

## ***SPIRAL DYNAMICS INTEGRAL AND THE THEORY OF LIVING HUMAN SYSTEMS, PART 2***\_\_\_\_\_

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In the first part of this series, I compared and contrasted Spiral Dynamics Integral (SDI) (Beck and Cowan, 1996, Wilber 2009) and the Theory of Living Human Systems (TLHS) (Agazarian, 1997) with a particular focus on what SDI calls first tier value systems. In this article I would like to focus on second tier value systems and the relevance of this model for SCT practitioners.

There are a number of similarities in the theories. Both theories inquire into the development of human systems from simple to complex and seek to understand the driving and restraining forces involved in this process. Both theories also understand that as human systems become more complex they contain paradoxical truths and hold deeper levels of the existential conflicts that are inherent in human life. Spiral Dynamics Integral sees the spiral of human development as held between the polarities of the human impulse towards individual agency and the impulse towards communion with others. Using the paradigm of TLHS to view the developmental conflicts on this path, I proposed that these conflicts could also be understood as complex iterations of conflicts around authority and intimacy. One difference is that SDI tracks the resolution of these conflicts on the large stage of human history and the development of cultural values as well as in the evolution of individuals and organizations. TLHS maps these conflicts in the development of human systems in a more general way and is not concerned with historical context. Another similarity between these two theories is that they both see the evolution of human systems as a movement from self-centeredness to the capacity to understand and care for oneself while remaining deeply resonant with a progressively larger context. In the language of TLHS, this is the movement from being self-centered to being centered in oneself in a systems-centered context.

Finally, both theories implicitly understand that as human systems hold more complexity they naturally grow in their capacity for compassion. This movement leads to a deep realization of each individual's interdependency and connection with all of life in one unitary and unbroken field of energy. The visceral recognition of this truth leads to an understanding of each person's responsibility for co-creating the context of life at every level, from family, to group, to the planetary and cosmic community. In SDI this becomes particularly clear in what is called the second tier of human systems development. In TLHS, this understanding is particularly relevant to the third phase of systems development.

### **A Brief Recap of First Tier Value Systems**

To briefly recap what I explored in part 1, in SDI, human value systems develop along the following pathway (Robbins, 2010). They begin with confronting the problem of physical survival. At the individual level this is similar to the situation of the new-born. They then develop a *tribal* consciousness, which has a high value on the survival of the group. In tribal consciousness, nature is seen as filled with mysterious, magical forces that have to be

placated with rituals and spells if the group is going to survive. This level provides a great deal of connection at the expense of many aspects of individual expressions of power and agency. In individuals, this is similar to the situation of the young child in a family. The next level is *warrior consciousness* in which the individual breaks from the sacred canopy of the group with all of its rituals and superstitions. Here human consciousness begins to develop a relationship with power and autonomy. This is similar to an adolescent rebellion as the teenager breaks from the protection and safety of the family. The excesses of this state of consciousness lead to the development of the *traditional* wave of consciousness. At this level, human systems create religious structures that delineate a universal system of rules and ethics based on some transcendent understanding or “revealed truth” of right and wrong. These rules save humanity from the chaos and brutality of *warrior* culture. However, these rules are often to be followed without question, compliantly, and dogmatically. This leads the spiral of development back to the individual, as human systems begin to question the truths of religion using the rational, logical power of the mind. This is the *modernist* wave of development. Critical thinking and scientific research are born. This scientific approach erodes faith in the “revealed truths” of traditional religion and leads to the industrial revolution, vast advances in medical technology, and various methods to use natural resources for the betterment of human life. On the down side, this value system also leads to the plunder of natural resources, immense corporate and individual greed, and an atmosphere of alienation in modern cities. The traditional structures and religious values that held families and communities together come under attack. These distortions of the scientific world-view, swing the spiral back to the group with the birth of pluralism and *post-modernism*. This value system seeks to redress the abuses of the scientific world-view by proposing a value relativism that promotes consensus and an understanding between all points of view. The difficulty with this wave is that it flattens out the spiral and refuses to recognize the real differences in levels of complexity between the different levels of the spiral. This flattening of the hierarchy of development leads to a kind of groovy narcissism in which a *tribal* level of consciousness is seen on a par with a scientific (*modernist*) level or a *traditional* level with little appreciation for the real differences in levels of complexity between these levels. The excesses in this level of consciousness create the conditions for humanity to make the leap to a whole new tier of development. (See Part 1 of this series for a more complete exploration of the different levels.)

## **Second Tier Waves of Development**

Although some theorists divide the second tier of the spiral up into four or even six levels (Wilber 2009), for the purposes of this article, I would like to briefly look at only the first two levels. Then I will examine how all of this might be relevant to SCT practitioners and also touch on how it has been personally meaningful for me to integrate the perspectives of these two theoretical perspectives.

