

**Know What You Want**  
*Discover Your Will Potential*



© Catherine Ann Lombard  
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Psychosynthesis Coaching  
+49 (0)2562 7011 377  
[www.catherineannlombard.com](http://www.catherineannlombard.com)  
[LoveAndWill@live.com](mailto:LoveAndWill@live.com)

## Introduction

*“Since the outcome of successful willing is the satisfaction of one’s needs, we can see that the act of will is essentially joyous. And the realization of...being a self...gives a sense of freedom, of power of mastery which is profoundly joyous.” Roberto Assagioli*

Joy has become just another three letter word. Except for young children and heroes in Hollywood movies, joy is something we often find embarrassing. Joy escapes many of our lives as we struggle with our day-to-day work, obligations, worries, and loneliness. Many times we chase after false joys by overindulging in shopping, eating, sex, or alcohol. Other times we look to others to fill our emptiness. But the reality is that real joy—a feeling of creative spontaneity and elation, is within reach.

We were all born to be joyful. We lose joy when we lose touch with our true selves. The true self is the core person inside you that you were born to become in full splendor. Like a rose that buds and then slowly and fully opens, we too are meant to bloom into our full potential. But this is not an easy task! You are in touch with your Self when you sense all is right and safe and your energy is flowing. Most of us have been conditioned from birth to do exactly the opposite and ignore the inner wisdom that sometimes whispers, sometimes screams, telling us what is right and safe for us.

Learning to tap into that wisdom as an adult is a soul adventure. As Dante wrote, we may first have to enter “a dark wood” of sorrow and fear before we can find our way back to the Self. Such a journey starts with relearning how to listen to your body, feelings, and thoughts and bring awareness to what choices you make and why.

We always start with our stories. And we all have a unique and special story about who we are and why. Discovering joy means rediscovering ourselves and then grounding our stories in our present lives, in the here and now of our experience. Turning this afternoon’s workshop, I hope to introduce some techniques, particularly around the will, that might help you to think about your own personal journey and perhaps take some steps towards your true self and joy.

## The Choices We Make

*“Will is: dynamic – quick – immediate – determined – relentless. It inspires.”* Roberto Assagioli

How often have you had trouble deciding what to do in your life? Perhaps you’ve pondered over whether to change your job or move into a new apartment. Perhaps you have debated if you should ask someone for a date or accept one. Many times we become stuck and can’t seem to decide, even when one choice is clearly for our benefit. Other times we feel as if we have no choice at all and are a victim of circumstance.

Every choice or decision we make is what Roberto Assagioli calls “an act of will.” Even making no decision is a decision. Our will power is energy, the energy that drives our life forward. We can think of the will like the engine of a car (our life) and we are the ones driving the car. In order to move closer to joy, it is vital that we understand this will power and learn how to effectively use it in our lives.

Consider your own will. Do you feel pushed around by others? Do you concede to what someone else wants to do, burying your own needs and desires? Are you paralyzed by inertia? Do you distract easily from the task at hand? Do your feelings overwhelm you and suddenly you find yourself acting in a way that you don’t want? Or do you genuinely do what you wish, from the depth of your being?

The best way to discover your will is to use it. Will is energy and it is meant to be activated and spent. For example, try doing something right now that you don’t want to do. (Like finish reading this! HaHa!) Or postpone something that you would prefer to begin right now. Or try doing something extremely slowly—like washing the dishes or getting dressed. All these small activities exercise your will and bring awareness to your relationship to the engine of your life.

Assagioli wrote an entire book on the will and I will be sharing some of his ideas. He says that there are four aspects of the will—strong, skillful, good, and transpersonal (cosmic or God’s will), which we all have. Usually one aspect is more developed than the others and the idea is to make them equally balanced. He also states that any act of will includes a number of stages or steps. For some choices we make (like which flavor ice cream to eat!) these steps can come naturally and quickly. For others, we can become stuck along the way.

The first step is investigation. We peer into the ice cream display and examine all the different flavors. The second is deliberation. I like chocolate but maybe the passion fruit and mango might be nice for a change. Then we decide. Chocolate! And affirm. Yes, I really want the chocolate ice cream today. Then we make a plan of action. I will catch the attendant’s eye and tell her that I would like a chocolate ice cream, then I will pay for it, eat it, and enjoy every minute! Finally, we actually execute the decision. Ymmm. Delicious!

