)*

Assagioli: Psychosynthesis makes use of more exercises and techniques than it is possible to list here. We have systematic exercises for developing every function of the personality. Initially we explore all the conscious and unconscious aspects of the personality by having patients write autobiographies, keep a diary, fill out questionnaires, and take all types of projective tests (TAT, free drawing, etc.) As therapy proceeds, we use relaxation, music, art, rhythmical breathing, mental concentration, visualization, creative imagination, evocative visual symbols and words, and meditation. But I want to emphasize that every individual is different and no techniques can be applied automatically.

Keen: Did psychosynthesis develop from psychoanalysis?

Assagioli: Yes. In 1910 Freud was unknown in Italy. My doctoral committee was reluctant, but they finally permitted me to do my doctoral thesis on psychoanalysis. I went to Zurich to study with Eugen Bleuler, the inventor of schizophrenia. When I returned, I practiced psychoanalysis in Italy but I soon discovered its limitations.

Keen: What was your relationship to Freud and Jung?

Assagioli: I never met Freud personally but I corresponded with him and he wrote to Jung expressing the hope that I would further the cause of psychoanalysis in Italy. But I soon became a heretic. With Jung, I had a more cordial relationship. We met many times during the years and had delightful talks. Of all modern psychotherapists, Jung is the closest in theory and practice to psychosynthesis.

Keen: What are the similarities and differences?

Assagioli: In the practice of therapy we both agree in rejecting "pathologism" that is, concentration upon morbid manifestations and symptoms of a supposed psychological "disease." We regard man as a fundamentally, healthy organism in which there may be a temporary malfunctioning. Nature is always trying to re-establish harmony, and within the psyche the principle of synthesis is dominant. Irreconcilable opposites do not exist. The task of therapy is to aid the individual in transforming the personality, and integrating apparent contradictions. Both Jung and myself have stressed the need for a person to develop the higher psychic functions, the spiritual dimension.

Perhaps the best way to state our differences is with a diagram of the psychic functions. Jung differentiates four functions: sensation, feeling, thought and intuition. Psychosynthesis says that Jung's four functions do not provide for a complete description of the psychological life. Our view can be visualized like this: We hold that imagination or fantasy is a distinct function. There is also a group of functions that impels us toward action in the outside world. This group includes instincts, tendencies, impulses, desires and aspirations. And here we come to one of the central foundations of psychosynthesis: There is a fundamental difference between drives, impulses, desires and the will. In the human condition there are frequent conflicts between desire and will. And we place the will in a central position at the heart of self-consciousness or the Ego.

Keen: (*Beware—dangerous ground—whenever desire is opposed to will a tragic conflict appears that can only be solved by the intervention of the strong man. I suspect the iron hand of will-power lurks under the velvet glove of synthesis.*) Why do you place will at the center of the ego? Are you advocating a new form of voluntarism? Should we amend Descartes to read: I will, therefore I am?

Assagioli: I believe the will is the Cinderella of modern psychology. It has been relegated to the kitchen. The Victorian notion that will power could overcome all obstacles was destroyed by Freud's discovery of unconscious motivation. But, unfortunately, this led modern psychology into a deterministic view of man as a bundle of competing forces with no center. This is contrary to every human being's direct experience of himself. At some point, perhaps in a crisis when danger threatens, an awakening occurs in which the individual discovers his will. This revelation that the self and the will are intimately connected can change a person's whole awareness of himself and the world. He sees that he is a living subject, an actor, endowed with the power to choose, to relate, to bring about changes in his own personality, in others, in circumstances. And this awareness leads to a feeling of wholeness, security and joy. Because modern psychology has neglected the centrality of will, it has denied that we have a direct experience of the self. With the certainty that one has a will comes the realization of the intimate connection between the will and the self. This is the existential experience of the direct awareness of pure self-consciousness. It is self-consciousness that sets man apart from animals. Human beings are aware but also know that they are aware. We can express the importance of self-consciousness, the unity of willing and being, by saying (as opposed to Descartes): "I am aware of being and willing," or "I am a willing self."

