



## Levels of Development: Week 1

### **Growth Is Real and Needed**

Monday, December 7, 2015

Dr. Clare Graves, whose research was foundational to the formation of Spiral Dynamics, writes, "What I am proposing is that the psychology of the mature human being is an unfolding, oscillating, spiraling process, marked by progressive subordination of older, lower-order behavior systems to newer, higher-order systems as [a human's] existential problems change." [1] Graves posited, in the words of Don Beck, that the "deeper patterns in the evolution of human consciousness . . . reflect different activation levels of our dynamic neurological equipment." [2]

I'll own that I am out of my league here, trying to explain neuroscience! But if you'll bear with me, I will give you a layman's summary of what I've learned about "our dynamic neurological equipment." I am fascinated by recent studies of the brain that support Graves' idea that the evolution and growth of the human brain affects our level of consciousness. We need every angle we can find to try to understand ourselves, and even what is happening in history, which often feels so hopeless.

Much of what I'll be sharing about brain research comes from Joseph Chilton Pearce and his book, *The Biology of Transcendence*. The study of neuroscience and brain development indicates that we are wired for transcendence, for the ever bigger picture, but it is all highly dependent on being exposed to living models and personal nurturance as we move from one stage to the next. Fowler and Kohlberg said the same thing: We all need living models. How important we are for one another! This is a good argument for some form of church community--to gather enlightened, transformed, loving people together so they rub off on one another. Beyond models, we also need

nurturing: mothering and fathering, loving, and partnering at the critical stages of brain development, which are almost all in the first twenty-five years of life.

Throughout childhood and adolescence, the individual regions of the brain and the pathways connecting them are still under development. Between the ages of fifteen and the early twenties, excess gray matter and unused neural pathways are pruned to make the brain more efficient. A myelin sheath--like electrical insulation--forms around a nerve to increase the speed of electrical communication between neurons that are being used. In this way, the brain's regions are stabilized and prior brain developments become permanent. It appears that the pruning occurs starting at the back of the brain, moving forward. The prefrontal cortex is the last section to undergo myelination. The prefrontal cortex helps you inhibit impulses, make decisions, make plans, think long-term, achieve goals, and evaluate rewards and risks. Research shows that our human brain is not fully developed until around age twenty-five.

Teens are much more sensitive to peer approval than they were as children or will be as adults. We often see this in teenagers as a desire to do something wonderful, to be someone great, to connect with something momentous. It's actually transcendence they are searching for. But because there aren't living models around them of saints, of mystics, of people who've got the big picture, they settle for rock stars, movie stars, or professional athletes. That's the only greatness offered to them in a secular culture. They will try to become rich or famous, which looks like greatness, and yet it is still inside what I call the false or small self. It is not yet the fully connected self, the Great Self, the God Self.

If, between the ages of fifteen and twenty-five, the young person has both models and enough nurturance (and maybe even an experience of initiation), the visionary, idealistic worldview takes off for the rest of his or her life. That's why such a person is never satisfied and keeps searching for more transcendence, yearning for closer connection with God, with others, and with the universe. I hope you know such a person. They are the prime movers for all of us.

If during this early period there are no strong models or wisdom elders, the prefrontal cortex does not keep the neural pathways for transcendence active and accessible. The young person becomes just the opposite: cynical and negative, with a deep, cosmic disappointment that this greatness will not happen to them. "I'm not part of something momentous," he or she concludes. "I'm just dumb old me." So to give oneself significance they may compete on a music or dance show or even join ISIS--anything big and noisy. Pearce says this is what we see in many Western teenagers today, because we haven't offered them anything greater or deeper--or within.

Pearce suggests many young people even revert to earlier levels of brain development because their disappointment is so great. Some revert to the reptilian brain where they only react to life in terms of freeze, fight, or flight. That type of person divides the world into simplistic good guys and bad

guys. We call this dualistic thinking, or "all or nothing thinking." There is no ability to subtly read the soul. This is the character of many politicians, preachers, and people attracted to a kind of religion that affirms their good buy/bad guy worldview and takes away their inner anxiety.

Hopefully life and God bring new opportunities--through experiences of great suffering and great love--to "rewire" our brains even if we have not experienced the nurturing and guidance we needed at key stages.

