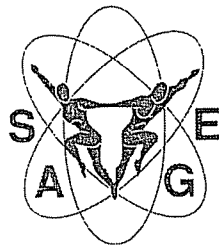


"Imagining the Way"

CONFERENCE PROCEEDINGS

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Taking the Mystery Out of Personal Growth

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Talent development emphasizes achievement and outward recognition, personal growth emphasizes inner growth. Because talent development is centered on the outward products of talent, it is not child-centered. A focus on achievement (and on success) runs the risk of dissociation of talent development from the self. In personal growth, talent development follows organically, without risk of dissociation. Personal growth recognizes the child's self as the agent endowed with will and capacity for self-determination.

Personal growth is not part of the school's educational mandate. There are perhaps several difficulties toward providing the time and space for personal growth of schoolchildren:

- (1) lack of proper understanding of personal growth,
- (2) lack of practical knowledge of how to foster it,
- (3) reluctance to give the power of self-determination to children,
- (4) fear of an open expression of feelings and emotions.

Suppose that consideration was given to balancing the two opposing emphases on talent and the self, how would one go about fostering personal growth? Techniques for fostering personal growth are readily available (Ferrucci, 1982; Fugitt, 1983; Murdock, 1988; Siccone & Lopez, 2000; Wilson, 1994). They are simple in practice and don't take much time. They can be easily incorporated into daily or weekly schedule. In its most basic form, personal growth is about focusing attention, awareness of self as capable of choices and decisions, engaging the will to act on them, being aware of the consequences of one's choices and decisions, being aware of different aspects of oneself, being aware of the two-way nature of relationships; being aware of feelings and emotions in oneself and others, being able to accurately recognize emotions, and more. Fostering personal growth intersects with broad notions of emotional intelligence (Mayer, Salovey, and Caruso, 2000). However, there is one significant difference: in personal growth the emphasis is on the will and on the inner authority of the child.

For six years I taught an undergraduate course in personal growth based on psychosynthesis techniques. It was taught in the spring term 2 hours a day for 4 weeks. A shortened version, 20 hours over 6 days, was offered to gifted high school students over three summers. The techniques and examples of how the exercises work are described in chapter 20, "Personal Growth" of *"Mellow Out," They Say. If I Only Could* (Piechowski, 2006). Psychosynthesis was developed by Roberto Assagioli (1888–1974), who felt that in contrast to psychoanalysis, which dissects the psyche, there must be a synthesis—a way of putting the psyche together. The idea is to discover the different parts that are operating in the psyche separately, and bring them together to forge a unified, integrated self. Our various propensities, adaptations to social situations, as well as emotional camouflage, make us operate as if we had several selves, not all in agreement with each other, but often in conflict. These different parts of our personality come with different sets of behaviors, like a different set of suits to don on different occasions.

Assagioli called them *subpersonalities* because they tend to be quite distinct and hang together each in its own coherent way.

Assagioli devised a number of exercises to aid the growth of the self and Ferrucci, who studied with him for many years, expanded on Assagioli's ideas and put them together in the splendidly practical and accessible book, *What We May Be: Techniques for Personal and Spiritual Growth through Psychosynthesis*.

One can identify specific elements of personal growth—that mysterious process of inner work that takes place in the hidden vault of one's psyche. I divided these elements into forces, components of the self, and means (see Table of Elements of Personal Growth). *Forces* move personal growth toward inner transformation, the profound and lasting changes in one's psyche and personality, such as getting rid of pesky habits, becoming more understanding of others, abandoning anger and embracing kindness, getting rid of everything that is self-serving and inconsiderate towards fellow human beings and other living things.

Components of the self are hidden strengths to be discovered and used in personal growth. *Means* are practices through which the work of inner transformation is accomplished. Assagioli emphasized that of all the human faculties the most fundamental, yet sorely neglected by psychology, is the human faculty of will. *Will*, properly regarded, is our *executive faculty*. We put in action what we have chosen and decided to do. We do not need to force ourselves to do it. Exercising the will as a battering ram against oneself is what Assagioli called Victorian will that is imposed rather than freely chosen, forcing oneself into restraint or into acting against one's grain.

A child's or an adult's will is easily noticed in **resistance to compulsion**. This is a much overlooked but very basic phenomenon and it has to do with *choice*. For instance, we have the hardest time eating food we don't like and the more we are forced to eat it the greater our resistance. When you dislike a language it is very hard to learn it—memorizing falls on the dry soil of uninterest, and much energy goes into fighting it. But one can choose, out of one's own free will, to lower the barrier of dislike and thus reduce the resistance. Much energy is saved and learning suddenly becomes easier and one doesn't gag on disliked food. It's all about being conscious of how one has decided to act on one's choices. Here are examples of exercises for the development of the will:

- Do something you have never done before.
- Make a plan and then follow it.
- Break a habit.
- Do something extremely slowly.
- Say "no" when it is right to say "no," but easier to say "yes."
- Refrain from saying something you are tempted to say.
- Postpone an action you would prefer to begin right now.
- Begin, at once, an action you would prefer to postpone.

Eva Fugitt adapted psychosynthesis techniques to elementary grades. Her source book "*He Hit Me Back First!*" *Development of the Will in children for Making Choices*. There are about 25

exercises, many of which are meant to be done repeatedly. The value in Fugitt's approach is the stress on the inner authority of the child's self, which flows from the principles on which psychosynthesis is based.

Another excellent source is Maureen Murdock's *Spinning Inward: Using Guided Imagery with Children for Learning, Creativity and Relaxation*. It is worth noting that Murdock taught meditation to young gifted children, at the beginning for a couple of minutes, and by the end of a school year the children were able to meditate for up to 20 minutes (Murdock, 1978). The value of Murdock's approach is that she gives specific ages at which a given exercise can be used with children. Of her 33 exercises, 6 can be used with 3-year olds, 12 with 5-year olds, 15 with 7-year olds, and 22 with 8-year olds.

Among the benefits from doing psychosynthesis exercises, undergraduate students named visualization skills, better people skills, gains in will power, gains in inner strength, quitting bad habits (e.g., smoking), resolution of past emotional conflicts, understanding anger, overcoming procrastination, relaxation, enjoyment of solitude, etc. The benefits to children are many: being able to relax, learn more easily, improve memory skills, get along better, be more creative and productive, and make discoveries about their selves.

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