

CHAPTER 5

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BEYOND THE EXERCISE: DISIDENTIFICATION AS THE EVER-PRESENT INVITATION

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To know oneself beyond content, is to experience Self, as pure awareness and will, outside of the story of a life. Disidentification (*I am not this*) steps us back from content and story. Self-identification points to the experience of being the one who is aware and the one who chooses (*I am more*). The *I am more* is a key theoretical underpinning of psychosynthesis. It points to the assumption of *I* and *Self*. This essential concept implies a potential way of self-knowing that is not simply defined by personal history, genetics, circumstances or fate. The principle of disidentification (identification, disidentification and Self-identification) aims towards that end point. I am Self. I am.

1. To be Free

We are dominated by everything with which our self becomes identified.
(Assagioli, 2000, p.19)

To discover who we are, beyond our stories and limiting beliefs, is an ongoing invitation in psychosynthesis and is particularly anchored in the work of disidentification. Disidentification is a life's practice and it is an essential and ever-present strategy in our work as helping professionals. "Who am I, really?" is the question that underpins our own evolution and that of the people we work with. Freedom comes with the dropping away of all the identifications that we confuse with our true Self, allowing ourselves to Self-identify as a center of pure consciousness and will, beyond any identification with the contents of consciousness. Akin, perhaps, to the concept of enlightenment in Buddhist traditions, this movement towards Self-Realization is the process of awakening, step by step, to deeper truths than those held in our mind, bodies, and feelings. Paradoxically, this deeper truth of who we are is content-less. It cannot be rendered as a set of beliefs or ways of being. It is both transcendent and immanent.

And the authentic unifying center operates with this same transcendence-immanence; such a unifying center functions as distinct from any agenda, identification, or role - that is, it is transcendent

- and at the same time it is fully present to any and all experience - that is, it is immanent. (Firman & Gila, 2010, p. 36)

We are human, fully, deeply and truly, living within the experience of our humanness *and* we are more. To be free is to know the “both/and” of our many identifications and the content-less Self which is our true home.

2. Disidentification

In this principle lies the secret of our enslavement or of our liberty.
(Assagioli, 1965, p.22)

Roberto Assagioli posited a profound concept in his elaboration of the process of disidentification. Let's clearly orient ourselves to that word, because it is one of three that actually define the experience that moves us towards our own Self-Realization: identification, disidentification and Self-identification. Self-identification, both as an experience of the personal self and the transpersonal Self is, in fact, the point of this ongoing practice. Assagioli (2000) referred to this as “Realization of One's True Self” (p. 21). And “practice” is perhaps the better word for looking at this process because this is the work of a lifetime and it takes a lifetime to do a life's work. Our identifications, and all of our passing psychosomatic content, continue to rise throughout a lifetime. The inclination to lose one's Self in any of this content is natural and strong. A stubbed toe immediately pulls us into an identification with our body. A criticism from a friend or colleague is very likely to pull us into an identification with an inner dialogue, with which we are familiar, and from there, quite often, into an old subpersonality whose primary job description is to protect us, thus being hypervigilant to external feedback. Slipped back into that subpersonality, it may be minutes or weeks before its hold loosens. This disidentifying may happen naturally, as we regain our sense of Self beyond that subpersonality and it may happen more consciously, by our embedded practice of disidentification, which allows, in fact requires us to be aware of the rising of content. Thus, a moment of reaction to the criticism offers a place to both experience the aroused feelings and thoughts and to become aware of them. That awareness creates the opportunity to disidentify.

In the broad stroke version of how one's psychosynthesis unfolds towards Self-identity, Assagioli (2000) notes three stages: thorough knowledge of one's personality; control of the various elements of the personality; and realization of one's true Self, also framed as the discovery or creation of a unifying center. The in-breath of Self-awareness, along with the out-breath of the will, inevitably invite us towards an ever-deepening experience of Self, the resting place where partial identities, passing contents of consciousness and all manner of false models and distracting experiences, move through like clouds in a clear blue sky.