Keen: (*I think he knocked down the deterministic house of cards which "scientific" psychology has been living in since cause and effect seized the throne. My God, he is trying to make us responsible for our identity!*)

Surprise. Unlikely allies. Introspection and instrumentation both lead to a recovery of the will. Assagioli discovers volition by looking within. Barbara Brown [see "New Mind. New Body," PT, August] finds that any bodily response that can be measured and fed back to the conscious mind can be controlled. And what is it that controls? The will. It looks as if there may be a ghost in the machine.)

Assagioli: I think most discussions about identity have gone wrong because academic psychologists don't take the trouble to experiment in appropriate ways. They run rats through mazes but they don't go into the inward laboratory and examine their own experience of the will. They might be compared, with some irreverence, to those theologians who refused to look through Galileo's telescope because they were afraid of disturbing their world view.

They neglect introspection, which is the best laboratory a psychologist has.

Keen: Can you describe will further?

Assagioli: No. It is indescribable. It is a matter of direct experience, just like the direct experience of red or blue. Can you tell me what it is like to experience blue?

Keen: (*The Holy of Holies is always empty. At the heart of every system of thought lies the ineffable: Ask a rationalist how to spot a clear and distinct idea, or a Freudian how to detect an Oedipus complex, or a positivist to verify the verification principle and the answer is always a stammering that covers an embarrassed silence. The starting point is always in mystery; the subject is always that which is not exhausted by the predicates; language only leads us to the point where silence begins.*) Well, almost. Blue is cool like running water and that is very different from red which is like cinnamon or sun. When you talk of will is it something like the resolve that stiffens the Prussian backbone, or like the warm juices that run through Henri Bergson's "élan vital"?

Assagioli: No. Élan vital is, in my opinion, the true conception of libido without the specific sexual connotation given it by Freud. It is the dynamic, the power, the energy that underlies life. Will is more like the directing agent in the personality than the vital force.

Keen: But that assumes there is a single will, a single directing force. From the time of St. Paul to St. Freud the experience of the split will has bedeviled mankind. "The good I will I do not" and the will to life is in opposition to the will to death. How do you unify the conflicting wills?

Assagioli: It is certainly true—that there is a multiplicity within the self but the will is essentially the activity of the self which stands above the multiplicity. It directs, regulates and balances the other functions of the personality in a creative way. I don't believe there is any fundamental split, any irreconcilable conflict, within man. I don't think there is a will to death opposing the will to life. What is loosely called the "split will" can be recognized to be in reality the conflict between the central will and a multitude of drives, urges, desires and wishes. This is a universal experience. Conflicts are present in every normal individual. Without them there would be no need for psychoanalysis or psychosynthesis! Each choice involves some conflict whether to stay inside and read or go out for a walk—you can't do them both at once. In neurotic conflict there is a desperate attempt to have two incompatible things at the same time. But in the normal person the will can function to lessen or to eliminate the conflict by recognizing a hierarchy of needs and arranging for an appropriate satisfaction of all needs. The central will distributes the tasks to other parts of the personality. Let me use an analogy that is central to my thinking: The will is like the conductor of an orchestra. He is not self-assertive but is rather the humble servant of the composer and of the score.

Keen: (*I hear feminine voices in the wings: "Philosophy and psychology in the West have always been ratified forms of man-talk, usually complete with after-dinner cigars and hidden chauvinism. What of the feminine perspective? Is he describing the condition of the male psyche or of the human psyche?"*) Doesn't placing the will at the center of the self betray a distinctively masculine perspective? In traditional terms, direction, control, assertion and aggression are considered masculine attributes. The female of the species is supposedly more welcoming, nurturing and flowing. Do you recognize an essential "feminine" component of the self? Of the will? How do you balance the masculine and feminine elements in the self?

Assagioli: The will is not merely assertive, aggressive and controlling. There is the accepting will, the yielding will, the dedicated will. You might say that there is a feminine polarity to the will—the willing surrender, the joyful acceptance of the other functions of the personality.

