

Reading and Reflecting on Excerpts from *Freedom in Jail* by Roberto Assagioli

Catherine Ann Lombard
AAP Webinar
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The following excerpts are from *Freedom in Jail* by Roberto Assagioli. Each excerpt begins with a brief Introduction followed by the words of Roberto Assagioli. Page numbers from the book are indicated with the selected texts. I have removed all footnotes. All underlined words are by Assagioli.

Before we come together, please take time to read and reflect on these passages. You will have the opportunity to discuss one of them with others in a smaller group. At the end of the Webinar, each group will present an overview of their reflections on a specific passage to the larger group.

Please also bring/have available drawing paper, crayons, pens/markers.

1. Acceptance (pp. 21-22)

Assagioli had to accept his situation and figure out what he wanted to do with this time in jail. Like those of us under quarantine during the Covid-19 crisis, he too faced the uncertainty of how long he would be in jail and even if he would survive. These passages reflect his coming to terms with the uncomfortable situation he suddenly found himself in.

In Jail

First day – after I was “settled.” I asked myself: “What attitude to take?” “What to make out of it?”

1. A wholehearted, generous acceptance. The value of acceptance: elimination of vain rebellion, irritation, self-pity and all kinds [of] negative reactions (quote *Way of Acceptance*). It is magical, it transforms and transfigures the situation.
2. A full utilisation of the experience and opportunity ...

Acceptance

Not a passive, sad “resignation,” but a positive/serene acceptance of an unavoidable condition, an elimination of all useless emotional reactions and rebellion – an active search of the best way of utilising in the fullest measure the opportunities offered by the new situation.

It was not difficult for me, for several reasons:

First: I had been for a long time convinced of the stupidity of rebellion against what cannot be changed. If we kick against a wall, it is our feet which suffer!

I well knew that the study of the effect of psychological states upon the body has demonstrated that violent emotions, such as fear and anger, produce real poisons in the body (quote Cannon and Crile), upset the digestion, etc. It would have been foolish indeed on my part if I had aggravated my situation by poisoning my system and straining (?) my liver!

Second: as my vocation and work is that of a psychologist, my life in jail offered me a most interesting, unique/special opportunity for new observations and unusual experiments. It is indeed a great privilege that of a psychologist not to need material implements of any kind in order to pursue his research. The painter needs canvas, colours and brushes; the sculptor needs chisel, clay or marble. The chemist and the biologist need laboratories with delicate instruments and all sorts of chemicals and substances. The psychologist too for certain special research (such as ...) needs instruments etc. But many other studies, experiments; indeed for those which have the most central/highest importance and value, needs absolutely nothing material.

His own self, his body, his immediate surroundings, his fellow-men, the universe, in their varied relationships and ceaseless interactions provide a constant and inexhaustible field of observations and of action ...

2. The Prisoners, The Officials and Wards (pp. 22-23)

These brief passages and notes offer insight into Assagioli's first impressions of what it means to be a prisoner and a prison guard.

The Prisoners

The fierce outburst of the prisoner I had met the first day kept ringing in my ears: "I want good dinners; I want wine; I want women," and I realised vividly that these passionate longings were his real bondage, that the day in which he will regain external freedom, psychologically he will be a prisoner more than ever.

The Officials and the Wards

"Adlerian" types.

Their complexes (an exception:)

Impression of dryness, of in-humanity.

Due to:

- repression
- the "function" which absorbs the human side. (perhaps they may have been different outside).
- the deadening effect of "routine"

(when there is no higher life – in this case, routine gives more freedom and scope to the true life, to the real Being).

3. Freedom, (pp. 23-24)

This passage is probably the most quoted of all Assagioli's notes on freedom.

Freedom

I realised that I was free to take one or another attitude towards the situation, to give one or another value to it, to utilize it, or not in one or another way.