Disidentification, remember, is a practice and thus a much more expansive and ongoing experience than simply that of an exercise, though like all practices, those exercises that we use to build that practice, do exactly that. Practicing the scales on the piano is not being a musician, but builds the musician, such that, in time, a sonata slides easily from fingers to piano. The classic disidentification exercise has evolved and been expanded upon in many ways, in service of building this practice. Interestingly, as psychosynthesis practitioners have worked with this process, it has moved its language around in several key ways. “I have a body, but I am not my body” is the classic framework, using, of course, whatever identification is arising at the moment. “I have a body *and* I am not my body;” “I have a body *and* I am more than my body;” “I *am* my body *and* I am not my body;” are some of the variations that have emerged. How and when we use different language is relatively irrelevant, guided by the needs in the moment, the contours of the “identified” experience and the felt sense of how disidentification is most true for any individual. Like the various one-liners we might use in meditation to refocus ourselves, mindfully, back to the breath, the goal stays the same: coming back to Self.

It is the awareness of these partial, limiting identifications and the choice to step outside of them, that moves us back to Self. And then the practice. The on-going arising and attaching to content (identification), invites a stepping back (disidentification) and in that experience of “I have arising contents of consciousness and I am

not those,” we are invited to settle in to Self. I am a center of Self-consciousness and will. I am Self. I am content-less. I am unstoried. I am aware of and anchored in my internal unifying center.

3. Seeing Beyond

The opening of the channel between the conscious and the superconscious levels, between the ego and the Self, and the flood of light, joy and energy which follows, often produce a wonderful release.
(Assagioli, 2000 p.39)

As a psychosynthesis guide (psychotherapist and coach), I tend towards seeing my clients through the lens of the three steps of the Self-identification process. They are, after all, natural steps. The crying infant is fully identified with their hunger; when fed, they disidentify; and then they are more. They are, on a good day, best Selves, as an identification falls away into disidentification, which *naturally* opens the door to Self-identification. We adults do this, too, regularly, unconsciously or consciously, with minor and with immense issues. It is evolution. We can hope and actively support the continued capacity of individuals, cultures and the human family, to be in this practice. The importance of this cannot be overstated.

The recognition of the existence of the Self and of its nature, is of immense spiritual value. Such a recognition constitutes a real revelation for the individual. It is the beginning of a new life, and the necessary foundation for a successful effort toward self-regulation, toward freedom and inner regeneration; that is to say, for a real *Psychosynthesis*. (Assagioli, nd.a, p.6)

In working as a guide, I may or may not ever introduce a “disidentification” exercise to a client, but I am always inviting that point beyond limiting identifications. I do not dismiss the identification. It is our road sign. And as we know, the various identifications that we experience run the gamut from current grief, loss, pain, to old limiting scripts, trauma, subpersonalities and beliefs, to experiences of divinity, transpersonal qualities and the like, to functional, here and now ways of knowing ourselves. All need to be identified with. All need to be, over time, disidentified from. Because we are always more. As guides, we invite that in so many ways:

“So, part of you...”

“Who said that?”

“Tell me more.”

“What is bigger than that?”

“What do you deeply know?”

“Take a few breaths and step back.”

“We know that story, don’t we?”

“What’s the deeper truth?”

“What does your intuition tell you?”

“Who are you really?”

Beyond the exercise, is the deeper way of seeing that psychosynthesis offers us, as both practitioners and travelers on the path of our own life. Every day the world gives us something to hold onto; something to believe in; something to call “true.” That almost sounds like a good thing, and sometimes it is, because what the world

may be offering us, on a good day, is a larger view than the one we had the day before. Sadly, however, the world, from its most outer layers to those most inner layers that we call “me”, fills us up with identifications that may be comforting or may be frightening, but are, in either case, partial, limiting, content laden and therefore lacking in freedom. It is in finding, resting in, and finally living from Self that we may find freedom.

Psychosynthesis, in its core theory, uses two forms of the idea of Self, and both are the end-points of disidentification. The first is the personal self or “I” and the second is the “higher” or “transpersonal” Self. Assagioli (2000) makes it clear that this is only an apparent duality. “The Self is one; it manifests in different degrees of awareness and Self-realization.”(p. 17) One way to think of these “selves” is as Self at the kitchen sink and Self at the mountaintop. In my understanding and experience, we must add, Self in the dark night of the soul: The Self manifest in all levels of the unconscious.

Piero Ferrucci (1982) eloquently reminds us of this one Self.

The self can also be defined as the only part of us which remains forever the same. It is the sameness which, once found and fully experienced, acts as an ever-present pivot point for the rest of the personality, an inner stronghold to which we can always refer in order to regain a sense of poise and self-consistency. Then we can see that self remains the same in ecstasy and despair, in peace and turmoil, in pain and pleasure, in victory and defeat. (p. 61)

The Self (or self) that remains the same is where disidentification is taking us. It is, in fact, where psychosynthesis is taking us. Always.

