

Chapter 22

Coaching for Integral Liberation & Transformation

by Raúl Quiñones–Rosado

“The personal is political,” says the well-known feminist slogan of the late 1960s, attributed to Carol Hanisch for her essay addressing the debate around the “therapeutic” or “political” nature of women’s consciousness-raising groups of the era. While today, some fifty years later, psychosynthesis coaches are not likely to find themselves organizing or facilitating political consciousness-raising meetings (at least, probably not in their roles as coaches), the political, economic, cultural, social and environmental justice issues of the day may well be showing up both in our professional practices and in our personal lives. In fact, these issues are indeed showing up, even when we are not aware of them; even when we may not quite understand how these “external” societal forces effect the “internal,” or physical, mental, emotional and spiritual, aspects of our personal lives; even when our education and training may not quite equip us to effectively address the negative impacts of race, class, gender, sexuality and other social power dynamics on our sense of self or on our ability to pursue our life purpose.

Beyond doubt, psychosynthesis coaches tend to be people committed to practices that foster personal growth, spiritual development and the evolution of human consciousness which, in turn, contribute to “transformation” of human culture. The principle of “liberation” abides firmly within our shared values and purpose, even while, given the historical role of the fields of psychotherapy, counseling and coaching, our practice tends to be limited to the individual sphere of experience. In our practice, we tend to give little attention to the collective sphere—the social, cultural, economic or political contexts in which a person’s experiences and behaviors emerge and which, in large measure, shape the very identities and subpersonalities, aspects of “self” that,

presumably, seek to be liberated.¹ Clearly, the cultural and cognitive biases that minimize the importance of the role of the collective dimension of human experience have serious implications concerning the effectiveness of our coaching practice and, more broadly, our role as agents for the transformation of human consciousness and culture.

Given the historical context and moment in which this is written, as psychosynthesis coaches and members of a community of thought and practice, a key question begs our consideration: Does social justice matter to psychosynthesis coaching? Are matters that involve racism, classism, sexism, heterosexism and other forms of oppression relevant to psychosynthesis practitioners and other helping professionals, particularly at times, such as these, of increasing political turmoil, social unrest, economic uncertainty, and cultural questioning? At times when concerns about climate change and the future of the planet itself, not to mention increased levels of stress, anxiety, personal dissatisfaction and dis-ease seem so commonplace? Often, it seems, these are questions many within the field of coaching may not be very inclined to engage. Though some of us might get “personally” involved, as voters and concerned citizens, or perhaps even as activists, typically “social justice” or “liberation” are simply not considered to be issues within the purview of our work as professional coaches. However, while neither our education nor professional training as coaches includes nor requires us to have, basic knowledge of history, social psychology, sociology, or social identity development, much less economics, societal ethics or critical psychologies, it behooves us to examine the questions and attempt our rightful actions in response.

In this spirit, I share a revised version of a piece previously published by Synthesis Press which, I hope, you may find a useful part of your exploration.

Since the 1960s, there has been an increased interest in relationships between psychology, spirituality, and social action. The spread of psychosynthesis and, subsequently, the emergence of transpersonal psychology as a formal field of study, points to the interest in exploring connections between psychological well-being and spiritual development (Assagioli, 1965/1976, 1973; Walsh, 1980; Wilber, 1977, 1980, 1981). During this same time, interest in examining the role of psychology, psychotherapy and coaching in relation to the socio-political well-being of individuals and communities led to the development of various fields, including liberation psychology (Akbar, 1996; Bulhan, 1985; Fanon, 1963, 1967; Moane, 1999, 2003), community psychology (Montero, 2003, 2004; Nelson, 2005; Prilleltensky, 2003; Prilleltensky & Nelson, 1997)

¹For more on identity, social identities, and social identity development, see my paper, “Social Identity Development and Integral Theory.”

and critical psychology (Fox & Prilleltensky, 1997; Martín-Baró, 1989, 1994). More recently, a renewed interest in liberation spirituality, or the relationship between spirituality and social action, is also taking place in the form of spiritual activism (Horwitz, 2002; Nhat Hanh, 1992; Sivaraksa, 1992).

Consciousness-in-Action

Consciousness-in-action (Quiñones-Rosado, 2007; Quiñones-Rosado & Barreto-Cortéz, 2002) is an approach that, in some measure, integrates these three orientations to human well-being and development. Drawing from psychology, sociology, critical theory, integral theory, and years of work in communities-of-struggle, consciousness-in-action offers an integral view of well-being and development in the context of social and institutional oppression, of societies in which people's health, educational, economic, social and political outcomes and status can still be predicted by race, class, gender and other social identities. Both a conceptual framework and a practice, consciousness-in-action is a liberatory and transformative process to help people move from emotional and behavioral reactivity rooted in both learned superiority and inferiority to responsiveness. This chapter introduces some of the concepts and principles of consciousness-in-action as they relate to psychosynthesis coaches and the coaching profession.