Similar to the first tier of consciousness evolution, second tier consciousness continues to spiral between the human drives of agency and communion, but with a crucial difference. The essence of this difference is that when a person or group or a culture is primarily identified in one of the first tier value systems, they feel the need to defend their point of view as “right”. A hallmark of second tier consciousness is that it is capable of honoring and understanding all of the previous levels of development with no need to fight

for its own point of view. Second tier value systems understand the importance of every earlier wave of the Spiral and supports the healthy expressions of each wave as inevitable and important steps along the path of human systems evolution. Furthermore, they do this without flattening out the hierarchy into a value relativism that denies the evolution of consciousness from simple to complex. Second tier consciousness understands that each level transcends and includes the levels beneath it in an ever-expanding march towards greater wholeness and inclusivity.

In the first wave in the second tier, which is usually called the *Integral* wave, consciousness focuses on the qualities of flow, functionality, competence and spontaneity. (Beck and Cowan, 1996) External authority and the issues around compliance and defiance to external authorities must be resolved for consciousness to truly enter this wave. At the integral level, what is important is competency and efficacy, not the relationship to external authorities, persons or dogma. The credos here are “does it work?” and “is it helpful?”, rather than the pursuit of external validation, titles or degrees. There is a freedom from inner compulsiveness and a great capacity to enjoy the best that life has to offer, as well as the capacity to not take things personally. People whose primary center of gravity is at this level, can fight for themselves while still being open to feedback and have the capacity to transcend their pull towards personalizing or defensiveness. This level has great respect for the power of knowledge and the skill to get something done, but not for persons, titles or dogma.

The second wave in the second tier is usually called “*Holistic.*” At this level, consciousness swings back to emphasize the experience of communion at a deeper level. At this level, consciousness intuitively feels the unitary energy field that knits all of life together and viscerally understands the interconnectedness of all living systems, human as well as natural. Communion with others arises as an immediate felt sense and inner empathic knowing which creates an intuitive understanding of our oneness with this universal, energetic matrix. As consciousness tips into this layer, insights flow into awareness with a kind of visionary, apprehensive, suddenness in which we understand something about the nature of reality in a kind of complete and wordless knowing. It may take years to formulate these insights into language.

People who are awake at this level are deeply aware that words can never fully express what unfolds at this level of awareness. As the Tao Te Ching says “the Tao that can be spoken is not the true Tao.” Language that arises from this level is often poetic, mystical and the listener has a sense of something flowing beyond and behind the words. When one is in the presence of someone that is awake at this level of apprehensive, a-verbal knowing, one often feels inspired, uplifted, and understood at a core level that touches both the existential essence of universal truths and their unique manifestation in a particular context.

### **What Does All This Have To Do With TLHS?**

So what does all of this have to do with the Theory of Living Human Systems? In my estimation, a lot.

Let’s go back to Agazarian’s Phases of Systems Development chart and look at Phase Three of human systems development: “Interdependent: Love, Work and Play” (Agazarian, 2008). At this stage of system development, Agazarian notes that human systems are concerned with modifying only two final defenses. The first are: “defenses

against knowledge” and the second are “defenses against common sense.” In an earlier version of this same chart (Agazarian, 2006), she puts a little more meat on these bones. Under “defenses against knowledge”, she adds “defenses against autobiographical inner reality and integrated apprehensive and comprehensive knowledge”, and under “defenses against common sense” she adds “defenses against reality and reality testing. Communications missing attunement and empathy. Closed mindedness” (Agazarian, 2006). Although this is perhaps a less poetic way of describing the realizations of second tier consciousness, my hypothesis is that she is talking about the same thing as the SDI folks are talking about in their second tier.

If I look at the defenses against knowledge a little more closely, I am struck by two things. The first is that the defenses against “autobiographical inner reality” place an emphasize on our capacity for self-knowledge and a insight into the basic assumptions that have shaped our world-view up until that time. Unless we modify and see through the basic structures that formulate our pervasive transferences to the world, we will be limited. Our compulsion to repeat old roles and subtly distort our perceptions of our present context will be overwhelming and mostly outside of our awareness. We all know that the ramifications of this lack of awareness and insight can be severe. Once the assumptions that have limited our understanding of autobiographical inner reality have been modified, the world opens up and the sources of apprehensive, a-verbal knowledge, as well as our openness to new comprehensive knowledge, takes an exponential leap. We are free to enjoy life with gusto, free from old roles with full access to our creativity. This sounds very much like a quality of the *integral* wave.

