

Integral Life Practice: All the World's a Stage

(Part 3 of a 5-part series) A service celebrated at the Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Grand Traverse on 24 February 2008 Chip Roush

HOMILY

"integral life practice" How many of you have watched at least part of the presidential candidates' debates? How many found yourself disagreeing with everything one of them said? How many agreed with at least something from both or all of the debaters?

Philosopher Ken Wilber begins with the assumption that nobody is 100% wrong. Every philosopher, every scientist, every theologian must have understood *something* about our world correctly. Wilber then maps our human understanding showing where there is significant agreement among all the various experts, and looks for patterns and trends in that knowledge.

The map, thus constructed, demonstrates how the spirit of evolution acts in similar ways, over and over, from the subatomic level to the microscopic, and from the macroscopic to the galactic.

Several patterns do emerge, that help us understand how the universe has evolved thus far, and where it might be headed in the future. There are five significant patterns, or five elements of the Wilber's "integral map." These are quadrants, lines, levels, states and types. We'll focus on levels, or stages, in a few minutes; allow me to recap the others, first.

Quadrants are a crystallization of the insight that every event or thing or organism in the universe has both internal and external aspects, and both singular and plural aspects. Thus, everything can be examined from four viewpoints: the singular internal, singular external, plural internal and plural external. "Internal" and "external" could also be described as "subjective" and "objective;" "single" and "plural" are also "individual" and "group."

For example, if I am drumming at a "spirit in the bone" session, one of the embodied practices we engage on the first and third Tuesday evenings, we could look at my drumming from all four vantage points. The interior individual would be my own subjective experience: my thoughts and my feelings while I am drumming. The exterior individual are the objective facts that pertain to me, like my heart rate and body temperature, or an EEG showing my brainwaves, and how they change as I drum. The interior plural would be the feel of the group, how "connected" they feel together, how well they "catch the groove" as they share their music-making. Finally, the exterior collective could include measurements of the temperature of the room, the volume and tempo of the drumming, and other objective facts about the whole-group phenomenon.

All four of these quadrants are valid and important; all four must be taken into consideration by any theory claiming to be complete.

If we wish to address the epidemic of HIV/AIDS in Africa, for example, we must include the psychological and spiritual needs of the afflicted; their physical symptoms; their cultural context, how their society treats them; and their objective systems: the availability of food and medicine, and the infrastructure to deliver them. Any specific human may concentrate her or his efforts in one of those areas, but unless we are dealing with all four, our efforts are doomed to failure.

By keeping in mind all four quadrants in every decision, we are more likely to use all the resources we possess, and thus more likely to succeed in our endeavors.

The second element in Wilber's maps are "lines of development." This is the understanding that there are different tracks of development for different abilities. Moral understanding is different from intellectual intelligence, which is different from aesthetics which differs from kinesthetic abilities like sports and dance. Being very good at one thing does *not* imply that we will be good at some other thing. This explains the existence of evil geniuses: such people are highly developed, intellectually, but not well-developed at all, in their moral understanding.

We'll get to the third element, stages, soon.

The fourth element is “states,” meaning “states of consciousness.” These involve concepts like “awake,” “asleep,” “deep asleep” and “altered states” like you may experience from drugs or alcohol, or fasting, or meditating, or exercise.

Finally, the fifth element is “types.” The spectrum of gender, including male and female and transgendered people, is a type. So is the spectrum of “introvert” to “extravert;” or the nine personality types of the enneagram.

All of these elements are things which exist in our experience, which can help us if we are more aware of them.

FIRST READING Grace Butcher was born in Rochester, New York, in 1934. She made her living as a poet and English professor, but her real loves have been running, and racing motorcycles. She wrote “Athlete Growing Old” over twenty years ago.

The caution is creeping in: the step is hesitant
from years of pain; a soft grunt bends the body over,
and straightens it. The skin loosens; everything moves
nearer the ground.
To overcome the softening,
the yearning toward warmth, she exercises,
makes her muscles hard,
runs in the snow,
asks herself, when she is afraid, “What would you do now if
you were *not* afraid?”
She listens for the answer
and tries to be
like that person who speaks, who lives just outside
all her boundaries
and constantly calls her
to come over, come over.

SECOND READING Oliver Wendell Holmes, Sr., was born in 1809, in Cambridge, Massachusetts. A physician by trade, he achieved fame as a writer. A “chambered nautilus” is a mollusk, a sea creature which builds and lives in a spiraling shell.

“The Chambered Nautilus”

This is the ship of pearl, which, poets feign, Sail the unshadowed main,-- The venturous bark that flings
On the sweet summer wind its purpled wings In gulfs enchanted, where the Siren sings, And coral reefs
lie bare, Where the cold sea-maids rise to sun their streaming hair.

Its webs of living gauze no more unfurl; Wrecked is the ship of pearl! And every chambered cell, Where
its dim dreaming life was wont to dwell, As the frail tenant shaped his growing shell, Before thee lies
revealed,-- Its irised ceiling rent, its sunless crypt unsealed!

