

Soul work bridging across thresholds

Living Anthroposophy as a potential bridge between cultures in modern Africa

Yehuda Tagar

Tagar, Y. (2004). Soul work bridging across thresholds: Living Anthroposophy as a potential bridge between cultures in modern Africa. *Anthroposophy in Action: Journal of the Anthroposophical Movement in South Africa*. Cape Town.

A very special opportunity for spiritual/cultural renewal presents itself in Africa today. A special meeting starts to take shape here between those of us who are starting to remember the broader spiritual reality surrounding us – and those in this country who have never forgotten it. Living Anthroposophy can become a bridge across spiritual/cultural divides here in ways unimaginable elsewhere. The profound Anthroposophical understanding of the respective gifts of different cultures towards the whole progress of the evolution of consciousness is an extremely helpful framework for the intense weaving of the myriad of streams and cultures here. Psychosophy¹ offers an understanding of the life of the human soul as another potential contribution to the meetings across thresholds that are happening here. A grounded spiritual-scientific understanding of human reality is in short supply and in a rapidly growing high demand.

But the deeper dimensions of the human soul are not available to external sense-based observation and intellectual reflection, nor to any abstract theoretical interpretive frame of reference of any kind, try as we may. The human soul can only be comprehended from the stand point of a spiritual self awareness. As we grow to respect ourselves as conscious spiritual beings – our own soul life and progressively that of others becomes an apparent reality for us. As the soul phenomena speaks to us – pre-conceived ideas, ideologies, speculation and belief systems give way to the communication with the actual human soul in front of us. This is where soul work begins. Expressive non-verbal as well as verbal modes of communication must combine if the effort is to be consequential. Training towards professional soul work must systematically address the conscious development of Imagination, Inspiration and Intuition as the higher tools for the art of deep empathy.

The soul life that becomes a reality reveals that the human soul never lives in isolation, neither can it die with the death of the body. Our inner being never dies, and our connection to each other never dies either. The complete gamut of the human community is

¹ Psychosophy: Rudolf Steiner's foundation for a spiritual science based psychology and psychotherapy, from 1910. See: Steiner, R. (1999) *A Psychology of Body, Soul & Spirit*. Reprint. NY: Anthroposophic Press

much broader than the portion of it that meets the physical eye. Through our work as practitioners of Psychophonetics² in South Africa we are progressively being made aware of the constant presence in the psyche of our clients who have passed over the threshold. For the native Africans this comes as no surprise, other than the fact that European educated people are open so speak about it. This is one of the most important potential meeting points between Anthroposophic-based soul work and the people of Africa.

Again and again in our clinical and training sessions we find the beneficial presence of fathers, mothers, grandparents, uncles, aunts, brothers, sisters and other people of special importance for our clients who passed away, sometimes many year ago, appearing as powerful supporters, protectors, nurturers and encouragers from within the soul of the person we work with, if we but listen and respect their experience. Guardian Angels, Archangels, beings named Love, God, Cosmic Heart, The Mother, The Father by our clients and other beneficial spiritual beings appear frequently in these sessions as well, mostly by people who had no previous exposure to or belief in the existence of such entities before. We welcome them, accepting fully the meaning these experiences have for our clients, regarding their soul reality *as reality*. Reconciliation meetings between souls who lost each other across the abyss of death take place on a regular basis, rituals of forgiveness between people who harmed each other across the threshold, of relief of anxiety, of allowance of love to flow, of healing across the threshold - become more and more common in our practice. This is a rich meeting ground between the Anthroposophic teaching on the relationship between the living and the dead and traditional healing practices of this land. We do not come from any tradition but from listening to the genuine voice of the soul of the person we strive to meet. But surprisingly to some we find ourselves in this work standing very close to our traditional healer colleagues here.

Never would any of it be imposed by the practitioners, suggested or assumed. Never would any other presence be allowed to take charge of the situation, of the responsibility and of the guidance other than the autonomous I of the client, which is the only point of entry, communication and decision. But when soul reality is being respected - it reveals its broader nature. Let me share with you some pictures, moments, reflections and experiences from recent time, expressing this newly emerging bridge in practice.

