

An Explanation of the *Orders of Self*

This narrative is intended to supplement a [chart of the *Orders of Self*](#) that is attached to this document.

1. What is this tool for?

All growth happens from within. This is true whether we are talking about the transformation to butterfly that happens in the chrysalis or the ability to quit drinking on the part of the alcoholic. We don't change because of what is around us but because of what happens within us. Yes, the larva needs the chrysalis and the alcoholic needs the AA group, the sponsor and the higher power. But all of those can be in place and still transformation does not occur.

If we are to grow, we must be able to go within our own experience and be Self conscious. This awareness of our own interior involves at least two sets of choices. One is that we get to decide what we will pay attention to, that is, the *focus of our attention*. Another is that we get to decide the perspective from which we will look at things. This is the *locus of our identity*. This is the eye from which I view what is going on with me.

Remember for a moment what your second grade classroom was like.

You probably haven't thought about that room for a long time but you may be able to call it to mind and remember some things about it. You are able to focus your attention on something that had been filed away in your memory.

Now look at the perspective from which you are viewing the room. Do you look at it from the point of view of a second grader? Or do you look from the point of view of who you are now? There isn't a right or wrong way, just different ways. We get to choose. This is the *locus of your identity*. Things look different depending on the point of view from which we view them.

There are many points of view from which we can look at what is going on both within and around us. There are many "selves" from which we can approach the circumstances of our lives. Everything that grows does so by progressing through stages of development. One of those things is the "Self."

2. How does our understanding of the development through stages inform our understanding and use of *Orders of Self*?

Everything that grows does so by progressing through stages of development. When we look at the processes of growth we discover that growth happens simultaneously along many lines. That is, there are many developmental lines and they may each experience growth at different rates. As we observe these many lines we discover that there are some qualities and conditions that are true for all developmental lines. Here we want to look at just a few of them to get a general view before we move to look specifically at the *Orders of Self*.

a. Stages must be done in order and one can't skip a stage, though stress may cause regression to an earlier stage.

Each stage of development has a particular task that it performs. That task must be completed to a minimum level of competency before the organism can move on to the next level. Each level prepares for the one to follow. An insect grows from egg to larva to pupa to adult. It can't go from larva to adult. It can't skip a step. Some development can be fragile enough to be undone by stress. Someone who is severely stressed by life circumstances may regress to an earlier level of ethical development. Many Americans, stressed by 9/11, became vengeful and reactive to all people of Arabic descent saying they were defending liberty. This was a regression to an earlier stage of development ethically.

b. Each stage transcends but includes the stages below it.

Each stage or level builds upon the stage below it. Thus each stage incorporates and draws from the tools and resources of the previous stages. To the degree that a stage abandons or repudiates an earlier stage, it weakens the capacities at that stage. This is a form of pathology.

Let's look at this with a simple example from the work of Jean Piaget in the field of cognitive development. Suppose that there is a family in which there are two sons; Jack, who is five years old, and Jamie, who is three. The parents know about Jack that he will use his position to take advantage of Jamie so they have a rule that whenever there is something to be divided between the boys, one son makes the division and the other gets first choice.

Jack understands the rule and is willing to obey it but is not above trying to exploit the situation for his own gain. When it is a cookie to be divided, he has Jamie break it because he understands that cookies never break evenly and he will then be able to select the bigger piece. But when it comes to dividing the last of the juice, he is the one who pours.

He selects two different styles of glass to pour into. One is tall and thin and the other is short and squat. He carefully fills them to the same line and then puts the last few drops into the tall thin one so that it rises to a slightly higher line than the short squat one. Jamie then chooses the tall thin one and Jack is pleased with himself.

At five Jack understands something that Jamie doesn't. He understands volume while Jamie has only just mastered length or distance. Jack can think in three dimensions while Jamie is still working with two. If Jack had not mastered two dimensional thinking he would not be able to understand volume and wouldn't know that he was actually getting more juice even though it didn't go as high in the glass.

c. Hierarchy of adequacy, not of value

Some people resist thinking in developmental terms because it appears to value some people over others. There is an important distinction to be made between the adequacy of the understanding and the value of the person who holds it.

Jack has a way of understanding that helps him know that *amount* is more dependent upon *volume* than on *height*. Jamie is going to figure this out in a few months and Jack will find himself holding the tall thin glass. Jack's way of understanding is more adequate [for the moment] than is Jamie's. This doesn't mean that Jack is better than or has more value than Jamie.