Year after year beheld the silent toil That spread his lustrous coil; Still, as the spiral grew, He left the past
year's dwelling for the new, Stole with soft step its shining archway through, Built up its idle door,
Stretched in his last-found home, and knew the old no more.

Thanks for the heavenly message brought by thee, Child of the wandering sea, Cast from her lap, forlorn!
From thy dead lips a clearer note is born Than ever Triton blew from wreathed horn; While on mine ear it
rings, Through the deep caves of thought I hear a voice that sings:--

Build thee more stately mansions, O my soul, As the swift seasons roll! Leave thy low-vaulted past! Let
each new temple, nobler than the last, Shut thee from heaven with a dome more vast, Till thou at length
art free, Leaving thine outgrown shell by life's unresting sea!

HOMILY

“all the world’s a stage” How many of you can recall how it felt to first fall in love? How many were incensed at the time if someone called it a mere “crush” or “puppy love”? How many then later named your child or some other young person’s first love using words like “crush” and “puppy”?

We humans go through the same basic stages of development. This is intuitively sensed, and it has been born out in hundreds and thousands of scientific studies. Like the nautilus, in our second reading, we really do move into more stately mansions—our understanding gets broader and deeper—as we grow and develop through life.

Infants, of course, don’t have a lot of understanding yet. It is a milestone in their young lives when they determine that part of the world is not them. Oversimplifying mightily, we get toddlers and the “me do!” phase, and four million and seven questions, each requiring a factual and concrete answer; then some portion of the teenager experience questions virtually all of those answers; and as young adults, we test some hypotheses and accept some answers and begin to construct a flexible but sturdy structure of understanding. Most of us reach a plateau there, and spend our energy raising a family or pursuing a career or both, then we experience another period of intense spiritual growth in mid-life and we may continue to grow and adapt, and still be learning and deepening right up until the moment we die.

Now, not everyone is on that time schedule. There are at least a few people who never leave the “me do it” phase. I said that most teenagers challenge the worldview of their parents; that may be true, to some extent, but many people do not challenge it very much, or don’t challenge their received worldview until much later in life. There is no set time table or schedule for these stages, and we don’t all of us end up at the far end of the line, but we all follow the same set of tracks. This is why the law differs for young people, and for people with mental challenges. They really do not understand things in the same ways that well-developed, mature adults do. Teen-aged brains are swamped by different chemicals. They are quite literally out of their minds, at least part of the time.

Fortunately, most of us grow out of that phase, and the chemicals die down a bit, and we are able eventually to think more clearly. It doesn’t mean that teenagers are wrong, it doesn’t mean that our first crushes were not important experiences, it just means that there is always a context, that our understanding can always widen and deepen. Virtually all of us in this room understand things differently now, than we did ten years ago. And ten years from now, we’ll be wiser yet.

We almost used a picture of nesting Russian dolls on the cover of the order of worship, to demonstrate this concept of growth and development. It’s like the little eleven-year-old girl that we heard about in the Story for All Ages (*Eleven*, by Sandra Cisneros). She was eleven, but also ten and nine and eight and so on.

Well, I am forty-four and forty-three and forty-two and so on. I still have moments when I feel like I am three, and I just want to curl up and cry. And I have moments when I am sixteen, and I want to shout from the mountaintops how thrilling it is to be alive. All of that is still available to us, or is still causing trouble in us, depending on the situation. But our overall psychological “center of gravity,” the average of our daily interactions and responses tends to keep going up, becoming more wise and more understanding.

All of this growth and development occurs in countries and cultures, just like it does in our individual human cousins.

There are many ways of talking about this growth. Some researchers use three very broad categories; some use as many as twelve much-more-specific stages. Ken Wilber often uses the system developed by Don Beck, called “Spiral Dynamics.” Spiral Dynamics uses colors to describe each stage, from beige through purple, red, blue, orange, green, and beyond.

Beige is the basic level of self preservation; it is barely a cultural understanding at all, because it is really focused on simply keeping the individual alive. This was seen primarily as far back as 100,000 BCE.

Purple might be called “tribalistic”—where we all do what the leader of the tribe says to do, and our identity is almost totally defined by the tribe. This flourished from 50,000 BCE, forward. There are still some tribes in the deepest forests on our planet that might be considered purple.

In the Red stage, people identify as selves different from the group, and the will to power becomes dominant. Groups and cultures still form, based on hierarchies of physical power. This was first demonstrated about 7000 BCE.

The only thing that might rein in that much power is a “higher power” so the next stage, Blue, is all about obedience to a god or deity. Blue societies first developed about 3000 BCE.

Orange is the “scientific” stage, that seeks autonomy and objective understanding. Capitalism and other economic theories come into play, as well. Orange understanding began around the year 1000 of our common era.

The Green stage is communitarian and egalitarian. Coming into our human consciousness around 1850 CE, approximately 150 years ago, Green thinking believes that values are relative, that multiple cultural understandings are valid.

