

Has the ego landed? A view on integrative psychosynthesis

by Roe Woodroffe

The concept of Integrative Psychosynthesis is one that I identify as my way of working. But what do I mean when I say 'integrative'? This suggests to me a method of working that includes other disciplines, or schools of thought, which add to, strengthen, and thereby enhance the effectiveness of the spiritual philosophy behind, and incorporated in traditional Psychosynthesis by, in the main, attending to the ego, body, or container, from which the soul may more consciously align herself with spirit - and soar.

The bias when I was doing my training was - it seemed to me - on soaring, throwing myself open to the 'more than', the larger whole, the universe. I recall feeling 'I'm not ready for this, I can't even care for myself'. At the time this was (and not totally inappropriately) named as my 'repression of the sublime'. The fact that there was meaning and indeed wisdom in my self-imposed ceiling was not really appreciated. In retrospect I can see I had insufficient ego strength to be able to contain more than I was already attempting to contain! I could not embody (and this word feels very relevant to this discussion on Integrative Psychosynthesis), a spiritual philosophy until I had learnt how to relate with the body I was attempting to inhabit, and the chaos that lived inside.

Icarus came to a sticky end through his untimely attempts to soar, and in a piece of art work I viewed today he is depicted blind-folded crashing into the sea, head first, in a flurry of feathers, his waxen body, below his chest, simply does not exist. I would suggest that whilst spirit and soul have been honoured if not always 'alive and well' in traditional Psychosynthesis, the body, or ego when acknowledged has been treated as 'lesser than', and at times, not in existence, at all.

I attempted to fill this all-important gap for myself by attending a two year Psychodynamic Counselling course running parallel with my training in Psychosynthesis. I also avidly read Marian Woodman's work, as she seemed to include and prioritise matter as mattering in matters of soul and spirit. During my training in Psychodynamic counselling the tutor asked me about my experience of Psychosynthesis, and I remember her commenting that it had the reputation of being regarded as 'the icing on the cake of therapies'. I was most upset to hear this, tried to defend it and thereby my involvement in it, but actually she pin-pointed a disquiet I had, till then, been unable to put into words, namely that traditional Psychosynthesis, as I was being taught it was very short on body, or to stick with the cake analogy, 'mix'.

What my Psychodynamic training also showed me was the importance of transference and counter-transference in the therapeutic relationship. Unfortunately neither this basic counselling training, nor my Psychosynthesis training really taught me how to work with it. Indeed, two years plus into having clients of my own this same Psychodynamic tutor with a gift for putting her finger on the holes in my experience, asked if I worked with the negative transference. I had to ask her what she meant!

The therapeutic relationship as I was taught it, Pre Integrative Psychosynthesis, put great emphasis on the I-Thou, and the sacred dance between, but was short on the working with transference, the you, and whoever I may be for you right now. This relative blindness to both the individual personality and pathology of therapist and client as they limped and lurched in the room meant that potential for movement was necessarily limited, and certain moves were often inappropriate. For example, guided meditations meant a tendency to try taking people up mountains who couldn't yet walk. The 'vision' of 'what we may be' needed to take more account of what we are right now - that is the body in which, and from which the vision must be embodied.

It seems to me that the difficulty inherent in traditional Psychosynthesis with staying with my twitch and your limp was, in part the non-inclusion of the body, and that this was to a greater or lesser degree due to the fact that Freud had 'done that, been there' ad nauseam. No doubt further neglected via the thread common to a number of spiritual traditions of transcending the body which is regarded as messy, sinful and worst of all, mortal.

Spirit and Soul were doing fine in their symbiotic dance in the garden of Eden before the body ruined all that. There is nothing quite so efficient as the body for drawing our focus to our differences, be they gender, race, cultural, age, or physical ability/disability. When we look at our difference we are faced with our prejudices, our fears and forced to recognise boundaries, the very obvious fact of our separateness. Paradoxically of course it is through the recognition and honouring of difference that we can really be in any form of satisfactory relationship, be it with ourselves, an other, or community. The call for the inclusion of difference, within individuals, and in the world is perhaps now, of all times, at it's loudest, and most urgent.

Psychosynthesis, in the past has given great import to the notion of 'inclusion' but has had great difficulty in including the voice of the 'other'. I refer in particular to all that which doesn't easily fit with the spiritual philosophy: pathology (the less than perfect), boundaries (individuality and separateness), body and sexuality. Is it possible that part of the shadow of traditional Psychosynthesis, despite it's emphasis on 'inclusion' has been a nervousness about including the body for fear seeds would be sewn that would re-awaken us to our difference, and thus increase the chances of our separation from the garden of our common spiritual vision,

and values?

To put this another way, if the individual were to fully individuate, and own his/her potency, the gateway to a further splitting may result. Where there is a very real need for community and belonging to that community, whatever this may be, there is also and equally the need for individuation, and separation. Where there is emphasis on the collective needs, the individuality needs may go into the shadow, lie dormant until they erupt. (Some indications that this may be occurring are a sense that the individual voice is stifled, a drop in creativity. Also an increase of group 'regression', and fragmentation). An emphasis on the collective may be unconsciously held, gathering momentum for a backward pull, to a symbiotic state.

I have implied throughout that by re-instating, and giving 'proper' place to Freud's emphasis on the body and sexuality, Klein's on object relations, Mahler's on the developmental model and taking into account the psychodynamic thinking regarding transference, counter-transference and the import of boundaries, the Gestalt attention to dialogue, and the Jungian's fluency of the symbolic language, (particularly in respect of the alchemical process, and shadow), Integrative Psychosynthesis is giving traditional Psychosynthesis a much needed body, from which a stronger and safer container is created for mediating soul and spirit in the therapeutic relationship.