4. The Self Calling

Passing in inner quietness, slowly listening to hear the right word, I am obeying certain conditions. Shall I take this road or that? Shall I respond to this call or await another?
(Archivio Assagioli, box 45)

It is important to take a moment to differentiate *purpose, meaning, values* and *transpersonal qualities* from *identifications*, to clarify and emphasize the power of this work of Self-identification. Let’s use the ever-present *Act of Will* as a place to see this. Self is not empty. It is only disidentified from content. It is, still and always, the source of our deepest knowing, the reservoir of the qualities of our being, the source of our purpose. Thus, it is our quest to know ourselves as Self, not as partial identifications. And in this quest, we look to free the will from the constraints of these limiting identifications, which will often hijack the will, moving us in directions that are not true to our deepest purpose. The disidentified Self opens the door to the profound movement of the will, in its goodness, skill and strength.

Purpose, the first stage of the act of will, is a way of knowing the Call of Self. It is not received or evoked at the level of form. It is an experience of resonance between a call, pull, intuition, inner longing (fill in the blank with your way of knowing purpose) and the quality that carries it. No one is destined to be a doctor, for instance. It is not a life’s purpose to be that form, that role, that career. But the Call to serve, to heal, to use the inquiring mind to assess, to feel connected to other humans, that may well be one’s life purpose. When a 17-year-old gets it into their mind that they are meant to be a doctor, some disidentification is, in fact, in order. Step back from the imagined form and find the meaning and values that define purpose. They must be the guiding light. If anchored into quality, not form, *Deliberation* (stage 2) is open and that young person is free to hear all of the possibilities for how they might manifest these qualities. In fact, perhaps with great surprise, this youngster might realize that being a dancer could serve the same purpose. Wow! Disidentified from limiting models, family expectations, cultural biases, subpersonality agendas of all kinds, the young person can move to *Choice* (stage 3). And, in sane and safe fashion, can choose *a* next step, not a whole life’s path. That choice might be

to go on to study pre-med in college, and it might not be. But it is now a choice, made from Self and, by having seen that there is not just one path, accessing purpose will become an ally that will continue to support choices aligned with Self. *Affirmation* (stage 4), without identification, is a powerful experience! The would-be doctor has now become a strongly connected person of care. An *Affirmation* (kept free of limiting identifications) anchors back to purpose. “I care and will live that truth.” *Planning* (stage 5) asks for the same disidentification, because if the “Be a Doctor” pressure is great enough, planning will subtly tip back towards doctoring. But if planning is done by the Self, free of content and old story, owing itself only to the grounded manifestation of purpose, the plan will, in fact, involve exploring the goodness of fit, in whatever choice the young person has made. And once *Manifest* (stage 6), that person, freed of stories and should, false models and unconscious messages, will come again to a moment where Purpose is addressed. “I have taken one step and I am looking for my next step.” Doctor or Dancer, professor or parent, the purpose will guide. But only if we are disidentified, disidentifying, observing, not lost in content, breathing deeply into knowing ourselves as more.

5. All Paths Lead to Self

But all ways are directed to and lead to the same great goal... Through this unity in diversity, through this unanimity, we can make united spiritual approach to the essential divinity in each, in all, and in the great Whole. (Assagioli, 1976, pp1-5)

Significant attention has been paid to Assagioli’s “Training” document (Assagioli, nd.b), a late writing he did that elaborated what he considered to be the seven core experiences of psychosynthesis. In the wonderfully integrated way that psychosynthesis exists as a whole which is greater than the sum of its parts, it would be hard to pull any one of the experiences apart from the others. They are of a piece. The experiences (note they are not only theories, but lived experiences) are:

- Disidentification;
- The Personal Self;
- The Will;
- The Ideal Model;
- Synthesis;
- The Superconscious;
- The Transpersonal Self.