So, to mix our metaphorical colors a bit, Red State voters who are religiously conservative would probably be classified as “blue” in spiral dynamics. And Red State voters who are economically conservative are “orange” in spiral dynamics. Blue state voters, liberals, are mostly “green” in spiral dynamics. Fundamentalists of all stripes are blue; and warlords and violent leaders of militias are probably red.

None of these understandings or stages are “wrong,” in and of themselves. They are all important and useful, in their own ways. Every person has inherent worth and dignity, no matter what their level of understanding. And some of our understandings can make it more difficult, or easier, to thrive in different circumstances. In a country at war, with violence erupting all around you, sitting down to discuss the enemies’ different viewpoint will probably not help. Nor will scientific research or the stock market help to curb the war.

This is like the Prime Directive, in the TV show, *Star Trek*. The space-going heroes were not allowed to mess with the cultures on the various planets they visited. They knew that their advanced technology, and their advanced political and psychological understandings would mess with the native cultures they encountered.

Orange science would be swamped by Red violence; Green relativism is considered a threat to Blue obedience; Each may be appropriate in its own context, but they are speaking fundamentally different languages.

Again, these are theories, but they are well-supported theories. Like the theory of evolution of life on this planet, these theories of individual and cultural evolution have been observed in hundreds of studies. Some of the details may be in question, but the overall picture, that we and our societies are evolving in similar, predictable ways, is widely accepted.

So, what does this all mean? First of all, we are all born at square one. Each baby born is beige, and has to learn and grow through purple and red and blue and so on. This means that there will always be more people at blue and orange than there will be at green. We cannot expect that billions of people at blue or orange will suddenly “see the light” and pop into a higher understanding. And even if they did, their kids would still be born beige. So we have to facilitate that process: we must support people in their current understanding, keep them alive and well and as peaceful as possible, within their framework, and build better bridges from stage to stage.

Both for ourselves, and for each other, we have to be like the person in our first reading, who “tries to be like that person who speaks, who lives just outside all her boundaries and constantly calls her to come over, come over”

Fortunately, this is occurring. The force of evolution continues to work and the overall center of gravity of our world is rising. I said earlier that the Green wave of consciousness debuted on our planet around 1850. Well, at that time, the center of gravity of the whole world was probably somewhere in blue, in deity-centered obedience, although a growing minority were orange scientists and economists. By now, our global center of gravity is orange, and there are a significant number of green thinkers. We are always born beige, but the world we’re born into keeps evolving, with better and quicker ways to educate us through red and blue and orange and green and beyond.

Did I say beyond? There are indeed colors beyond green. Like the cartoon on your order of worship, “I was wondering when you’d notice there are a lot more steps.”

All of the colors we’ve talked about so far—beige, purple, red, blue, orange and green— are called “first-tier” stages. That is because the next color starts the “second tier.” Yellow and turquoise and coral are second-tier colors. The reason they are called “second-tier” is because a significant change occurs, between green and yellow.

All of the first-tier understandings believe that their viewpoint is the only correct one. Red thinks that everyone is red; blue thinks everyone ought to be blue; even green, in its relativism, thinks that everyone ought to be relativistic.

Second-tier colors understand that we need all of the colors. Each stage of development is required for our world to thrive. Quoting Wilber, “unlike all first-tier waves (which imagine their values are the only correct values), second tier has an understanding of the crucial if relative importance of all previous values—including red, blue, orange, and green. Orange thinks green is mindless; green despises orange; blue thinks both of them are going to burn in hell forever. Yellow, on the other hand, finds all of them necessary and acceptable, as long as none of them gets the upper hand and starts repressing the others.”

When asked about the Iraq War, Wilber had this to say: “the problem with this discussion at large is that it is entirely first-tier. Blue says bomb the hell out of the evil ones; orange says, okay, but hurry, because it’s hurting the stock market; green says, no way, let’s be loving. First tier has such a hard time seeing big pictures, so it moves around within the partial value structures that define it. This...discussion...is just a big first-tier food fight.”

He goes on to say that America is allowed to despise Iraq, but it should not be allowed to invade Iraq. On the other hand, Saddam Hussein should not be allowed to torture and kill the Iraqis or the Kurds or whomever else he attacked.

In a perfect world, there would be a worldwide body to prevent such things. Every human could believe or think what they wanted, and every culture could have its own belief system, as long as nobody, individual or government, acted to force others to behave or think like them. And, maybe, as our human consciousness continues to evolve, someday enough people will be yellow or turquoise, and such a utopia will exist.

Without worrying too much, about whether such a second-tier system might look like, our task, here and now, is to support people at whatever level they are, and to build better bridges at every level, up to the next one.

The Persian poet Rumi wrote, “be a lamp, or a lifeboat, or a ladder.” By living lives of peace and joy, we show it can be done, and we act as beacons to others, who may follow our example. That’s being a lamp. We can be a lifeboat by preserving life at every level, supporting peoples’ rights to believe what they do, and ensuring that they have food and shelter and medicine, etc. And we can be ladders, by creating better ways to get ourselves and others up to the next level of consciousness, so we continue our human evolution.

So may we be.