I believe that by continuing to include the voice of the 'other', by working consciously with other disciplines, and in some cases their inherent disciplined, and structured approach means we are increasing the field of conscious ground, and so, the field of vision. We know there is value in experiencing blindness, for example, it can open up another, or enlarged form of seeing, and Integrative Psychosynthesis has gone some distance to see through the blindness of Icarus.

However, it seems to me that our attention may need to be still further directed towards the blinding of Oedipus: to issues of boundaries, individuation, separation, personal power, and will. Perhaps we are now sufficiently individuated as a body to be able to let go of some of the anxiety I would suggest has been around, in connection with fear of losing our collective identity, enabling us now to reclaim some of the wisdom of our grandfathers and grandmothers in the field of psychology, and so, hopefully to further deepen our own, Re-Visioned roots.

an alphabetical index for integrative psychosynthesis

boundary

A regular session time, day. Punctuality, holidays. Contracting and initial contract. Suitability to work. Commitment. Adequate time given to endings.

body

Client's and own - through counter transference experienced in therapist's body/energy. Mirroring client postures, asking client to continue and elaborate gestures, increase bodily tension, imagery, working with clay, Gestalt chair work. Client's sexual orientation, sexual history, expression of in life, and in room, (erotic transference). How does this client care for his/her body: food, exercise, expression of.

challenging

A willingness to do so, recognising that this 'difference' is an essential part of that which makes the container 'safe', and models a relationship that can sustain difference.

container

Physical - setting a safe space (including positioning and angle of seating); **emotional** -including both trust and mistrust; mental - formulating a hypothesis and context for which to work.

context

Seeing through to the underlying patterns. What work needs attending to now in client's life? Using symptom, age as guide to meaning and context. Will this work be through strengthening the ego thinking developmentally or is it more existential opening to the what may be?

counter-transference

Utilising therapists own images, thoughts, feelings, and physical experiences as they appear to inform of what is in the field between them and their clients.

creativity

dream work, myth, story, symbolism. Realm of imagination as bridge between matter and spirit.Can client dream, play?. Import of the 'ordinary' in terms of client everyday chores, rituals as 'hand-crafted' life. Using client's own creative resources, (what touches, moves, motivates, makes them skip, etc.?)

discipline

On the part of the therapist, keeping records, own regular and on-going therapy with therapist(s) with different theoretical backgrounds. Regular and on-going supervision. On-going training. Recognising personal limitations. Willingness to refer. Import of holidays, and personal 'nourishment' Physical exercise. With client, will exercises, to strengthen (as appropriate).

dynamics

Client's life journey to date, how those experiences have been experienced by client. That which is in the room (or excluded from it) which may pertain to the client's past, key relationships, in external and internal life. Using actual and physical dialogue present in the room to inform.

dreams

Working with, including keeping an eye on 'big' dreams, where appropriate re-referring to as they may have an ongoing myth to speak of

the client's journey.

education

Therapist's: particularly of other disciplines, concepts, and new ideas. So, reading, discussing, films, theatre, art. Peer discussion/challenging and support. Discussion with those from other disciplines. Networking.

grounding

(Particularly in association with will work). Taking practical steps in embody vision or aspiration. Asking what client is willing, feels able to begin to express or further express in their life. Blocks to: how are these serving/limiting, etc. Deepening experiences through imagery, and taking into body, e.g.. breathing, noting body responses.

humour

Looking at absence of, or use of in the sessions, for both therapist and client. Therapy as a serious business that needn't always be treated with seriousness.

horizontal vision

Exploring the client's personality issues, their neurosis, the defences (honouring). Staying with the 'now'. What is actually happening in the relationship between therapist and client at a personality level. Eye open to therapist and client pathology: collusion, emmeshment, withdrawals. Client and therapist coping mechanisms, in action!

instinct and intuition

Observance of both - trusting in own as therapist, and those of the client.

models

Utilising humanistic and analytic models as seems appropriate to the particular client.

peripheral vision

That which doesn't appear in the room between therapist and client as source of information to therapist's blind-spots, and those of the client. Also informs ...

shadow

Paying attention to that which is negated or judged, or feels like it is in the room but doesn't willingly introduce itself!

soul

Holding questions regarding what the client's soul may be needing to discover, include, deepen. Meaning. Imagery. Creativity. Soul-nourishment important for therapist too!

silence and stillness

A great way to evoke the transference, particularly the negative!

transference

Level of competence and confidence in working with both the positive transference, and the negative. Staying with, and taking it on, (at same time as not taking it personally!) Recognition of what not getting round to the negative transference may mean for a particular client, e.g. if their work has been focused on the building of trust/ego strength with

therapist. Staying awake to, and working with the erotic transference.

vertical vision

What is this person attempting to actualise in their life. What vision/values are they wanting or needing to embody? Issues of purpose, actualisation.

waiting

For however long it takes for this client to reveal to themselves and the therapist whatever it is that needs to emerge. Waiting as part of the process of building container for soul, creativity.

will

Working with. Particularly effective in association with subpersonality work. Refer to Erikson's eight stages.

zzzzzzz!

Therapist need of adequate sleep, in order to keep awake! Also, import of ongoing attention to dreams, (all sorts!)