

## Psychosynthesis Palo Alto, California (1996, Ongoing)

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*Ann Maria Gila*

*This essay is about my life, teaching, and writing I did together with John Firman, until his death in 2008. Our development of psychosynthesis theory grew organically from our commitment to*



*John Firman and Ann Gila*

*our personal and spiritual development. We sought the truth of our lives and then looked at how it fit with psychosynthesis theory; therefore, our teaching and writing were guided by our experiences and those of the clients and students to whom we listened and with whom we traveled. In our work, we held Assagioli's concept of Self-realization as primary; to the best of our abilities we followed this, listening to the "call" of Self each step of the way. Psychosynthesis Palo Alto, our teaching at the Institute of Transpersonal Psychology, and our books were our responses to "call."*

### **Beginnings**

Psychosynthesis Palo Alto in Palo Alto, California officially began in 1996 when John Firman and I presented our first one-year training program. In reality, however, it began in the early 1970s when John and I first met and were members of the Psychosynthesis Institute that was located in Palo Alto and then in San Francisco. Not long after we met, we began "hanging out" with each other. We had similar minds that loved to think about theory and explore psychospiritual concepts in depth. We had many intense discussions over meals in the courtyard of a local restaurant, talking at length about the nature of "I." This was one of our favorite topics; and in the years that followed, we delighted in telling others that some of our most intense fights were about theory.

In the late 1970s, our lives took different directions. In 1987, when we came together again after a period of nine years, John was living and working as a therapist on the staff of a parish in Los Angeles, and I was in private practice and living in Palo Alto. During this time of renewing our friendship, we spent many long weekends together sharing the journey we each had lived. We learned that we had been reading many of the same books, including the writings of various Western and Eastern mystics; we both had been exploring and examining our families of origin and the impact our early lives had had upon us.

In these discussions, both in California and in England where we taught and lived for many months in the late 1980s, I was focused on the personal and the visible abuses I had experienced in my childhood. John was uncovering a more subtle level of

wounding he had experienced, one that was much more difficult to see and was easier to dismiss. Our discussions led John to review the notes he had written when he had visited and worked with Roberto Assagioli for two months in 1973. During one of their sessions, John had drawn a diagram, now commonly referred to as the "ring model" that was to become the heart of our first book, *The Primal Wound*, published in 1997 by State University of New York (SUNY) Press.

*The Primal Wound* was born out of our shared experience of wanting to know the truth of our lives. It was not a writing that initially came from a desire to develop theory; rather it was the result of exploring and examining ourselves and recognizing how we had been led, sometimes unknowingly, by Spirit. After our parting in the late 1970s and considering the direction we each had taken, it had seemed improbable that we would come together again. However, Spirit called and *The Primal Wound* and our subsequent work together began. We were married in 1990, and it was in this personal relationship that we both heard the invitations of Self so intensely. Through the interactions and discussions in our everyday life, whether while having breakfast or while taking a walk, we developed the theory that became the underpinning of how we lived, taught, and wrote.

### **The Training Program**

In the early 1990s, we began teaching psychosynthesis in both the MA and PhD programs at the Institute of Transpersonal Psychology (ITP) in Palo Alto, and this led to our establishing Psychosynthesis Palo Alto. As our students completed the psychosynthesis course at ITP, they began asking how they could continue studying psychosynthesis with us. In 1996, we began our first one-year psychosynthesis training program with six trainees and decided that our groups would be small, with a maximum of ten students. The following year we once again offered the one-year program along with a follow-up year-long program for those who wanted to continue studying psychosynthesis. In each subsequent year until 2008, we offered the one-year program along with as many as three follow-up groups. In addition to graduate students in the training, we had licensed psychotherapists, medical doctors, religious individuals, businesspersons, personal coaches, teachers, and body workers.

The structure of the one-year program varied over the years, but in general it consisted of nine weekends. The follow-up groups were different from year to year, generally meeting for one day every two months. The content of the follow-up meetings varied with each group as we were committed to responding to the needs of the students who made up each particular group. In general, however, the follow-up groups continued to deepen the trainees' understanding of theory. About 250 students have gone through our programs, though some of these were repeat students who attended for more than one year.