3. What are the sources for *Orders of Self*?

I want to say a bit about how I came to discover the *Orders of Self*. The sources are important both because I want to acknowledge my debt to my teachers but also to give others a context in which to understand what I find so valuable here.

a. Ken Wilber

My greatest debt is to Ken Wilber both for the breadth of his map and for the specificity of it in its application to my own work. Anyone who is familiar with his AQAL framework will recognize many of its elements here. Anyone who is not familiar with his work can easily find excellent resources on-line. For those who would prefer to start with one of his many books, I would suggest either *A Brief History of Everything*, or *A Theory of Everything*, both from Shambhala.

b. Robert Kegan

A couple of years back I took Kegan's *In Over Our Heads: the Mental Demands of Modern Life* with me on vacation. While not an easy read, I found it to be restorative in its own way as it gave me a refreshing new perspective on the work that I do with men who batter their adult partners. It was instructive both from its emphasis on the importance of understanding the dynamics of development through stages, but also from the specific stages of consciousness that it describes.

With regard to the dynamics of development: the most significant piece is the observation that it is by taking what is the subjective experience and making it the object of our observation that we are able to move to ever higher stages of development.

With regard to the stages themselves: the first four Orders are taken directly from Kegan's work. It is only at the fifth order and above that I begin to depart from his schema.

c. Richard C. Schwartz

Dick Schwartz is the developer/discoverer of Internal Family SystemsSM therapy. IFS is a framework for understanding the complexity of the human personality that has much in common with the techniques of Voice Dialogue, Focusing, Big Mind, and psychosynthesis. Of particular value theoretically is his distinction

between the *parts* of the personality and the ways they are sometimes in conflict with each other and the *Self* which is to the parts as the conductor is to the orchestra. It is his influence more than others which has informed my understanding of the fifth and sixth orders.

4. An introductory look at the Orders

a. First Order [1°]:

Our first apprehension of experience is the physical awareness of our sensory realm. We have the incessant input of our five senses giving us information about the world in which we find ourselves. This can be very pleasant and satisfying and this can be very hurtful and terrifying. We are our experience.

At 1° we are the construction of the physical experiences of our bodies. “I am cold. I am tired. I am rested. I am scared.” Whatever the experience I am having, that is what I am. As infants our only construction of Self is at 1°. We go from crabby to laughing to shy in moments. We are at the mercy of our experience.

b. Second Order [2°]:

We wish to have some control over our experience and we notice, for example, that when we bite on the blanket it feels different from biting on the thumb. We discover bit by bit that we can make choices and that the choices that we make affect the circumstances of our experience. We begin to gain mastery over the experience and we begin to identify ourselves differently.

At 2° I am not the experience itself, I am the one having the experience. I am the subject that can look at my experience as the object. I can make choices and those choices have an impact on my experience. I may be feeling tired but I know that when I have rested I will no longer feel tired. Feelings and experiences come and go, but who *I am* endures.

c. Third Order [3°]:

This mastery over my physical experience may also have some success in the realm of my relationships with others in that I can choose as friends those who are like me and so we can enjoy the same activities, but I find more and more that others make demands of me that I cannot escape. This may be a problem for me when I want dessert and my parents withhold it until I have eaten my peas, but it becomes more of a problem for me as I want greater and greater autonomy and my freedom to do as I wish is curtailed by the expectations of others.

At 3° I am the construction of the expectations of others. I have certain relationships in which I find myself and certain roles that I am expected to perform. If I want to play in the big game, the coach tells me I have to come to practice. If I want to be Pat’s boyfriend, I have to call him or her every night. If I want to get a paycheck from my job at Burger Doodle, I have to show up for work

when it is my shift. I am my roles and my relationships. My identity comes from the community which tells me who I am.

d. Fourth Order [4°]:

Still, this community which is defining me is not of a piece. I am on the schedule at Burger Doodle for 3:00 and practice is at 4:30 and Pat is expecting a call and I have a paper due tomorrow. The demands of my life become complicated and conflicting. I try to be a person of integrity and consistency and to be all things to all people but I cannot meet everyone's demands of me.

At 4° I decide that I will be who I decide I will be. I will enter into the relationships that I choose and be who and how I decide I will be. I am not ignoring the expectations of others or denying the impact that my choices have on them, but I am a construction of my own will. I am the author of my destiny.

e. Fifth Order [5°]:

Yet, I find that I do not always do what I decided I would do. I intended to get a good night's sleep for the presentation tomorrow and here it is 2:00 AM and I am watching a bad movie that I have seen before. I mean to quit smoking and get exercise and have more patience with the kids. I find that I am not of one mind about who or how I want to be.