Personal and Collective Dimensions of Integral Liberation & Transformation

Indigenous traditions inform us that these four aspects—mental, emotional, physical and spiritual—co-exist, inseparably, holistically (Bopp & Bopp, 2001; Bopp, Bopp, & Lane, 1998; Bopp, Bopp, Brown, & Lane, 1984/1989). Individuated spirit, integrally associated with body, mind, and emotions, is understood to be at the core of our humanity. Spirit encompasses our intuitions and values, and is linked to our intellect and creativity, our feelings and beliefs, as well as our desires and drives. Like the Chinese yin-yang, each aspect is contained within the other; like the Yoruba ibeji, the male-female twins, one compliments the other. Further, like a holograph, of which the smallest film fragment contains the whole image, all aspects of our being are ever-present. Together, these four aspects synergistically generate human consciousness and will. It is consciousness and will that allow us to focus our awareness and volition, our attention and intention, for the purpose of our survival, well-being and development as human beings.

Spiritual practice, like psychosynthesis and other transpersonal psychologies, often involves ways in which humans seek to reconcile a perceived conflict between individuality and unity. These transpersonal approaches reflect people's impulse to overcome the illusion of their apparent separation and presumed individuality as they move to embrace an intuited Oneness with all other beings and with a Universal All. Within their own cultural context, people who engage this search develop, adopt, or adapt practices or disciplines that move them, consciously and willfully, toward greater personal integrity, self-transcendence, and unity consciousness.

Spirituality, in this broad sense, then, involves the development of the whole being, as all aspects of the personal dimension are impacted by changes in the any one of them (Quiñones-Rosado, 2007).

Obviously, individuals (or more accurately, persons) do not exist alone, separately, in isolation from other people. We are all born into and live within a society, a system that is far more complex than the mere collection of individual persons. This society, with its particular political, social, economic, and cultural structures and institutions, creates laws, norms, rules and traditions, all which serve to regulate relationships among its people. These structures and institutions, in turn, are what provide the context for relationships, processes and dynamics that enable—and often hinder—our survival, well-being, and full development.

Social psychologists maintain that our individual or personal identity, our very sense of self, is socially constructed by our interactions throughout socialization process (Berry, 2002; Gardiner, 2002; Stryker, 2000). Our sense of identity develops, not only because of our particular mental, emotional, physical and spiritual traits, but because much of who we are has to do with our shared experiences with others closest to us and most like us (Jacobs, 2003; Vygotsky, 1978).

At the same time, much of who and how we are has to do with our relationship to others who have a different sense of collective identity, and who also, by virtue of their group membership, exert a different degree of social power and access to the resources needed for their full individual and collective development (Hardiman, 1997; Tatum, 1997). Our very sense of “I am”-ness, therefore, emerges, developmentally in relationship to others, as we learn that “I am not you.”

In a society that, both historically and presently, as a general rule grants more social power to men than to women and other-gendered persons, to the rich than to working class and poor people, to white people than to People of Color, to heterosexuals than to gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender and queer people, and to other dominant group members vis-à-vis subordinated ones,

differential social power² inevitably plays a central role in shaping our identity, our sense of self—both personal and social.

These dynamics of differential power, within a society that advantages some while oppressing others, have lasting negative impacts on people—both individually and collectively—as people develop distorted (or inflated) self-images, negative (or overly positive) self-concepts, low (or exaggerated) self-esteem, and little (or narcissistic) self-love (Quiñones-Rosado, 2007).

Cognitive Impacts of Internalized Oppression

The effort to equalize the differential power between social identity groups and, moreover, to transform the institutional and systemic forces that perpetuate oppression is, typically, the work of social activism. But if spiritual practice is concerned with our attaining or remembering our inherent unity, then transcending fragmentation of self and overcoming oppositional dynamics within oneself and between social identity groups is also our inevitable task, if not our core human purpose. Spiritual practice and social action, therefore, are essentially two expressions of the same basic human drive: the search for fulfillment of our true humanity, of our divine nature, the evolution of consciousness itself. Spiritual practice tends to be an inward exploration and activity, while social action may well be its outward expression; the first, mostly an individual effort and personal experience, while the latter, a collective effort and shared experience of community, or “common-unity.”

The success of these long-term processes might ultimately depend on our ability to: resolve our basic (and subtle) internal contradictions; transcend our felt sense of separateness; experience unity beyond relatedness; realize our True Oneness. Meanwhile, however, both persistent, disciplined spiritual practice and social action, together with other liberatory and transformative practices, may help guide us along the on-going, ever-spiraling process of consciousness-in-action (Quiñones-Rosado, 2007):

- Perceiving – noticing, witnessing, becoming aware of the contraction, the sense of separation of “I” and “other,” of one’s social group and another.
- Recognize – moving beyond ignorance and/or denial of the sense of separation, and the activity of contraction it self, and how this dynamic is played out psychologically within us and sociologically, or collectively, throughout society.