² Psychophonetics: a modality of transformational life coaching, counselling, psychotherapy, consultancy and training based on Rudolf Steiner's Psychosophy. It combines sensing, movement, visualization and sounds with conversational counselling procedure.

Botsabelo - Here at Botsabelo, a place of shelter in the heart of the Magalisberg mountain range north of Johannesburg, in front of the burning fire, at the heart of the Medicine Wheel created by a Hopi Indian for the local villagers, surrounded by the beautiful hills of this Cradle of Humankind, amongst hundreds of children, teenagers and adults from the healing communities of Botsabelo Village and the Agape clinic of the Mamelody township, teachers and students from the University of South Africa, Rao University and Persephone College, Richard, a Sangoma elder from the Transkai blessed our good work for the healing of our communities in the name of the ancestors of this land. He told us that all human sicknesses come from the soul, and that all good people who respect the spirit of the land, the people, the traditions and the ancestors can do the work of healing. This was the conclusion of a day of festivities, theatre performances, concerts, rituals and joyful meeting of these communities, brought together through our work in South Africa, on the 1st August 2004.

This was the culmination of two years of Psychophonetics work of Persephone College teachers and students at Botsabelo, developed alongside the Johannesburg campus of our professional course of Psychophonetics. This work is a continuous human meeting crossing many thresholds, uniting people across different races, nationalities, languages, cultures, countries and psychological schools of thoughts in creative soul work, based on a respectful observation of the phenomena of human experience in the context of human community.

A week earlier I stood at the grave of yet another AIDS victim at the Botsabelo graveyard further east of the Medicine Wheel, farewelling a young woman of this community, as the singing, coming out of the depth of the souls of hundreds of people surrounded by these ancient hills engulfing us as if coming from the hills themselves, the red rocks, the burnt grass. At the invitation of the bishop of the nearby town, with no previous notice, I found myself speaking at the grave to her, the soul of the woman, as if she was still amongst us. I spoke to her crossing the threshold on behalf of all of us, connecting us yet again with the world of spirit from which we all come, in which we are always placed, embedded as we are in the forgetfulness of matter. I promised her that we will not forget her membership in our community and that on her behalf we will care well for her children left with us. I knew as I was speaking that coming out of my Anthroposophic background, thus appreciating the actual present reality of the departing soul - I was representing a very controversial possibility, potentially threatening and welcoming in equal measures to many, and yet a potential meeting ground between the opposing approaches to the connection between the living and the dead in this continent: that of most of the established churches

here and that of the traditional ancestral reverence of the indigenous people of this land. I realised again that living Anthroposophy is a potential modern bridge between the contradicting currents of our time, especially here in Africa.

I first woke up powerfully to these confronting world views a few weeks back, at the 4th international conference of the African Chapter of the World Council of Psychotherapy (WCP-AC) at the University of the North in Polokwanw, Limpopo Province, attended by psychotherapists from across Africa. In the middle of the workshop that was offered by a team, with professor Stan Lifshitz of the University of South Africa, Dr Corinne Oosthuisen of Rau University and myself, about creating healing rituals, the controversy manifested through the inability of some professionals to join the work of traditional healers here, whenever rituals were touched on in more than clinical intellectual forms. Amongst those who could participate in this ritual creating workshop – a spirit of complete openness prevailed, marked by mutual respect and support for bringing the spiritual dimension of our lives into our professional therapeutic and academic lives. Traditional healers, and other spiritually based therapists like myself, formed a moment of high ritual between us, honouring each other's spiritual striving which assumed a particularly powerful significance here at the school of psychology at this university, at the heart of this conference. At least for that moment we became a close, spiritual/professional community. At the core of the controversy, as well as at the heart of the community – there stood formidable the threat and the promise of working consciously with the spirits of the ancestors. This was for me a turning point in the relationship between my personal sphere of applied Anthroposophic work and the spiritual/cultural developments of our time, an indication of things to come.

The struggle to bridge the divide between the spiritual and the mainstream approaches to mental health dominated the third day of the conference when in one paper presentation after another the tendency to hide traditional healing and ancestral rituals was exposed and openly critiqued by a brave group of pioneering researchers from across South Africa. The tension in the rooms was palpable. At the core of the encounter between the differing cultures present, simmering underneath the official proceedings was the question of the connection to the ancestors: can the inclusion of the presence of the spirits of those who passed away within the healing procedure be tolerated and openly acknowledged within the professional and academic fraternity of mental health in this country?