The more we understand these stages and work with the aspects of our will (that is, the better we are at driving this car called Life), the easier and freer we are to move in the direction we long for. And when we choose to improve our lives, move on, surrender something negative, and think of new possibilities, we are moving towards joy.

## Strong Will of Fire

Strong will is one of the four aspects of the will, the others being skillful, good, and transpersonal (cosmic or God's will). We all have these aspects of will, in various degrees. Will is energy and usually one aspect is more developed than the other. The idea is to make all the aspects equally balanced.

Strong will is not your ability to force your will onto others. This is the Victorian idea of strong will. The will is to *direct*, not impose. In fact, most people see strength as the *only* aspect of will. But when the will is only strong, it can actually cause failure and harm to yourself and others.

Strong will is really about fire. How much fire or drive does your will have to carry out a decision? Perhaps you can remember a time when your strong will surged forward. It might have been a crisis, when you felt that you had to say "No!" no matter what the consequences. Times when you felt there was no other choice in a matter and your determination seemed to propel you forward towards a desired goal.

This is strong will and it is an inner experience. Its opposite is when you may have felt too easy-going, just letting other people or circumstances decide things for you. Like a weary helmsman of a ship, you let the waves and wind batter your boat around. Instead of taking the steering wheel and keeping to the ship's course, you simply couldn't take the trouble to struggle with the storms and sea currents and, ultimately, arrive at your destination.

I have to admit my lack of strong will shows up whenever it comes to learning a new language. I have all kinds of excuses and am ingenious at creating things that I absolutely must do first. Like writing this and preparing for the workshop! Instead of focusing my strong will on learning Dutch or German, I seem to be very clever at using my skillful will to avoid it!

Like any physical muscle, the way to strengthen your will is to exercise it. Assagioli proposes a number of techniques. Ironically, you need some will to develop a will that is weak! To help with your determination, first imagine yourself as having a strong will. See yourself walking with a determined step and acting in every situation with focused attention and persistence. See yourself successfully resisting temptations to do otherwise. For inspiration, read a biography of someone you admire who has possessed great will.

Now stand up from your chair. Right now. Stand up. Now sit down. Stand up. Sit down. Stand up. Sit down. Feel ridiculous? This is one of Assagioli's "useless" exercises, deliberate acts to help train the will. Any easy, little task will do, the important thing is that you repeat it a number of times with precision, regularity and persistence for five to ten minutes everyday. Afterwards, write down how you felt and what you thought as you were doing it. For example, spend five minutes walking back and forth to your bookshelf and touching it. Move 100 matches or bits of paper from one place to another. Get up and down off your chair 30 times.

There are other practices you can do to strengthen your will. Get dressed calmly but rapidly. Remain serene while doing a tedious task. Control your impatience while stuck in traffic or when you feel that you are being unjustly treated. Resolutely stop working when you are tired. Lie down in the middle of the day for ten minutes when you have a million

things to do! All these small daily activities help to exercise and strengthen the will. But don't try to do them all at once. Pick one and stick to it and then after some time, change to another.

When the will is missing, our creative life energy is buried and we can fill ourselves instead with anguish, depression, resentment and confusion. Whenever we exercise and activate our will, we move closer to our purpose and life goals. We move closer to joy!

## **Skillful Will and Waiting for Change**

*“The will has a directive and regulatory function; it balances and...utilizes all the other activities and energies of the human being without repressing any of them.” Roberto Assagioli*

As I wrote in the last section, strong will is not about how well you can dominate others. It is about how much power or energy you have to drive your own life forward. Imagine your strong will as a horse. Horses are huge, strong beasts with tremendous power. But if you don't know how to ride a horse, or how to be in relationship with them, they will take advantage of your ignorance. They might gallop away with you hanging on for dear life, or they might just stand there and not take a single step, no matter how much you try to coax them.