I can state the same point in another way. At the heart of the self there is both an active and a passive element, an agent and a spectator. Self-consciousness involves our being a witness—a pure, objective, loving witness—to what is happening within and without. In this sense the self is not a dynamic in itself but is a point of witness, a spectator, an observer who watches the flow. But there is another part of the inner self—the will-er or the directing agent—that actively intervenes to orchestrate the various functions and energies of the personality, to make commitments and to instigate action in the external world. So, at the center of the self there is a unity of masculine and feminine, will and love, action and observation.

Keen: (*Both/and rather than either/or. There goes the synthetic principle joining together what is usually kept apart. Eastern philosophy locates the essence of man in the atemporal observer. Western philosophy, since the rise of technology, locates the chief dignity of man in the ability to control the world, to act. Assagioli marries East and West. Do mixed marriages work, or do they produce philosophical bastards?*)

Keen: How does psychosynthesis train people to create this Olympian attitude of detached powerfulness?

Assagioli: Techniques are always related to the individual situation, so it is hard to generalize. But I can discuss two basic techniques: disidentification and training of the will.

I can begin with a fundamental psychological principle: We are dominated by everything with which our self is identified. We can dominate and control everything from which we disidentify ourselves. The normal mistake we all make is to identify ourselves with some content of consciousness rather than with consciousness itself. Some people get their identity from their feelings, others from their thoughts, others from their social roles. But this identification with a part of the personality destroys the freedom which comes from the experience of the pure "I."

Keen: We identify with the predicate rather than the subject.

Assagioli: That is right. Often a crisis in life deprives a person of the function or role with which he has identified: an athlete's body is maimed, a lover's beloved departs with a wandering poet; a dedicated worker must retire. Then the process of disidentification is forced on one and a solution can only come by a process of death and rebirth in which the person enters into a broader identity. But this process can occur with conscious cooperation.

The exercise in disidentification and identification involves practicing awareness and affirming: I have a body, but I am not my body. I have emotions, but I am not my emotions. I have a job, but I am not my job... etc. Systematic introspection can help to eliminate all partial self-identifications.

Keen: This technique is similar to the Buddhist vipassana meditation in which one merely observes passing thoughts, sensations and images.

Assagioli: Yes, and it leads to the affirmation that the observer is different from what he observes. So the natural stage which comes after disidentification is a new identification of the self: I recognize and affirm that "I am a center of pure self-consciousness. I am a center of will, capable of ruling, directing and using all my psychological processes and my physical body." The goal of these exercises is to learn to disidentify at any time of the day, to disassociate the self from any overpowering emotion, person, thought or role and assume the vantage point of the detached observer.

Keen: (*Danger: the practice of disidentification may produce a person who has much light but little fire. Love is an inordinancy; therefore always blind or one-eyed. I single out one woman, one place, one work for an inordinate quantity of attention. Deep caring always involves an element of fetishism. Passion makes us lopsided. And sometimes the fastest way to the heart of things involves surrendering to forces, impulses and desires we cannot understand—i.e., transcend. Is passion compatible with psychosynthesis? Norman O. Brown: "We are all fractions. We are broken." In the Christian tradition healing comes from accepting our brokenness not from synthesizing our parts into a perfect whole. The ideal of wholeness, realizing the full human potential, transcending contradictions, achieving enlightenment intrigues me. But I suspect it is a secular replacement for the Kingdom of God (which was always coming tomorrow). Perhaps the human condition is inevitably colored by partialness and tragedy. Perhaps. But I owe it to myself to doubt my doubts. My resistance to the idea of life beyond conflict may be a way my ego holds onto contradiction. Would I still be me if I were happily synthesized?)*

Keen: I see how you arrive at the pure experience of the self as observer, but how can you claim that the will is capable of ruling and directing all the other psychological functions? Frequently the will seems powerless to master infantile drives. At times it is a powerless prisoner governed by an infantile tyrant. When depression strikes, or anger surges, or sexual desire bubbles up, will power seems weak, more like an aging parent than a virile manager of the personality.

Assagioli: Will, like any other function of the personality, can be systematically developed and strengthened. If it is weak it can be trained by regular exercise in the same way muscles are developed by gymnastics. And if a person begins with a weak will he may, by the simple miracle of overcompensation, develop a greater than normal strength of will. Everybody has enough will to begin the process of developing more.