## Gateway to Silence

I am open to change.

## References:

[1] Clare Graves, as quoted by Jessica Roemischer, "The Never-Ending Upward Quest," *What Is Enlightenment?*, Fall/Winter 2002, [www.mcs-international.org/downloads/046\\_spiraldynamics\\_wie.pdf](http://www.mcs-international.org/downloads/046_spiraldynamics_wie.pdf), 6.

[2] Don Beck in an interview with Jessica Roemischer, "The Never-Ending Upward Quest," 8.

Drawn from Joseph Chilton Pearce, *The Biology of Transcendence: A Blueprint of the Human Spirit* (Park Street Press: 2004).

Adapted from Richard Rohr, *True Self/False Self* (Franciscan Media: 2003), disc 3.

## The Evolving Brain

Tuesday, December 8, 2015

According to Joseph Chilton Pearce, there are five "brains," each building upon the other. Pearce writes: "at each stage of development each new system is dependent upon the full function of the system that developmentally preceded it." [1] Both Pearce and Ken Wilber say that a smaller and smaller portion of the human population makes it to each higher level of brain development.

At the bottom of the pyramid is the old reptilian brain. This is probably what Freud would have called the Id. It's the survival instinct and the reproductive urge on a sensory-motor level.

Above that is the old mammalian brain, the limbic system, which controls basic emotions of fear, pleasure, and anger. It feeds our basic emotional needs of hunger, sex, power, control, and nurturing. What Freud calls the Ego begins here. This feeling and remembering brain holds the pain body that goes deep and can even "possess" us for decades after we've been hurt. This brain is necessary because it gives us the emotional intelligence by which we read the meanings and social cues of daily interactions. It can be either a helpful emotional program or a wounded and angry one. It largely resides in our unconscious, only brought to the surface by either conflict or honest insight.

Next is the new mammalian brain or the neo-cortex. This too contributes to our egoic self. The neo-cortex has two hemispheres--the left brain and the right brain. The left or logical brain focuses on

analytical, sequential, and logical thinking. The left brain deals with old, familiar, settled material that you have made logical and orderly. If you are primarily left-brained, you can become very logical but also very rigid and, as you get older, respond from the few neural grooves you've used in repetitive ways. You may not be able to understand people who don't think exactly like you do. Without collaboration with the right brain, there is not much capacity for empathy or solidarity, much less intimacy with others.

The right or creative brain is nonverbal and intuitive, using images rather than words to find and express meaning. It is the part of the brain that can deal with new material in new ways. Both hemispheres are important and both need education and development by mentoring and modeling. The right brain, however, has far more connections to the next level of the brain, the prefrontal lobes. That's why right-brained people can often be more imaginative and can adjust better to change. This may also be an aspect of spiritual intelligence.

The left brain apparently does not have many neural connections to the two remaining "higher" brains. So you normally need some encounter with mystery, paradox, non-rational truth or beauty, and inconsistency itself in order to develop your right/creative brain, and therefore the next two brains. This is why we grow through conflict and not through any easy order or the maintaining of comfort. I believe this is what Jesus means when he shockingly says, "I have come not to bring peace, but the sword" (Matthew 10:34). Most of Jesus' core teaching *should* put you in conflict with business as usual and with what you took for granted! The Gospel creates necessary conflicts that grow people up. What a shame that we made it into a simplistic answer book rather than read its deep transformative message.

Around age 15, a great brain surge begins in the prefrontal lobes. This is what I think Freud would have called the Superego. Historically, this was the age for initiation to assure the small ego would be given a great challenge at this time. Helicopter parents are of no help here. This developmental process integrates all the lower brains and aims you outward and upward. Myelination stabilizes all the neurons that have been used up to now. But all the synapses that have not been used are actually pruned away. What a loss to nature and the world! If there's no one loving our young people, believing in them, challenging them, and modeling for them the next stage, they fail to develop the potential of the prefrontal lobes, which connects them to the fifth brain. They inevitably become angry, sullen, and cynical.