I could rebel inwardly and curse; or I could submit passively, vegetating; or I could indulge in the unwholesome pleasure of self-pity and assume the martyr's role; or I could take the situation in a sporting way and with a sense of humour, considering it as a novel and interesting experience (what Germans call an *Erlebnis*. I could make of it a rest cure; or a period of intense thinking either about personal matters reviewing my past life and pondering on it, or about scientific and philosophical problems; or I could take advantage of the condition in order to submit myself to a definite training of psychological faculties to make psychological experiments upon myself; or finally as a spiritual retreat.

I had the clear sure perception that this was entirely my own affair that I was free to choose any or several of these attitudes and activities; that this choice would have definite and unavoidable effects which I could foresee and of which I was fully responsible. There was no doubt in my mind about this essential freedom and power and their inherent privileges and responsibilities. A responsibility towards myself, towards my fellow mankind and towards life itself or God.

4. An Incident and a "Test" (pp. 25-27)

Assagioli did not really spend time in solitary confinement as we might understand it today. At that time, more affluent prisoners, like Assagioli, could pay for private and more comfortable cells as well as better food. Assagioli actually writes about his personal struggle when his money nearly ran out and he faced the possibility of having to share a cell with other prisoners and the idea that he might lose his "'freedom' ... of solitude and of privacy!"

An Incident and a "Test"

The peaceful but intense life I was leading was one day troubled by an incident.

I was told that my money which had been deposited (?) at my entrance in jail was running/getting (?) short and that when it was exhausted not only I would have to take only the common fare (?) of the prisoners consisting in a pail (?) of soup and a loaf of bread each day, but that I had to leave my special cell and pass into an ordinary one, probably together with others. This I had to do in spite of the fact that the cell had been paid for one month in advance, because the regulations of the institutions forbade the use of a "special" cell to those who could not afford to pay for special food as well.

The news that I had no money available was a surprise for me because, foreseeing that the original fund would be soon exhausted, I had written to my wife asking her to deposit another sum in my account, and I was sure that she had done so. Therefore I made enquiries on this

point/about this and was told that the money had been regularly deposited, but that I could not have the use of it without a special permit (?) from the Police Headquarters. This was a special rule concerning political prisoners. That permit had been asked but had not come as yet. I wrote to my wife to hasten the matter, but – as I have said – letters were submitted to a special censorship on the part of the Police and this delayed their delivery [for] several days. I could not understand/see (and I cannot even now) the logic of this regulation. A man with very little money available might prefer to have a clean cell and a comfortable bed rather than more food – but perhaps this choice was beyond the grasp of “those in power”!

Thus I had nothing else to do and to hope for the best, that is: it was all about the practical side of the matter. Instead the incident started an psychological test and experience, which I watched with interest. The test was twofold: concerning the food and concerning the cell.

I never had any special interest or attachment for food. When I was a student I used to take my noon meal in less than 20 minutes and to have the same menu/fare for months (Both these are not advisable because ... but they show my detachment). Later my diet has been mainly, though not exclusively, vegetarian and raw. And yet a kind of physical instinctual panic surged which tended to create an emotional preoccupation.

I fought it through clear reasoning: the food which I would get was quite sufficient, hundreds of people in this very establishment and many thousands throughout the country were living in that diet. I roused in myself a sense of shame for my selfish preoccupation. I realised the human value of sharing the experience with the others of this “poverty.” I became really interested in this experience (develop).

After a series of efforts along these lines, I succeeded in freeing myself from that preoccupation so as to pursue serenely and with concentration my inner exercises, my readings and all my usual activities.

The second test concerned my “freedom,” my privilege of solitude and of privacy! I thought that I had to make a different, an opposite experience, to give up my solitude and the opportunities which it offered me, and to help actively those with whom I would come in contact, those sharing the cell with me and those whom I would meet at the “walk.” (develop)

When I had arrived to possess only about 25 cents and I expected that the next day the change would be made, I was notified that the permit from the Police Headquarters to make use of my money had arrived and that, therefore, the matter was settled, and things would go on as before.