Keen: (*Whenever anyone talks about developing will power, two contradictory images rise before me. 1) The self-made man: Horatio Alger, Dale Carnegie, and How To Develop A Powerful You in 30 Days. I suspect superficiality. 2) The Victim. Neurosis is inner passivity. Depression is learned helplessness. Without a strong will a person remains a victim. Maybe. The ambivalence about the concept of will, or rather its neglect, in modern psychology is a reflection of an embarrassment about the desire for personal power. Our power drive has been externalized and channeled into science and technology, politics and warfare. Why not have the development of inner potency as an overt goal?)*

Keen: What other techniques do you use to develop will power?

Assagioli: Let me clarify something. Psychosynthesis is not primarily concerned with developing will power. Strength is a necessary but not a sufficient condition of the will. It is equally important to develop a skillful will and a good will. We have many techniques for developing each of these qualities. I deal with these at length in *The Act of Will*. One technique is visualizing the "ideal model." Picture as vividly as possible how your life would be different if you were in possession of a strong will. Visualize yourself as having attained inner and

outer mastery. We also advise performing some "useless exercises" everyday for strengthening self-discipline. You can resolve to stand on a chair for 10 minutes or run a mile a day or control a violent temper. Developing a skillful will is more difficult. If the will is placed in direct opposition to strong feelings or drives it will be overpowered and so we have to create a strategy to achieve the ends we will. Take, for example, a person with an obsessive desire who wills to be rid of his obsession. The more he concentrates on the obsession, the fiercer it grows. But he can withhold his attention and substitute a new interest, he can cultivate a beneficent "obsession." Holding new images before the eyes tends to produce the reality suggested by the image. This follows from a well-known psychological law: Images or mental pictures and ideas tend to produce the physical conditions and external acts that correspond to them. Or as William James said: "Every image has in itself a motor element." One very simple technique I use is a series of cards on which are printed evocative words such as: CALM, PATIENCE, BLISS, ENERGY, GOOD-WILL. When these cards are placed around the room they trigger attitudes and call forth the quality they symbolize. I also use works of art in a similar way. For instance Fra Angelico's *Transfiguration* is a visible symbol for the transformation of the personality which takes place when a person gets in touch with the transpersonal Self.

Keen: *(Is this simpleminded, or a judicious use of the automatic responses of the body/mind? I am not certain. Confession: One evening I put up the card named GLORY in my hotel room and waited for results. In the morning I awoke in ruffled and musty sheets to streaming sunlight and church bells and a golden day filled with florentine coffee, Leonardo da Vinci, and—most certainly—glory. But we all know such attitudinal overlays are due to the power of suggestion, don't we?)*

Keen: Good will seems to belong more to religion than psychotherapy. Can't the will be healthy without being good?

Assagioli: No. A person is always in a social context; he is not an isolated unit. So the more conflict there is, the more energy is wasted. If we are to have any deep peace it depends upon the harmonization of wills. Self-centeredness is deeply destructive to the cooperation without which a person cannot live a full life in community. Why should we consider good will an expendable virtue, a matter only for the religious? I can go even a step further. This same principle applies to an individual's relation to nature and the universe. No person can take an arrogant stand and consider himself unrelated to the universe. Like it or not, man is a part of the universal will and he must somehow tune in and willingly participate in the rhythms of universal life. The harmonization and unification of the individual and the universal will—the Chinese identification with the Tao, the Stoic acceptance of destiny, or the Christian will of God—is one of the highest human goals, even if it is seldom realized.

Keen: Until Maslow began to talk about metaneeds, psychology was embarrassed by anything that looked like metaphysics or religion. Now it seems that mysticism and medicine are joining forces. Does healthy self-awareness necessarily involve a religious commitment?

Assagioli: Not necessarily. What I call personal psychosynthesis can be achieved by coming to understand the lower and the middle unconscious. But for some people, when basic psychological needs have been met and a measure of health has been achieved, boredom and a sense of meaninglessness set in and a search begins for some higher purpose in life. As Jung pointed out, being normal and adjusted is enough for some persons but others have a hunger for transcendence. There is a new "fourth force" in psychology—transpersonal psychology—which seeks to explore those needs and aspirations that go beyond self-actualization and humanistic psychology.