The fifth brain is located in the heart--literally, the muscular organ that circulates our life-blood. All of the poetry and songs about the heart "knowing" were not just idle chatter; we now have scientific validation that the heart shares brain-like functions. The connection of the prefrontal lobes to the heart has been demonstrated electromagnetically and at the neural and hormonal levels too. [2]

The simplest indicator that someone is living at all of the brain's levels is that they are not violent in thought, word, or action. They do not need to hurt or humiliate the other or themselves. It doesn't mean that they cannot say hard things, but it doesn't come from a place of malice or a desire to cause pain. Quite frankly, they can "understand" the human soul. They are humans themselves!

#### **References:**

[1] Joseph Chilton Pearce, *The Biology of Transcendence: A Blueprint of the Human Spirit* (Park Street Press: 2004), 50.

[2] Drawn from Doc Childre and Howard Martin, *The HeartMath Solution: The Institute of Heart- Math's Revolutionary Program for Engaging the Power of the Heart's Intelligence* (HarperCollins: 1999), 28-34.

## **The Process of Divinization**

Wednesday, December 9, 2015

Joseph Chilton Pearce's book, *The Biology of Transcendence*, points to both culture and the cultural entrapment of Christianity as blockages to potential growth toward transcendence. Each stage of brain development provides a biological window to connect with higher levels. But if the child or teenager is threatened or shamed, these possibilities for higher connection die off and the connections to the more primitive, reflexive, reptilian brain--which is hardwired for defense and survival--are strengthened. People stop developing or they even regress. Unfortunately, our culture's approach to childrearing and even the Church's teaching style have focused on shaming, punishing, and threatening, just the opposite of what Jesus modeled. Pearce points out that Jesus and other great spiritual teachers throughout history intended to awaken us to "the illusion of culture and the reality of our transcendent nature." [1]

Indeed, Christianity has not emphasized our inherent transcendent nature for at least the last five hundred years. We just wanted to flee earth and get to heaven! Christianity allowed itself to be co-opted by cultures for the purpose of social control and order. As Todd Wynward, a longtime friend in New Mexico and a former intern of the CAC, writes in his book *Rewilding the Way*, "We are the people God's been waiting for. Why is this so hard for modern Christians to believe and embrace? Because God's amazing expectations, and our divine potential, have been hijacked by empire-based Christendom and subverted by the framing stories of dominant culture. . . . Your native, indigenous character as a child of God has been distorted. . . ." [2]

It has not always been this way. The early church fathers and mothers were quite clear about God's goal for humanity. Augustine (354-430) described the *mysterion*, the mystery, in one phrase: "For even as Christ became a human being, so now human beings could become like Christ." It is that simple. What Christ put together, we too have the opportunity to put together. In the second century, Irenaeus said that Jesus became what we are in order to make us what he himself is. That's daring language. We lost the courage to talk that way in later centuries. Christianity became much more juridical and rational, much more transactional than transformational.

The early church understood the mystery of holiness as a true process of *theosis*, which is the Greek word for *divinization* (2 Peter 1:4). Gregory of Nazianzen (c. 306-391) said, "Let us seek to be like Christ, because Christ also became like us: to become gods through him since he himself, through us, became a man. He took the worst upon himself to make us a gift of the best." This teaching lasted probably into the 14th century to some degree, but largely among the mystics, and only among those who prayed from within.

Dame Julian of Norwich (c. 1342-1416) has this deep sense of the organic union between the soul and God. Hers is still an optimistic worldview. In Chapter 54 of *Revelations of Divine Love*, Julian writes, "So greatly ought we to rejoice that God dwells within us, and more greatly ought we to rejoice that our soul dwells in God. . . . In fact I saw no difference between God and my substance. [Wow!] But as it were we were all one. And still my understanding accepted that our substance is in God." That is to say, God is God, and our substance is a creature in that God. This is why she's still considered orthodox. Julian is fascinated with that absolute unity, and yet she maintains the I-Thou relationship of the two. [3] *We are one and not two, and yet we are two and not one!* Think about that.

Tomorrow we will begin to delve into Spiral Dynamics, a developmental schema integrating spirituality and the sciences of biology, psychology, and sociology. Like Julian of Norwich, it is very optimistic. Rather than blocking the evolution of consciousness as much of Christianity seems to have done in the last few centuries, Spiral Dynamics is acknowledging that as humans adapt to changing conditions, new intelligences are awakened that in turn shape our future. As Wynward puts it, "divinely revolutionized humans are to be conspirators with God's dream of heaven on earth." [4] Ken Wilber says that only healthy religion is prepared to operate "as a conveyor belt" moving us all the way to the higher stages of consciousness. Mere education cannot do that.