When the news was given to me, I distinctly registered two opposite inner reactions at the same time: an instinctual sense of relief and a feeling of disappointment for being deprived of the new experience and of the opportunity of helping my fellowmen.

5. The Stilling of the Mind (p. 38)

This is just one of the inner exercises that Assagioli outlined for his book. Most of the notes he left on this topic are mere lists of items and numerous references to pages in the book *Concentration and Meditation*, published by The Buddhist Lodge in 1935. However, this exercise is more fully described.

The stilling of the mind

I adopted the method of letting it jump and run, while observing it in a calm, detached way.

Better this than forcible suppression (develop).

At first a mild interest, a sense of humour, a smiling observation, coupled with a close firm watchfulness in order not to become involved in the mind's activity.

At first many failures, but by and by less and less ...

Gradually, the mind got tired, calmed down spontaneously and, like a child or a boy who had had their full of running and playing came back subdued and in an attitude as of asking what to do, of waiting for orders.

Then: either

- a. meditation on a definite subject ...
- b. or a turning inward of the attention, an attempt to realise the consciousness of the pure Self without any "object."

Gradually a sense of light, of stability, of permanency as a diamond. Then a sense of power, of calm indomitable power, mastery.

Then, a sense of radiation, effulgence.

6. Love (p. 56)

Assagioli described some of his transpersonal experiences while in prison, including Love.

Love

A sense of boundlessness – of no-separation with all that is, a merging with the self of the whole.

First an outgoing movement, but not towards any particular object or individual being, an overflowing of effusion in all directions, as the rays of an ever expanding sphere, a sense of universal love.

Then the ability to focalise the radiation towards some object or individual and at the same time to specialise its quality:

1. Compassionate love towards the inmates of my prison and towards all prisoners, inmates of hospitals and asylums.

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2. Tender love to the members of my family.
 3. Brotherly love towards my friends.
 4. A love of admiration, gratitude, veneration towards the Great Souls, the wise, the geniuses and particularly towards Christ, that perfect embodiment ...

But all these qualifications remained always within the whole, as parts of the identification with the whole of Reality, of Life, as sections of the Universal infinite Sphere.

A wonderful merging ... no separation, only differing aspects of a same wonder.

7. Joy (pp. 57)

Assagioli described some of his transpersonal experiences while in prison, including Joy.

Joy

It is a joy utterly independent from outer circumstances and also from any hope, expectation or vision of the future. It is the joy of pure being, of pure consciousness, or realisation of the Self resting and standing in Itself, free from any striving, from any outgoing tendency. It is the joy inherent in Life itself, in the substance of Reality.

How much joy one can draw from all sorts of experiences –

The great point is not to dwell and pine on the sources of joy which are not available in the present situation, but to look for and extract the full blessing of those which are at hand, and there are always some, much more than one ordinarily realises.

This has been not a theory but an actual living experience for me during this month.

After all, it is so simple and easy: it is (as I said speaking of freedom) all a question of choice and of decision.

All excerpts are from: *Freedom in Jail* by Roberto Assagioli, Edited by Catherine Ann Lombard. Florence: Istituto di Psicosintesi, 2016.

Buying *Freedom in Jail*

To purchase *Freedom in Jail*, please contact the Institute of Psychosynthesis Florence at istituto@psicosintesi.it. Books are also available from the Psychosynthesis Trust London by contacting enquiries@ptrust.org.uk.

Further Reading

[5 Facts about Assagioli's Time in Jail](#)

[Your Jail Cell Reading List](#)

[Freedom in Jail – One Year Later](#)

[After Freedom in Jail](#)

[Finding Freedom in Jail](#)

Listening to Freedom in Jail

[You can now listen to excerpts from *Freedom in Jail* \(in both English and Italian\) at this YouTube site.](#)

Many thanks Gruppo alle Fonti, the Istituto di Psicosintesi Firenze, and especially Lucia Bassignana, Paola Marinelli, and Susan J. Allen for their efforts in producing the audio files of *Freedom in Jail*.