The following areas of psychosynthesis were covered both conceptually and experientially in the training program:

- Personality theory
- Developmental theory
- Practice

Personality theory included:

- The experience and structure of subpersonalities
- The authentic personality and survival personality
- The nature of "I"
- Identification and disidentification
- The nature and formation of the higher and lower unconscious
- The psychosynthesis understanding of psychological disorders
- Personal and transpersonal psychosynthesis
- Self-realization

Developmental theory included:

- Life-span development and the role of the I-Self axis over the course of this development
- The role of mirroring and empathic responsiveness
- The formation of subpersonalities
- The four stages of psychosynthesis
- A model of abuse and addiction
- The growth of authentic and survival personality
- The etiology of the "trance of everyday life"
- The function of internal and external unifying centers
- Transpersonal object-relations theory

Psychosynthesis practice included:

- The nature of spiritual empathy and empathic resonance
- Psychotherapy as an act of love
- Subpersonality or "ego state" work
- The nature and healing of childhood trauma
- Accessing the higher and lower unconscious
- The process of contacting, facilitating, and utilizing inner wisdom and intuition
- Supporting the experience of "call" or "vocation"
- Developing a conscious relationship with Self

Since 2004, Psychosynthesis Palo Alto also has offered a distance-learning program in which students read psychosynthesis books and articles, do experiential exercises, and write reports and papers. Feedback is given to the student via e-mail. These distance-learning students work independently and establish their own pace of learning. In addition to students living in the United States, we have had students in our distance-learning program from England, Ireland, Turkey, Greece, India, Canada, and Belgium.

### **Publications**

In the early 1990s, Psychosynthesis Palo Alto published *I and Self*, a book written by John, and a series of monographs. Several of the monographs were written by John and me; two were written by Chris Merriam, who at that time directed a psychosynthesis center in Seattle. In addition, John and I recorded two CDs of psychosynthesis exercises focused on subpersonality exploration and disidentification. We wrote our second book

*Psychosynthesis: A Psychology of the Spirit* (SUNY Press, 2002) as a textbook for our psychosynthesis course at ITP. We have used both it and our earlier book, *The Primal Wound*, in our classes and in our training programs. These publications are listed on our web site.

With great sadness and a broken heart, I tell you that on June 23, 2008, John Firman died of pancreatic cancer. The future of our training program and Psychosynthesis Palo Alto is unknown at this time. Four weeks before John died, we signed a contract for the publication of our third book, *A Psychotherapy of Love: Psychosynthesis in Practice*, which was published by SUNY Press in April 2010. We wrote this book in response to a need to have a practical and fundamental textbook for our psychotherapeutic skills class at ITP. It draws upon current thinking about psychotherapy, moves toward an understanding of psychotherapy as an act of love, and presents psychosynthesis as such a psychotherapy. The book discusses the nature of spiritual empathy, empathic resonance, the death and rebirth of the therapist, and power and ethics. It presents the stages of psychosynthesis that can occur within a field of altruistic, empathic love. Drawing on case vignettes, we extended these stages—described by Assagioli in his book, *Psychosynthesis*—to include the clinical situation.

### **In Closing**

John Firman and I knew that our call was to work together, teaching and developing psychosynthesis theory. We frequently asked, "What is Spirit calling us to now, in this moment?" We tried to listen and to respond as best we could. Our love of God and our love of each other was the container that held the work we developed and presented. I hope that those who are drawn to our writings will find them useful in the years to come.

**Ann Maria Gila, MA, MFT**, is a licensed psychotherapist practicing in Palo Alto, California. In 1974, she completed advanced training in psychosynthesis and worked as therapist, trainer, and editor for the *Psychosynthesis Institute* and for the journal *Synthesis in Palo Alto/San Francisco*. Ann also completed training in gestalt therapy with Erv and Miriam Polster.

*Ann has been in private practice for over 30 years and is presently an associate core faculty member at the Institute of Transpersonal Psychology (ITP). For several years she served as a clinical supervisor for its counseling center.*

Email: [gilafirman@aol.com](mailto:gilafirman@aol.com)

Web site: [psychosynthesispaloalto.com](http://psychosynthesispaloalto.com)

**John Van Ess Firman, MA, MFT**, was a licensed psychotherapist practicing in Palo Alto, California. John completed advanced training in psychosynthesis at the *Psychosynthesis Institute* and, for several months in 1973, he studied with Roberto Assagioli in Italy. He also received training at the *Family Therapy Institute of Southern California* and worked for several years as a psychotherapist and spiritual director on the staff of a Catholic parish in Los Angeles. John was an associate core faculty member at the *Institute of Transpersonal Psychology (ITP)*.