#### **References:**

- [1] Joseph Chilton Pearce, *The Biology of Transcendence: A Blueprint of the Human Spirit* (Park Street Press: 2004), 126-127.
- [2] Todd Wynward, *Rewilding the Way: Break Free to Follow an Untamed God* (Herald Press: 2015), 26.
- [3] Adapted from Richard Rohr, *True Self/False Self* (Franciscan Media: 2003), disc 3, [CD](#).
- [4] Wynward, *Rewilding the Way*, 25.

## **Growing into Union**

Thursday, December 10, 2015

(Thomas Merton Day)

So many of our problems can be resolved if we understand that people are at different levels of emotional, mental, and spiritual maturity. I am told that United States diplomats are given an intense course in Spiral Dynamics before they are sent to other countries because they need to have some empathy for the levels of development they are likely to find there. I remember how

horrifying it was for me and a group of missionaries overseas, standing outside a couple's home when I realized that our presence was keeping the man from beating his wife inside. We knew as soon as we walked away he'd continue, and there was little we could do to change the whole culture.

When I later asked the woman, "Why do you let your husband do that?"

She replied, "Because I was bad, Father."

"Who decided you were bad?"

"He did, Father."

I know it blows your mind, but this is early stage consciousness, which is all about power and staying at your proper level. Whoever wields the power is considered to be right. In many if not most cultures, men have had all the power and women submitted to this, because that's the way patriarchal systems function.

But who are we to judge? It was only a little more than a hundred years ago that people in the United States, people who called themselves Christian (including Jesuits on the East coast), not only tolerated slavery, but had slaves. Even though most Americans have moved beyond considering humans as property, we still have a long way to go in terms of true racial and gender equality. A significant number of Americans are still at the early Purple and Red levels, which we will explore next week. Spiral Dynamics risks appearing to be politically incorrect, but without anger or violence.

I am offering you these levels of development as a tool for understanding yourself, others, and history; but please know that it does not come close to describing the complexity and the subtlety of the human person or the spiritual journey. Also recognize that the ego wants to decide its level, and it's very likely to pick a high one--which is ironic, because at the highest levels of development, the ego is less and less interested in categorizing things up and down. It is in many ways artificial and even unhealthy to talk about *higher and lower* levels because this will appeal to the small self and lead to assessing ourselves in ways that are fundamentally untrue. Yet, we do need to understand development so we can see where the trajectory of growth is heading--toward union with God, others, creation, and our own mind, heart and body. Otherwise we have no criteria by which to discern maturity from sickness. Without this awareness, many unhealthy people have led both churches and countries. This is the danger and also the need for a developmental theory.

It is also important to distinguish between *stages* and states. You can have a momentary *state* of unitive or high level consciousness, where you experience your union with God, with other humans, and with animals, the sun, the moon, and the stars. But a momentary state doesn't mean you've practiced it and changed your hardwiring so that it has become a lasting stage. A momentary state has to be practiced for years before it can become a genuine new *stage of*

*consciousness*. And still it's up to God, grace, time, love, and suffering to nudge you forward and to keep you there. Even then, at times--for example, when we're hungry, angry, lonely, tired (H.A.L.T.)--we all backslide. Knowing this will help you understand and forgive yourself and others.

**Reference:**

Adapted from Richard Rohr, *In the Beginning . . . Six hours with Rob Bell and Richard Rohr on Reclaiming the Original Christian Narrative* (Center for Action and Contemplation: 2014), disc 2, [CD](#), [MP3 download](#).

## Spiral Dynamics

Friday, December 11, 2015

Next week we will look more closely at each level, but for now I'd like to give you an overview of the entire spiral of human development. This model was popularly introduced by Don Beck and has been adopted by many others, including Ken Wilber. Each level, which describes both individuals and societies, is represented by a color.

The early levels of development are the most dualistic and egocentric.