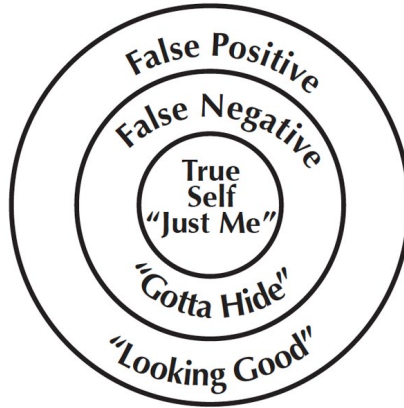
Disidentification infuses all of these powerful experiences. It takes us first to the Personal Self, then, over time towards and possibly directly to the Transpersonal Self. It moves through the process of the Act of Will, in its stages and the will’s aspects of goodness, strength and skill. For whose goodness, skill and strength is it? The disidentified Self. The Ideal Model, as itself both an exercise and a way of seeing, cannot unfold without the capacity to identify (false models) and disidentify towards an Ideal Model, or Self-identification. And how does the process of Synthesis occur without disidentification? *Balancing and Synthesis of Opposites* (1972) as Assagioli called this process, again requires that movement away from polarized distortions and must be done from outside of (more than) any limiting identification. Our identifications with distorted polarities are first experienced (unconsciously) and then seen from a disidentified place. That open moment when we see our polarized identifications, invites the movement of Synthesis, where we become more. *I have these polarized beliefs and I am not these beliefs. I am more.* And the Superconscious, that luscious unconscious arena of potential, is the very home of purpose, meaning and values, a home we have access to when we are disidentified or (next step) Self-identified. And it is here, that we offer ourselves clues to Self, through our access to transpersonal qualities.

Both guide and traveler are in this process for life. And we both must be, for client goals to be met. The helper, while being guided by any ethical, legal, role-based requirements, is always more than their identification. *I am a psychosynthesis life coach and I am more than that.* Many a human has stretched their wings and taken on the helper role in response to a Call of Self. And after those first scary months of that expanded identification, the new identification starts to fit like a well-worn set of clothes: comfortable, functional, perhaps engaging, exciting, meaningful. Time will come when the role identification is now a limitation. The role may not change, but who we are within the role is calling for an expansion. Our knowing how to do this role is too comfortable and, if we keep our disidentification practice alive and well, we will be able to see where we have fallen in to some limitations. Very likely those will resonate with old messages and will serve old subpersonalities, but in the very act of doing so, we have become caught, dominated, as Assagioli said. And in that limiting identification, we may lose a spark of our Self that wants to shine through our work. The very next client will invite in us a renewal of the practice of disidentification, so that we, as helpers, continue to be present, open and available.

6. Reclamation of our Birthright

*As a rule, we live life more or less as it comes.
Yet the business of living is in reality an art and should be the greatest of all the arts.
(Assagioli, 1973, p.1)*

It is likely that clients come to helpers, be they therapists, coaches, psychiatrists, energy workers or other healers, caught in an identification that is constricting them. Often that identification is a leftover from family and culture of origin, a message given frequently enough (often with associated trauma) that the client has internalized the message as an “I am” statement and experience. The map below (originally encountered by the author in training with Martha Crampton. The initial origins are from Taylor, 1968) points to a developmental process that moves most people from the core of our Self (our True Self), into ways of knowing ourselves that are “negative”, disempowering, hurt, discounted, etc. This is often a key experience of childhood, even in “good enough” families, where the child is still experiencing themselves as small and helpless in a world of bigger, more powerful others. To compensate for this “I’m not ok” experience, people tend to build the false “positive”, a way of knowing and presenting oneself to the world that feels safe and ok. This map has been compared to Jung’s idea of persona, shadow and Self (1959). Often, in fact, people are moved towards finding a counselor or coach because the “shadowed” false negative experience begins to leak through. While painful, this is good news, because the work of disidentification requires a movement away from both the identification of “looking good” and the shadowed identification of “gotta hide.” Beyond both comforting and distressing identifications is the Self. As we invite clients to know themselves as more, they have the opportunity to change the limiting narratives, the oppressive subpersonality identities and the whole body/feeling/mind experience.