Keen: In Freud's time there was a vast cultural conspiracy to repress the libido, to force it to remain unconscious. Would you say we have a parallel conspiracy to repress the religious impulse? We seem as ashamed of our appetite for meaning as Victorian society was of erections and palpitations not of the heart.

Assagioli: Many people seem to have voluntarily submitted to a spiritual lobotomy, to a repression of the sublime, a complete denial of the transpersonal self. Consequently the higher unconscious remains virtually unknown to many people. Much psychology has encouraged the adoption of a degraded self-image by advancing the argument that all religious or spiritual impulses are mere sublimations of sexual instincts. This type of reductionism ignores the fact that many of the most creative people in human history report experiences of a transpersonal nature. By what right can we deny that spiritual drives are less real, basic or fundamental than sexual or aggressive drives?

Keen: Why should people repress the sublime? What's so threatening about paradise?

Assagioli: It is no more mysterious than the repression of sexual ecstasy. We fear the sublime because it is unknown and because if we admit the reality of higher values we are committed to act in a more noble way. Goodness, cooperation, the loss of self-centeredness, and responsibility for spiritual growth go along with acknowledgement of the higher self.

Keen: What is the nature of the transpersonal self? Are you talking about an entity separate from the self we experience directly in self-awareness?

Assagioli: My dear friend, I cannot tell you what the transpersonal self is like. Maslow tried to characterize it and the nature of the peak experience in *The Psychology of Being*. Direct experience of the transpersonal self is rare and union with it is very rare. But many people have a knowledge of it that is mediated through the higher unconsciousness, or the superconsciousness. I can describe some of the effects. It is spontaneously manifested in the creative works of the great universal geniuses such as Plato, Dante and Einstein. Others get in touch with it through prayer or meditation. Or they may feel a call or pull from some Higher Power. Language is always inadequate to speak about transpersonal or spiritual experiences. Every expression is highly symbolic, and a large variety of symbols have been used: enlightenment, descent into the underworld of the psyche, awakening, purification, transmutation, psychospiritual alchemy, rebirth and liberation.

Keen: I assume you have techniques in psychosynthesis to develop awareness of the transpersonal self.

Assagioli: Yes. Among them the technique of inner dialogue works well. Imagine a very wise man who knows the answers to all the problems you face. If you could obtain an interview with this man what would he tell you? This is your inner teacher...

Keen: (*I fear my inner guru maybe senile. He seems to offer contradictory advice: take it easy/work harder, risk everything/stay where you are, dare madness/cultivate sanity. He can never decide whether he is on the side of Dionysus or Apollo.*)

Assagioli: ... If you listen for an answer you may find it coming spontaneously through a third person or a book you are reading or through the development of circumstances. The practice of meditation also is good. Sometimes I suggest that clients write a letter.

Keen: To the transpersonal self?

Assagioli: Yes. "Dear Transpersonal Self..." Try it and see what happens.

Keen: To what address do I mail it?

Assagioli: To the same place you mail the angry letters when you tell a lover or enemy all the things you hate about him.

Keen: I can never quite decide whether psychosynthesis techniques are naive or brilliant. They frequently seem a little simpleminded to me. (*Should I admit that after yesterday's session and his "simplistic" analysis of neurosis as vacillating in the decision seat, I stopped smoking cigarettes for happily-ever-after.*) There is an old tradition that links wisdom and foolishness. Is a wise man simpleminded? Is the simplification that comes with age wisdom or fatigue? And is psychosynthesis a modern version of a wisdom school? What is the difference between a wise man and a fool?

Assagioli: Wisdom is even more out of fashion today than will. The original notion of wisdom has little to do with foolishness. Of course wisdom does involve a higher simplicity of the spirit, but this is not simplemindedness. In Chinese the ideograph for wisdom is a combination of wind and lightning. So the wise man is not the one who is serene and tired but one who can no more be captured than the wind and who strikes like lightning when necessary. Wisdom is connected with intuition, (that is why she has been seen as a woman—Sophia) and with seeing things whole, and so it links up with the transpersonal perspective. It is the power to play with opposites and to establish a synthesis. I suppose that age helps one to acquire some of the perspective necessary to create harmony among the apparent contradictions.