If we think of our strong will as a horse, then we quickly see the great need to have skillful will. Without the skills necessary to ride a horse, we might never leave the meadow. Or worse! We might end up running around the meadow chasing the horse. Skillful will is, in fact, our ability to obtain what we want with the least amount of energy. We all know people who can ride horses almost magically, easing these huge, powerful animals right or left with just a miniscule pull of the reins. This how we want to move through our lives, skillfully, with minimal effort, going in the direction we desire.

Let's look at one example of how the strong will can actually work against you and the skillful will is more effective. I knew a headmistress of a high school in Romania named Olga who had two university degrees—one in mathematics and the other in engineering. She needed to support her son through university, and because her salary was too low to do this, she decided to leave her job and move to London. Despite living away from home, she was able to earn more money working as a nanny and also improve her English. Suddenly, after twenty years of running a high school she was taking care of three children, ironing, and cleaning house for someone else.

This change was difficult enough, but her new boss, the mother of the three children, was also challenging to work for. She did not trust Olga and was not skilled at giving instructions, even without their language barrier to cope with. The woman was not well-educated, yet acted as if Olga were even less so because of her weak English skills. Olga became despondent and depressed. Every night when she came home, she replayed in her head every annoying and unkind thing the boss had said to her. She spent hours lying in bed, unable to sleep, imagining entire conversations where she was telling that woman a thing or two!

Olga described a part of herself as Iron Woman. She was used to forcing her way through many of life's difficulties. But this time life was overwhelming, even for Iron Woman. Trying to survive in a new culture, without her family, so far from home, under these working conditions was breaking her.

I suggested that she disidentify from Iron Woman, who was very good at evoking strong will, and use a skillful will technique that might better serve her. When you pay mental and emotional attention to anything, you give it energy. The more energy this thought or person receives from you, the more it holds your interest, and the stronger it becomes. This is fine when it is a positive quality like courage or patience. But when it is negative and you try to combat it with strong will, it becomes more vivid and more negative leaving you more vulnerable to the situation.

I suggested that Olga, instead of directing her energy towards the negative events that happened during the day, use her skillful will to redirect her attention to something more positive. Something that was life affirming. We decided that whenever these thoughts entered her mind and started to go around and around, that she would think of her son, whom she loved dearly and for whom she was making sacrifices.

You can also use skillful will in the same way. Your new positive thought can be the simplest thing. Your child's smile that morning, the smell of toast at breakfast, the pattern of clouds and evening light on your way home. The important thing is that you deliberately withdraw your attention and energy from what Assagioli described as "psychic poisons" and focus it elsewhere, where it will do more good and give you more peace.

This sounds easier than it is. Try it when your mind is going around in circles. Try and redirect your thoughts to something positive that happened on the same day. How quickly those negative conversations and events jump back in! But every time you return to your positive thought, you are developing your skillful will.

When I saw Olga two months later, she had changed. Her eyes were brighter and she had gained some weight. She was more at peace with her choice to live and work in London. Her English had greatly improved. She was even able to relate better with her boss. Something between them had shifted. They had become more accustomed to one another and a trust had developed between them. All these things take time and sometimes we are in circumstances beyond our control that need to be experienced. Everything changes all the time. Sometimes it is a matter of skillfully holding onto the right attitude until it does.

In 1938, Assagioli was jailed by the fascists for his antiwar views. He wrote about how he was free to take one of many attitudes towards being in jail. He could become angry, feel like a scapegoat or martyr, look at it as an interesting experience, use it as a rest cure or a place for intense thinking over personal matters, or treat it as a spiritual retreat. He called this freedom to choose and the responsibility it brings "the ability to collaborate with the inevitable." This requires skillful as well as strong will. When we keep redirecting our thoughts and withdrawing attention from the negative aspects of our lives, we are choosing a positive, dynamic attitude of acceptance and are definitely moving towards joy.

## Goodwill Towards All

*“One of the principal causes of today’s disorders is the lack of love on the part of those who have will and the lack of will in those who are good and loving.”* Roberto Assagioli

During the holiday season, we often hear the words, “Peace and goodwill.” We are familiar with the idea of peace in the world—there are peace movements and peace marches, demands for peace not war, and a Nobel prize for peace. But what do we mean exactly when we say “goodwill”? Roberto Assagioli describes good will as one of the four aspects of will, the others being strong will, skillful will, and transpersonal will. We all have these aspects of will, in various degrees. How might we develop and strengthen our good will, at any time of the year?