²Again, social power is defined as access to and control over resources and opportunities for well-being and development as sanctioned by state authority. This power is not to be confused with either personal or collective power, agency that emanates from within a person or group of organized people, beyond or despite their social status and ranking.

- Realign – the nature of separate identity, of the contraction of the self, and of the dynamics of differential social power and oppression, its causes, and its consequences.
- Responding – with full feeling-attention to one's own suffering and to that of others; move toward the transcendence of our socialization—our learned internalized superiority and inferiority—through active engagement with others, non-violent, anti-oppressive, creative and liberating action toward self-determination (personal and collective) and transformation.

Coaching for Liberation and Transformation

Coaching, like social and spiritual activism, aims at helping people move toward greater expressions of well-being in their lives. The major difference, of course, is that the focus of coaches' work tends to be the individual person (or perhaps the couple, the family or specific group), while the focus of activists is the community, institutional policy, or society at large. Coaches mostly address issues that affect the mental, emotional, physical, and spiritual aspects of the person and seek to mobilize their internal resources (both their own and those of clients) to affect positive change and growth. Activists and organizers, on the other hand, seek to address political, social, economic and cultural issues that impact the collective by mobilizing people and other external resources as they seek to effect institutional, structural or systemic changes in the world.

Beyond (and despite) these and other obvious differences, coaching and activism alike respond to the perception, recognition and understanding that the quality of life of too many people is far below what is commonly accepted standards in contemporary US society. Moreover, when examined from a holistic perspective that takes into account the balance and harmony between all aspects at the personal level and within all domains of activity at the collective level, it is not difficult to see just how far people are from enjoying integral well-being.

For people concerned with both personal change and social transformation, an integral perspective of well-being and human development is crucial. Whether we are coaches, therapists, other helping professionals or social activists, our understanding of the dynamic and interdependent relationships between the individual and the collective is fundamental and of utmost importance. Then, as we are able to understand these relationships, we can also begin to recognize and fully appreciate our own personal responsibility to use our

professional role in the service of personal and social transformation.

Coaches engaged in consciousness-in-action—a social psychosynthesis of integral liberation and transformation—seek to understand the conflicts, contradictions and incongruities among our many social group identities. Since most conflicts and incongruence tend to become most evident in the midst of intimate relationships, we also work on these with our partners, children, other family members, and those closest to us in our various communities. To all of these relationships (whether our own or our clients'), we seek to bring awareness of social power, and how the dynamics of advantage and oppression (interpersonal, institutional and systemic) come to bear on the particular interaction and upon the relationship in general. Therefore, we strive to further explore how our own thoughts, beliefs, values, attitudes, feelings and behaviors may unconsciously replicate patterns of race, class, gender, sexual, cultural, national, political and other group identities, that would have us collude with the dominant/subordinated hierarchies that are normative in our cultures.

As professional liberatory transformation coaches, psychosynthesis coaches, we are fully aware of, understand and are opposed to oppression in its various expressions:

- ✦ Racism: the historical, systematic and institutional imposition of white supremacy—the ideology that presumes the inherent superiority of a socially-constructed “white race”—throughout society for the purpose of retaining State-sanctioned power and perpetuating advantage for white people collectively.
- ✦ Eurocentrism: the historical, systematic and institutional imposition of Euro-centered thought and behavior, and white culture, throughout society. The traditional ways of life and collective identities of Peoples of Color are actively sought to be displaced by the ideas, beliefs, behaviors, feeling, attitudes and values shared among people of European descent, a culture presumed to be superior. This is done for the purpose of assimilation, thus establishing internalized self-controls and maintaining compliance among the citizenry within the framework of racism.
- ✦ Classism: the historical, systematic and institutional imposition of capitalism—the materialistic worldview of white culture, which objectifies people, other life forms, material and cultural resources, and the natural environment, thus considering all of these “capital” to be invested, exploited, traded and accumulated for personal profit for the purpose of ensuring the privileged status and power of the small owning class.

- Colonialism: the historical, systematic and institutional means of white supremacy, Eurocentrism, and capitalism across national and cultural boundaries for the benefit of the ruling class of the imperial (albeit transnational) power.
- Militarism: the imposition of colonialism through the use, or threat of use, of the military might of the armed forces, as well as local, state, federal law enforcement, in the US and around the world.
- Sexism: the historical, systematic and institutional orientation of patriarchy, the ideology of male supremacy, which proclaims men as the standard of humanity (and of divinity in “western” cultures) through systems and institutions that objectify and exploit women by virtue of gender.
- Heterosexism: the extension of sexism and patriarchy through the exclusive sanctioning of heterosexual relationships which—based upon the presumed superiority of heteronormative identities and behaviors, and the subordinated status of women and LGBTQ persons—are deemed to be the only legal and morally acceptable expression of gender, sexuality and love.