### FIRST TIER--SUBSISTENCE LEVELS

Egocentric Early Levels:

- 1) Beige: Instinctive/Survivalistic (0.1% of adults in the world)
- 2) Purple: Magical/Animistic (10% of adults)
- 3) Red: Impulsive/Egocentric (20% of adults)
- 4) Blue: Purposeful/Authoritarian (40% of adults)

At this point, some minor death of egocentricity is required in order to move forward.

Sociocentric Middle Levels:

- 5) Orange: Achievist/Strategic (30% of world population; 50% of people in power)
- 6) Green: Communitarian/Egalitarian (10% of world population; 20% in developed countries; 15% of people in power)

Many of the people who reach the Green level stop here, believing they've made it to the top. Up to now each higher level has been contemptuous of the levels below, reacting most strongly against the level they most recently left. What Ken Wilber calls "Boomeritis" often occurs at the Green level. It is a combination of arrogance and individualism which will not finally let go of the ego's



separateness and superiority. A major death of the ego must be undergone in order to move forward to the Second Tier of development. This cannot be engineered by the ego, but is always initiated by Reality/God/Circumstances. This is the necessary "Dark Night of the Soul" which most will not allow.

## SECOND TIER--BEING LEVELS

Wisdom or Non-Dual Consciousness:

7) Yellow: Integrative

8) Turquoise: Holistic

(Less than 2% of the world population and less than 1% of those in power are at the level of second tier consciousness.)

Only at the Wisdom levels of consciousness can we have the freedom and ability to include the value of previous stages and not need to hate or reject any of them. There is a cosmic humility and a "rediscovery of hierarchy" in the second tier, whereby you are fully open to people still growing up and the possibility that there are people far beyond where you are now. You are now fully free to love, believe, and hope in everything.

### **Reference:**

Adapted from Richard Rohr, *In the Beginning . . . Six hours with Rob Bell and Richard Rohr on Reclaiming the Original Christian Narrative* (Center for Action and Contemplation: 2014), disc 2, [CD](#), [MP3 download](#).

## **Summary**

Sunday, December 6-Saturday, December 12, 2015

Learning about levels of development can give us understanding and compassion for ourselves and for others. It can also give us hope, especially during the dark times when things seem to be falling apart, personally or globally. ([Sunday](#))

We need nurturing: mothering and fathering, loving, and partnering at the critical stages of brain development, which are almost all in the first twenty-five years of life. ([Monday](#))

The simplest indicator that someone is living at all of the brain's levels is that they are not violent in thought, word, or action. ([Tuesday](#))

"Let us seek to be like Christ, because Christ also became like us: to become gods through him since he himself, through us, became a man. He took the worst upon himself to make us a gift of the best." --Gregory of Nazianzen ([Wednesday](#))

We do need to understand development so we can see where the trajectory of growth is heading-- toward union with God, others, creation, and our own mind, heart and body. ([Thursday](#))

At the Wisdom levels, there is a cosmic humility and a "rediscovery of hierarchy" whereby you are fully open to people still growing up and the possibility that there are people far beyond where you are now. ([Friday](#))

## **Practice**

### **Heartful Decision-Making**

When you are feeling anxious or stressed, try these simple steps, adapted from HeartMath's "Freeze-Frame" technique, to help you connect with your heart's intuitive wisdom. Set aside five to ten minutes when you can be alone in a quiet place. Choose a posture that is comfortable, perhaps sitting or lying down, and close your eyes.

Recall the stressful situation and "freeze-frame" the thoughts, feelings, and sensations that arise. Observe where and how the stress appears in your mind and body.

Shift your focus from your anxiety to your physical heart area. Imagine your heart pumping each breath through your body. Relax into your breathing and feel your heart warm. Hold your attention here for about ten seconds.

Now remember a happy time or picture someone you love. Feel the sensation that comes from such joy and love. Send that feeling to your whole being.

Ask your heart, "What would be an effective response to this stressful situation that would help reduce future stress?"

Listen to what your heart says. Visualize yourself taking this action and feeling peaceful. Say to yourself, "I am letting go of tension. Peace is within me."

When you are ready, open your eyes. You might want to journal about this experience so you can return to these insights later and act upon them.

### **Reference:**

Adapted from Doc Childre and Howard Martin, *The HeartMath Solution: The Institute of HeartMath's Revolutionary Program for Engaging the Power of the Heart's Intelligence* (HarperCollins: 1999), 67.