The continual modification of the boundary between our a-verbal knowing and our comprehensive understanding is a never-ending process. This process takes us into a deep development of our intuitive capacity to understand not only our own and others emotional lives, but also to have a direct understanding of the way the universe works. As our capacity for apprehensive understanding develops, it seems that human beings have the capacity to have a direct experience of the realities that disciplines such as quantum physics, complexity theory, or evolutionary theory explicate in abstract left-brain terms. Have you ever had an experience in an SCT group of exploring what the world looks like through the eyes of a tiger? Or a direct experience of the energy field that holds a subgroup or the group-as-a-whole together? To me this sounds very similar to what the SDI people are describing as the *holistic* level. Does it to you?

Similarly, although again the language is much drier then the SDI language, the “defenses against common sense and present context”, if we modify them all the way down, would seem to lead to an intuitive attunement to a unitary field of energy that knits all of life together as it expresses itself in a particular context. Common sense, we may discover, is not that common. As we both apprehend and comprehend each particular context to a deeper level we cannot help but also be aware of the nested holarchy\* (hierarchy of isomorphic systems) that connects every context all the way out, (or down, or up – directions don’t really make sense at this level) to this universal, unified energy field. This depth of attunement and empathy, theoretically at least, leads us to an experience of a-verbal knowing that is universal, existential, and also uniquely attuned to the dynamics of a particular situation in time and space. At least that is my read of phase three.

**So What?**

An important question to ask at this juncture is “so what?” Why is it important to put these two systems together? Does it benefit us in any way to integrate these two theories? Certainly gloating over SCT being a second tier theory would totally miss the point.

My answer to this is based in my clinical experience of thinking about my clients and also my human experience of thinking about our planetary community.

First, my clinical experience. Having the lens of SDI has helped me to place my clients along a continuum of consciousness development. It has also helped me to communicate with them in language that is empathically attuned to the level of the conflicts that they are working through. Understanding an angry adolescent as working through the “warrior” wave of development (rather than simply having major authority issues) helps me to resonate more fully with his muscle flexing and bravado. Talking to my religious clients who are concerned about family values and the erosion of their traditional communities has also made much more sense when I put them in the context of systems development that SDI proposes. The same goes for my atheistic professors from MIT. As a clinician trained in SCT, the resonance between the concepts proposed in SDI around the existential human conflicts to establish both agency and communion and the phases of systems development through *authority* and *intimacy* proposed in TLHS, makes this integration easy and intuitive.

Having this map helps me to look for signals that the next phase of development may be emerging. In TLHS terms, it has helped me to functionally sub-group more effectively and shore up the excesses of each level. Placing these conflicts in the larger context of the development of civilization has helped me to give more texture, flavor and depth to my clinical interventions. I am more able to contain, both apprehensively and comprehensively, my impulse to polarize with any of these points of view.

Reframing authority conflicts as issues around agency and autonomy has also helped me to be gentler with these inevitable developmental conflicts. Similarly, looking at the phase of intimacy as working through issues of communion has added a different color to my interventions that has seemed to deepen my capacity for empathic resonance with these conflicts. Maybe these are just semantic differences, but somehow it has made a difference. I encourage you to try these words on and see if you have a similar experience.

Next, my experience as a world citizen. For years I had wondered how to apply TLHS to our global conflicts. Somehow, there was not enough granularity or subtlety in simply using the lens of the three phases of systems development. There was something that was right about it, but also, “not enough”. Integrating SDI with TLHS and seeing how both of these theories were working with fundamental, human, existential conflicts has been eye opening. Understanding the progressive working through of each iteration of human conflicts around authority and intimacy, agency and communion, as they play out on the stage of world history, has been important. At least for me. Anyone else?

The lens of SDI, integrated with TLHS, has helped me to understand the inevitability of these steps in cultural evolution. Indeed the applications to a variety of global conflicts are immense. SDI practitioners have worked in such hot spots of global conflict as South Africa or the Palestinian/Israeli situation. Integrating the TLHS method of functional sub-grouping as a method of conflict resolution is an exciting prospect. Certainly this has helped me to not take the painful growing pains of our national and global culture wars so personally.

Finally, the emergence of second tier value systems (which has been an empirical

discovery by SDI theorists not a theoretical one!!) has given me great hope. As more people and micro-cultures enter these waves of development, which correlates in my view to phase three in TLHS, perhaps there is hope that our world will survive the virulent culture wars that are wreaking havoc across the planet.

\*A holarchy, in the terminology of Arthur Koestler, is a hierarchy of holons – where a holon is both a part and a whole. The term was coined in Koestler's 1967 book, *The Ghost in the Machine*.

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