Similarly, liberatory transformation coaches stand opposed to ageism, ableism, anti-Semitism, and all other forms of institutional oppression.

As coaches for **liberation**, our work is about fostering the process of recognizing, embracing, transcending and healing from the negative impacts of oppression, as clients move to restore balance and harmony, or integral well-being, in their lives. We are alert to patterns of implicit bias, of internalized superiority and inferiority, and of exclusion, exploitation and misrepresentation of oppressed individuals and communities.

As coaches for **transformation**, our work is to help people in our larger communities understand the collective human suffering caused by all forms of oppression: those societal forces that hinder our ability to survive and fully develop, the root cause of the social problems we endure. As such, we are ethically committed to counteracting the legacy of systemic advantage of the dominant few.

Psychosynthesis Coaching as a Practice in Consciousness-in-Action

Adoption of this integral liberatory and transformative approach to coaching presumes a commitment to one’s own on-going well-being, in which we direct our consciousness and will to all aspects and dimensions of being. In doing so, we can seek greater balance and harmony by continually seeking to resolve internal conflicts between mind (ideas, thoughts, images, dreams),

heart (feelings, desires), body (urges, impulses, sensations, perceptions), and spirit (principles, values, meaning, purpose, inspiration, intuition).

Among the most common spiritual or contemplative practices are prayer, meditation, self-observation, and inquiry. For some people, religion-free mindfulness practices and biofeedback techniques are preferred. For others, engaging in physical activities (e.g., taiji, qigong, running, swimming, and other sports) or absorption in music, art, or nature enables them to quiet the mind and experience a similar sense of unity consciousness.

A main purpose—and key benefit—of these practices is to perceive, recognize, and understand the psycho-spiritual nature of oppression: emotional reactivity. Whether we call it ego, self-contraction, the fear of being unloved, the fear of death itself, or all of the above, emotional reactivity leads to the illusion of individuality and a sense of disconnection from others that disrupts our inherent connection and ultimate oneness. Furthermore, emotional reactivity—both cause and consequence of oppression—diminishes our capacity to consciously respond and make appropriate behavioral choices in everyday life, and most certainly in the face of differential social power dynamics.

From the perspective of psychosynthesis coaching, as consciousness-in-action practice, understanding these dynamics allow us, as coaches, to perceive, recognize and address a wider range of manifestations of the psychosocial patterns stemming from internalized oppression and/or associated with institutional, external social forces. This understanding, together with our practiced ability to respond—that is, to catch ourselves emotionally reacting and, then, to relax the contraction—is essential to effective coaching relationships.

Closing Comments

Like many people, my non-religious spirituality leads me to believe that “we are all One in the Divine.” And notwithstanding the political stances at stake, I, too, believe that “there is only one race: the human race.” But, let me be clear: that we are all One, does not mean we are all the same. Given the reality of our socialization—all the myths, stereotypes, misinformation, and false narratives we were taught as children about one another’s identity groups—we cannot ignore or deny that these differences still really do make a difference in our daily lives, to the clear advantage of some and to the utter detriment of most.

In spite of the fact that these differences are socially constructed, their negative impact is real, tangible, measurable and predictable. Thus, we must not believe for an instant that we can merely meditate, counsel or coach away

racism, colonialism, sexism, and all the forms of oppression that harm, even kill, and that rob us all of our humanity.

As coaching professionals, each and every one of us is an active participant in our society; there is no such thing as being neutral. Everything we do either supports oppression and suffering or serves to liberate others and ourselves from it. I believe that given the opportunity and the knowledge, psychosynthesis coaches would choose to act against oppression and for liberation. I believe that coaches stand for the positive transformation of our society grounded in a vision of integral well-being and development.

Key to that process of transformation, in personal, professional, and social realms, is to learn to expand our consciousness; skillfully exercise our will; gain control of our attention; and further clarify our intent. We need to develop the ability to see multiple levels of reality simultaneously, and to be able to focus on any one aspect or dimension instantly, to move between foreground and background, without losing the ability to see the “larger picture.” By doing this, we can discern where it is that we need to go, and mindfully direct our energy and the movement of a coaching session in that direction.

As coaches committed to liberation from oppression and the transformation of society and consciousness itself, we must “assume our rightful place”³ as we co-create relationships that are free of the dynamics of dominance and subordination, as we build institutions that fundamentally honor and support our full humanity, and as we deepen our understanding of the Divine and learn to express the best of our divine nature in all contexts. That, I believe, is our greatest challenge.

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³A signature phrase of partner and colleague, María I. Reinat Pumarejo, founder and director of Colectivo Ilé: Organizers for Consciousness-in-Action.

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