Disidentification allows us to roam freely through the psyche, viewing that psyche through the map above, through the egg (oval) diagram, through the seven core experiences, and through every map and model that psychosynthesis provides. We are getting to know all the ways we identify in order to able, then, to step back. *I have lower unconscious trauma but I am not that trauma. I am an adult in the world and I am more than that. I have transpersonal experiences and I am not just those experiences.* Classic work, such as subpersonality work, through its five stages, depends on disidentification. *Recognition* of a subpersonality is the first and key piece of work with our subs. If we can't see them, we are them. We only recognize a sub from outside of it. "There's that part of me that always criticizes." This is the first moment that we can invite disidentification in a conscious way. Who is the *you* that sees this sub? Of course, we might find a polarized sub and have to go one level deeper, but the movement from "I'm not ok" to "A part of me feels not ok" is the first and biggest step in sub work. *Acceptance*, as the second phase of sub work, invites (and requires) an identification with Self, or with an advocate for Self: the observer, the most mature subpersonality or the wise being, for example. From there, true change can happen for the client, as *coordination* and *integration* occur, always directed by a disidentified Self. The end point, *synthesis*, assumes the reclaiming of qualities inherent in the sub, with the needed loss of subpersonality autonomy. *I have a false negative subpersonality and I am more. I have a false positive persona and I am not just that.*

In Zen, there's a saying: "Today's enlightenment is tomorrow's pitfall." The same is true for the core experiences and we'll note it particularly for disidentification. Today's disidentification is tomorrow's identification. That works just fine if the identification is conscious. "I used to be the mother to small children and now they've grown up." Who am I now? The open question allows the newly forming identification to be resonant with deepest values and the emerging Call of Self. Without the awareness, "I am a mother" sticks like glue so that, even as our children move on, we cling (unconsciously) to that role. It is amusing to watch a mother (yes, me) reminding her 45-year-old son to put on his seat belt, only to realize that he already has it on and so do his children! The sub slips back in, I notice it. The adult kids notice it. We smile. *I am more than that identification, though I had it for SO many years.* And, that mother (yes, still me) gets to notice the evolving identification of her children and grandchildren. *They all started out as babies and now they are more.*

Bi focal vision is one of the simplest, most profound disidentifying principles for the guide. We see our clients in their identifications, with whatever issues they are bringing to us, and we see them as more. We see the content-less Self that is inviting an emergence of something new. Whatever the presenting issue is, our job is to allow and support the client in identifying with it consciously, in order to understand its full depth and breadth, its needs, its qualities, its origins and its openings to change. At the same time, we see the "more" that is not caught in the story, the issue or the limiting identification. And we keep the door open for that movement. Sometimes we very specifically engage in a disidentification exercise with that client, helping them to see the "more" that exists beyond their troubled experience. Sometimes, holding our role as external unifying center, we simply keep the door open, invite or nudge the client towards it, as the timing is right. And one day they

will step through. Assagioli notes that psychosynthesis will take you to the door of the great mystery but it will not get you through (2000). Self-identification, like enlightenment, awakening, or other descriptors of this deepest of all experiences, is the great mystery. We, guides, will walk our clients to the door and they will step through.

7. Changing the Narrative, One Tiny Piece at a Time - (Disidentification by another name)

All this produces a true dreamlike state from which we can and must wake up.
(Assagioli, 2007, p.87)

To play this out in a brief (protected/combined) case study, I'll introduce you to Joy, a 58-year old Professor whose presenting issue was the pain at losing a relationship and her ongoing inner narrative that she is not good enough - "a loser" as she said. Unfolding quite quickly is the core trauma of childhood abuse and a lifelong struggle to rise above the circumstances of family of origin negating messages, societal issues, parental expectations, culturally imbued perspectives and deep inner self doubt, shame, and self-blame.

Me: Given all that, how did you make it so far as to become a Professor?

Joy: Well I had to do something with my life.

Me: Hmmm

Now I see the major identification in the client that blocks access, even cognitively, to an awareness of what/who else she is. Much unfolding of the identification, both in present time, as a "loser", and historically as a terrorized and abused child, appropriately followed. As well as present grief in having another relationship end, she drops in to the realization and experience of a lifetime of wounding.

Later:

Joy: I realized that Mary (the partner who had broken up with her) was so unlike me. She didn't like the music I liked, the food, even my kids. And her political views were almost opposite to mine.

Me: Why do you think you wanted to be with her?

Joy: I don't think I really did.

Me: Would you say that again?

Joy: I didn't want to be with her.

Me: Can you take that in?

Joy: well, but...

Me: Don't go there. Take in what you just said.

Joy: It's true, in my heart of hearts I didn't want to be with her.

Me: Good to know. Good to listen to your heart of hearts.