Keen: William Blake said: "The way of excess leads to the palace of wisdom." Shouldn't youth be a time of excess rather than striving for a premature balance?

Assagioli: That's amusing.

Keen: Here is another quote [from the Scottish philosopher McNab, I think] that goes with it: "Wisdom is a virtue in the second half of life but a bore in the first." Shouldn't psychosynthesis be reserved for those over 40?

Assagioli: You will excuse my not giving you a wholesale answer. Individuals differ. Some young people are psychologically mature and some adults are childish psychologically. Some personal psychosynthesis must take place before the transpersonal psychosynthesis, but people are ready for this at different ages.

Keen: What are the limits of psychosynthesis? If you were a critic of your own system, what would you criticize?

Assagioli: That should be your job but I will do it. It is fun. I will answer paradoxically. The limit of psychosynthesis is that it has no limits. It is too extensive, too comprehensive. Its weakness is that it accepts too much. It sees too many sides at the same time and that is a drawback.

Keen: (*That's my "self-knowledge index" question. Most "famous" people get about C-. I give Assagioli a straight A. He sees in the back of his own eyes.*)

Keen: Hannah Arendt says that forgiveness is the key to action and freedom. Without forgiveness life is governed by the repetition compulsion, by an endless cycle of resentment and retaliation. Yet few psychotherapists tip their hats to it. Some, like Janov, seem to encourage resentment and anger against parents and society because they are the source of primal pain. Tell me what psychosynthesis has to say about forgiveness, responsibility and gratitude.

Assagioli: In psychosynthesis we stress individual responsibility. No matter what has happened to a person he must assume responsibility here and now for changes he wants to make in his personality and not blame his parents or society. I am against many things in modern society and am a revolutionary in that sense but we have to change it from within because it is our society. Toward those persons who have harmed you I recommend understanding and pity. Probably the harm is not so great as you imagine. Of course we are conditioned by the past but we have the power to disown it, to walk away, to change ourselves. Most of the harm parents do to children is done out of ignorance and not malice and so it is liberating to forgive those who knew no better, rather than harbor resentment and self-pity. Also forgiveness becomes easier when you come in contact with the real suffering of humanity. One thing! would propose in education is that young people have a weekly: visit to hospitals, institutions for the insane and slums so they come directly into contact with human suffering without the interposition of theories, statistics, or political ideologies.

Keen: Since the decline of religion in the West and the loss of the rites of passage—birth and death rituals—it has fallen to psychology to help people cope with transition crises and boundary situations. How do you deal with death? At 85 how does it appear to you?

Assagioli: Death looks to me primarily like a vacation There are many hypotheses about death and the idea of reincarnation seems the most sensible to me. I have no direct knowledge about reincarnation but my belief puts me in good company with hundreds of millions of Eastern people, with the Buddha and many others in the West. Death is a normal part of a biological cycle. It is my body that dies and not all of me. So I don't care much. I may die this evening but I would willingly accept a few more years in order to do the work I am interested in, which I think may be useful to others. I am, as the French say, *disponible* (available). Also humor helps, and a sense of proportion. I am one individual on a small planet in a little solar system in one of the galaxies.

Keen: *(It is hard to know what counts as evidence for the validity of a world view and the therapeutic it entails. Every form of therapy has dramatic successes and just as dramatic failures. Enter as evidence in the case for psychosynthesis an ad hominem argument: in speaking about death there was no change in the tone or intensity of Assagioli's voice and the light still played in his dark eyes, and his mouth was never very far from a smile.)*

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Psychology Today consulting editor Sam Keen holds a master's degree in theology from Harvard Divinity School and a Ph.D. in philosophy and philosophy of religion from Princeton. He has taught at Rutgers University, Louisville Presbyterian Seminary and Prescott College's Center for the Person in Arizona. A freelance writer and lecturer, his books include *Apology for Wonder, To a Dancing God, Telling Your Story* and *Voices and Visions*.