This question has enormous ramifications to the future cohesion of the emerging new society in South Africa and in Africa at large. Many people are not aware of it yet, but they will be soon. The signs are everywhere for all to see. I realised there and then that as an

exponent of an Anthroposophic-based modality of mental healing I stand right in the middle of this spiritual/cultural struggle with an offer of a potentially significant contribution, both theoretical and practical, that could make a very positive difference to this emerging discourse here.

I saw again how Anthroposophy, when thought through and practically applied to soul work, could serve as a bridge. I was honoured to be received on the basis of Psychophonetics itself into professional membership of the WCP-AC by its founder and president, Professor Sylvester Madu, the head of Psychology at the University of the North, at whose invitation I was presenting this work at that conference. Ever since we met at Rhodes University three years ago, Professor Madu had always encouraged the presentation of Psychophonetics as one of the potential bridges between European based approaches to the human soul and Africa. He wrote to me last year the following paragraph:

This method (Psychophonetics) is not culture-bound. My impression is that it has the potential of making a significant contribution in the treatment of abused and traumatized persons not only in South Africa, but also in the whole of Africa. As the President of the World Council for Psychotherapy African Chapter and a Senior Lecturer at the Department of Psychology, University of the North, I would support Psychophonetics Counselling and services in any way possible within my capacity.

Combined with his publication of a paper on Psychophonetics in this country³, his support has made an important contribution to the arrival of this work in this country. At the closing ceremony of the WCP-AC, Professor Madu called on all of us to be courageous in creating, researching, formulating and articulating new approaches to psychotherapy that are unique to the spirit of Africa. I knew then with a mix of excitement and trepidation that I was standing at an important threshold in the cultural/ spiritual development of this century, representing a humble beginning of embryonic Psychosophy to the soul struggles of our time, “a cultivation of the life of the soul on the basis of a true knowledge of the spirit” in Rudolf Steiner’s words.

Back at Botsabelo, following the funeral that morning we all went back down to the village, to do the traditional healing consecration of our new Psychophonetics clinic there, named ‘Pilo Anthle’, meaning ‘Good Heart’ in Zuana, the language of the local people. The same Sangoma performed a full regalia purification ceremony for our new clinic. He addressed and cleared all the previous presences of this place, welcomed the caring love our

³ Tagar, Y. (2003) Psychophonetics in South Africa. In S. Madu (ed), ‘Contributions to psychotherapy in Africa. Plokwane (Pietersburg): UNIN Press

group members manifested towards the children of this land, thanked us for our dedication for healing his people, called for the blessings of his ancestors and the ancestors of the people of this community, and placed their protection around our sacred healing place. I joined him in the blessing by connecting the spirituality at the foundation of our work to the spirituality of the people of this land by speaking the Lord's Prayer in Hebrew, my mother tongue and the language of the country of my origin, and the anthem of Persephone College, the prayer for the manifestation of human meeting that is based on the Lord's Prayer. Then he blessed my talking stick, a Shaka Zulu sculpted weapon carved in Malawy, given to me by a Pedo woman on behalf of the Zuana people of Botsabelo, and he blessed the Persephone talking stick, the one carved in the upper Savana for the lounge of Persephone College in Africa two years ago - Spiritual bridges.

Then we commenced our healing work of the residents of this village in this clinic, the transformation of scars, pains, invasions, abuses, addictions and debilitations originating in the past biographies of our people into strength, courage, compassion and creativity for the future. The third year students of our first intake in Africa are fast becoming independent in their healing work at the student practice at 'Pilo Anthle' at Botsabelo, a wonderful preparation for their future professional healing work with Psychophonetics in this country. I hope this sharing can be an encouragement for creative, original, free thinking strivers in all walks of life who are inspired by Anthroposophy to take up the unique opportunities presented by this threshold time in our history for the crossing of the thresholds in front of us, both inward and outward, for the conscious humanising of our society.