We have now touched a deeper sense of Self, a knowing of values beyond the limiting "loser" narrative. And I have taken the client's knowing "In my heart of hearts" and anchored it as a quality of Self that we want to acknowledge, strengthen and give space to. I won't forget that phrase and will use it often to ask Joy to disidentify. "What would your heart of hearts say?" We now have a wise being figure to support this work.

Later:

Joy: You know I realized that I actually did the breaking up. At least I set the stage for it. Somehow, I knew it wasn't right.

Me: Yes, you knew. What else do you know about yourself that you don't say?

Joy: Uhhh. I'm good at my work.

Me: Anything else?

Joy: I'm a pretty good mom; at least my kids say so.

Me: Are you a pretty good mom or do your kids just say it?

Joy: NO, I AM a pretty good mom... a very good mom.

The client has now initiated the beginning of a new narrative about herself. She is disidentifying from an old story, finding a more objective observer and beginning to claim a larger truth. The weight of self-recrimination and negative self-concept remains strong and sessions are always a process of identifying (unconsciously) with the "loser" story and of her own accord or by gentle invitation, pulling back to the "more". Conscious subpersonality work helps make disidentification more possible. I attempt to anchor in to every moment of Self-identification, often indicated by superconscious qualities, or the quiet experience of Self, or the body's alert alignment with a deeper truth. Every human offers glimpses of their deeper truth. Guides need simply to pay attention and name those moments when they arise. Joy's "heart of hearts" continues to manifest and guide us.

Later:

Joy: The most amazing thing happened this week. Two things. I was given a promotion at work and my kids had a big surprise birthday party for me with lots of my friends. It was so lovely and everyone said the nicest things about me.

Me: True things, I imagine.

Joy: well... YES!

Me: What did they say?

Joy: (hesitating) They said... (a lot)... and I knew they were right.

Me: Who are you, Joy, when you notice what is really true about you?

The tipping point in disidentifying from a deeply intractable identification is powerful. A flower, pushing up through the soil, a butterfly unfurling its wings for the first time, a sunrise. This client has truly begun that blossoming.

Joy: I am me. I am amazing. Look at all I've done, in the face of all the obstacles in my life.

Me: You are amazing, of that there is no doubt.

There is more, of course. A next powerful moment was Joy recognizing that she still had all the "loser" experiences, while knowing and building a new unifying center around the Truer Self. Discovering that she could hold both, furthered the movement of disidentification.

Later and towards the end:

Joy: I feel that old loser story coming up again, as I begin to date a new person. I know that's an old story but it has power still.

Me: Who has more power, YOU or that story?

Joy: (laughing) ME, OF COURSE.

And now we have the beginning of a new identification, one which will be challenged many times by a well-known, but inaccurate and limiting story and deeply rooted subpersonalities that carry that old narrative. The work becomes building the new identification. *Joy has a story and she is more. Joy has a loser identification and she is NOT that.* My options with Joy are wide open. Could be a great time to give her the disidentification exercise, because now there is the presence of Self who will truly be able to use this exercise in service of expanding consciousness, Self-Realization and the living of life in resonance with Purpose.

Joy's unfolding will continue over a lifetime and she leaves our work with many tools. By the end, she has done the disidentification exercise, as an exercise. She has learned the short form to use on the run. *I'm having this experience and I am more.* She has identified an Ideal Model and realized herself as being closer to that than to her false models. She has touched her own transpersonal Self and practices, often, her identification with her personal self. Her "heart of hearts" is an ongoing home. She is amazing.

8. Everyday Practice...4Ever

There is a further degree or kind of illumination: it is the perception of the light immanent in the human soul and in the whole of creation.
(Assagioli, nd.c, p.6)

Many of us are meditators and I'd be unfaithful to my understanding of both meditation and psychosynthesis if I failed to point out that they are two sides of the same coin. In fact, the practice of disidentification and the practice of mindfulness (for instance) call on the same process. Something arises. I notice it arising (or notice it after being lost in it for 5 minutes). I name it. I return to my breath or to my Self or to the content-less awareness and will that is the cornerstone of both meditation and disidentification. And there I sit, until something else arises.

And I'd have to say, in closing, that meditation and psychosynthesis are a lot like life. There may be no cushion to sit on, or no exercise to do, but isn't every day an opportunity to notice the arising, to identify with whatever it is, to step back and to reclaim our Self? From the grocery store shelves, to the fights with loved ones, to the great victories and losses in a lifetime, *we have these experiences and we are more.*

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Selected Publications

Books

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