Good will is the vital energy needed in all of our diverse relationships and it is close to our experience of love. We think of love mostly as an innate spontaneous feeling, yet compassion towards all creation can also be developed through willful choice. When we attempt to replace competition with cooperation, conflict with dialogue, and consider the welfare of others, then we are engaging our good will.

Good will is when we consciously direct our energy towards the highest good. Acts of will that are made with the heart, that are filled with compassion and warmth are all manifestations of good will. Compassion is not true compassion unless it is active, a definite synthesis of love and will. In fact, the Buddha of Compassion in Tibet is depicted as having a thousand eyes that see the pain in all corners of the universe, and a thousand arms to reach out and extend help to all those who are suffering. To be compassionate isn’t enough; we need *acts* of compassion.

There are small things that we can do everyday to develop our good will. While riding on a crowded bus or train, instead of becoming angry with the other passengers who are jostling us, we can first use our skillful will to determine why we are feeling enraged. Once we better understand ourselves, then we can exercise our good will and try and wish our fellow travelers a safe and timely journey. Another example is when we feel frustrated or anxious while waiting in a queue or for our supper. Once we figure out why (perhaps we are really stressed out about something else, or simply tired), then we can try to wish the person serving us loving kindness.

The key here is to focus on developing a will-to-understand—ourselves and others.. It means approaching every individual with sympathy, respect and wonder—as a “Thou.” We can do this because we all share the essential qualities of human nature, despite our different cultural, religious, and historical backgrounds.

Learning how best to say “yes”, “no”, or “not for now” is an essential part of achieving good will. And it is vital to balance our good will—too much can become overbearing, interfering, and may actually only be for our own glory. There is the story of the kind monkey who saw a fish in the water and rushed to rescue it from drowning by carrying it up into the branches of a tree. If we offer help in a self-centered way, it can prove disastrous for the person we think we are helping.

To love well and will well require a deep understanding of the human soul, especially one's own. The mystery of being human is revealed inside each of our stories and inner struggles, imperfections, foibles, and triumphs. We are constantly influencing others, whether we are conscious of doing so or not, and whether we want to or not. Everything hinges on our intentions, our intention of doing good. It is our will that chooses and wants the good. Empathizing with each individual we meet brings us closer to our own humanness and helps us to move towards joy.

## New Year's Resolutions and the Will

We are now nearly through January and you may want to reflect on any New Years Resolutions you might have made. I recently read an article about a study by Richard Wiseman, a psychologist at the University of Hertfordshire in England, who led a team that asked 700 people about their strategies for achieving New Year Resolutions. Their goals included common resolutions like losing weight, giving up smoking, gaining a qualification, and starting a better relationship.

Wiseman's findings showed that 22% people managed to achieve their goals. Five strategies seemed to make the difference. People who kept their resolutions tended to:

- (1) Divide their goal into smaller steps.
- (2) Reward themselves when they achieved one of these steps and consider lapses as just temporary setbacks.
- (3) Focus on the benefits of their success.
- (4) Share their goals with a friend.
- (5) Keep a diary of their progress.

People who planned a series of smaller goals had an average success rate of 35%, while those who followed all five of the strategies above had a 50% chance of success.

These findings correspond amazingly well with Roberto Assagioli's six stages of the act of will. The first step is setting our *intention* or *goal*. I will use an example from one of my own resolutions—I want to learn German. The second is *deliberation*. I then must weigh all the possibilities I have to learn German, their advantages and disadvantages. I might think that going to Berlin and living with a German family is a good way to learn the language, but on a practical level, it doesn't make much sense for me to do this right now. Breaking your goal into doable chunks (this corresponds to Number 1 above) is a way of deliberating how best to achieve your goal.

Eventually, I will *choose* one or more possibilities and *decide* to do them. I have decided to enroll in a weekly class. (Deciding on which one is a complete act of will in itself!) In addition, I have decided to exchange with a German speaker one hour of English for one hour of German lessons.

Next I *affirm* my decision (Number 4 above). I tell my husband and now I am even telling you! The 5th stage is making a plan of action (Number 1 again). This can be a key stage. As Wiseman says, "Many of the most successful techniques involved making a plan and helping yourself stick to it." So, I start by finding a German class in town and sign up for

it. Then I start to look for a German speaker interested in exchanging languages. I buy my German dictionary and I plan to spend 20 minutes a day studying. Notice that I did not set my goals too high. I might have said I would study 2 hours a day, but I know that I would quickly fail at this, so I start SMALL.

Finally, I actually *execute* the decision. I'm in class and meeting with a German friend and trying to study vocabulary on the train ride into Enschede. This stage corresponds to the Wiseman's "helping yourself stick to the plan". Execution of will requires me to use my skillful will, imagination, feelings, and impulses to constantly supervise my activities (Numbers 2, 3, and 5). I also have to be flexible and adopt my plan to any change in conditions and circumstances (for example, if my friend decides to stop meeting me).

Slowly, I begin to learn to speak German. I may not be fluent, but I am moving in the right direction and will eventually get there. By focusing on my small successes (asking for something at the supermarket, having a short chat with my neighbor, understanding an overheard conversation) I am able to enjoy the benefits of even my limited German (Number 3). In this way, by recharging the energy I need to continue towards my goal, I am always moving towards joy.



You have the wings of longing,  
You know the pull of hope,  
You feel the flowing of desire:  
So why not soar?

*Mechtilde of Magdeburg*

## Tuning into the Transpersonal Will

*“It is often the transpersonal Self which exercises its will and compels the personality to express beauty.” Roberto Assagioli*

Besides strong, skillful and good, another aspect of the will that Assagioli writes about is the transpersonal will, which touches on the spiritual dimension of the human being. Many people can lead a rich and useful life without this aspect of will. But others, who have had a direct experience of a transcendent reality, will recognize the transpersonal will operating in their lives. Their goal will be to use the other aspects of will—strong, skillful, and good—to tune into the transpersonal will, come into relationship with it, and use it to also act in the world.

We may find ourselves longing to tune into the transpersonal will when we feel a need to understand the meaning of our life. We might feel as if our life—despite our worldly success in work, family, and on a personal level—lacks meaning or value. Or we might be facing a sudden, unexpected crisis, like a death in the family, illness, or loss of job, that calls up this need. There is a medieval story about three stone cutters who were cutting granite for a new cathedral. When asked in turn, “What are you doing?” the first replied in an angry tone, “As you can see for yourself, I’m cutting stones.” The second answered, “I am earning a living for me and my family.” And the third said joyously, “I am building a great cathedral.” All were doing the exact same thing, but the first felt a sense of futility, the second a personal purpose in his work, and the third recognized a greater meaning and connection with a greater whole.

In this story, the personal will of the third stone cutter was aligned with his transpersonal will and that alignment allowed for joy and meaning to enter his life. Often we experience transpersonal will as a “pull” or “call” to something higher. Assagioli describes the transpersonal will as operating from the *superconscious* (as opposed to *subconscious*) level of the psyche. There is a feeling of vertical movement which we may feel captured by. Jung, in fact, had the following written above the door of his house in Kussnacht: “*Vocatus, sive non vocatus, Deus aderit.* God will be present, whether called or not.”

There are a number of techniques we can use to answer the call of the transpersonal Self and better align ourselves with the transpersonal will. Some of these include: meditation, prayer, quiet time, keeping a journal of our thoughts and actions and reflecting upon them in the evening, and using active visualizations to connect to higher qualities, like courage, patience, or forgiveness. Basically, we are using the other aspects of will to connect with the wise and loving person inside us who intuitively knows the right speech, the right thoughts, and the right action at the right time.

These techniques are commercially available and can, at times, be exploited for the sake of so-called “well-being.” Actually, they have a much higher purpose. In fact, when we consciously try to tune in with the transpersonal will, we are seeking to further expand our awareness and manifest that awareness as compassionate action in the world. In this way, we are brought ever closer to love, beauty, our authentic selves, and, ultimately, joy.

## **Suggested Reading**

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