At 5° I discover that I am of many minds. I have many aspects and attitudes and abilities and recognize that they each may see the world and my place in it from a different perspective. Each aspect and perspective has its own validity and each brings something of value to my overall being.

f. Sixth Order [6°]:

But these aspects or parts are not always in agreement about what is in my best interest. Indeed, sometimes they are so polarized that they viciously attack each other, each insisting that it be the one that should be followed if my best interests are to be met. I realize that sometimes I am of one mind, and at other times am of another.

At 6° I am able to step back from these parts and relate to each of them with consideration and compassion and to appreciate what they each bring to my awareness and my competence. I then balance the needs and abilities of all of my parts as I choose how I will act. I draw from all of the experiences and lessons of my life, and, from the rich palette of my competencies, I paint the picture that is my life.

g. Seventh Order [7°]:

Yet I know that there are limitations to my palette. I have peculiar abilities and disabilities. I am my sex and my race and my nationality. I had no part in choosing these and I have no right to claim their privileges or any obligation to endure their injustices. I am a product of the rich diversity of the whole created

order and am no different in substance from all other aspects of this marvelous and horrible cosmos.

At 7° I am one of the manifestations of the Ten Thousand Things. I am one with all of Creation in its marvelous complexity and beauty. I have deep compassion for the suffering of other beings just as I have delight in their beauty and joy in their fulfillment.

h. Eighth Order [8°]:

Still, for all of the complexity and diversity of creation, there is something about each manifestation that has a quality of sameness with every other manifestation. Each wave is the same wave. Each joy is the same joy and each joy is the compliment of the same sorrow. All awareness is the same quality of consciousness.

At 8° I am one who knows the unity of all things and I know that I am that unity, that One.

5. Some observations about the symmetry of the Orders

a. Odd orders and even orders

The odd numbered orders are each constructed by the in-breaking of some circumstance that is externally constructed to the proximal self. In 1° it is the immediacy of physical reality, in 3° it is the demands of those around us constructing our roles and relationships, in 5° it is the emerging realization that I am not of one mind and I can't seem to control my own interior conflicts and I can't get me to do what I intend², and at 7° it is the realization that "who I am" is largely the construct of the circumstances of my being. I was dealt this hand. Now I have to figure out how to play it.

The even numbered orders are our attempt to gain mastery over the ways in which we appear to be helpless to construct ourselves and our own experience. At 2° I discover how my choices construct my experience; at 4° I discover how my choices construct my relationships and my roles; at 6° I discover how my choices mediate between my sometimes wounded parts and effect a healing that allows me to be fully integrated; and at 8° I discover how my choices in fact create the world in which "I" find myself.

b. Four domains

Each of these orders is paired into the four domains of the personal, the interpersonal, the intrapersonal, and the transpersonal.

6. The challenges that move us from one stage to the next

- a. From odd to even is the challenge of mastery of myself
- b. From even to odd is an intrusion of the awareness of demands or influences beyond my control
 - i. Personal: the demands of sensory awareness
 - ii. Interpersonal: the demands of the expectations of others

- iii. Intrapersonal: the demands of my own multiplicity
- iv. Transpersonal: the demands of the unique circumstances of my own life

7. Clarification of the difference between *states* and *stages*

We are all able to have an awareness of Self at all of the orders all of the time. Even a young child can know what her parents expect of her [3°], or have a sense of being very divided about what she wants [5°], and some children even have a sense of their lives having a purpose or a sense of destiny [7°]. That is, they are able to have an awareness of Self as a *state* of being at a given order. We all have moments of being able to access each of the orders as a *state* of being. What we are not able to do is to rest in all of the orders as a durable *stage* of development.³

For one to be able to reach a given order as a stage of development, one must first have resolved the issues of the previous order to a minimum level of adequacy.

For example,

1. At 1°, one will have to be able to tolerate the influx of sensory experience enough to be able to step back from those experiences to see them as something happening to the Self, not an aspect of the Self itself.
2. At 2°, one must be able to have a sufficient sense of mastery over one's own physical circumstances such that one can be aware of the expectations of others.
3. At 3°, one must be clear enough about what other's expectations are that one can begin to choose which demands will be met and how one wants one's role to be structured.
4. At 4°, one must have a sufficiently clear notion of how one wants to be in relationship to others to begin to notice that one is not being that way, that is, that there are parts of oneself that wish to be one way and parts that wish to be another way.
5. At 5°, one must have a sufficiently clear understanding of the various parts, aspects, attitudes and perspectives of which one is made to be able to begin to develop a mastery of those aspects and get them to a place of harmony and integration.
6. At 6°, one must...well...I'm not really sure. I am personally able to get to 6° for several minutes at a time on my best days. I suspect that I will have to be able to rest there more easily and that will mean having a clear sense of my own polarized parts, my roles and responsibilities, the expectations of others, my strategies for self care and self soothing, and be able to be fully present to my immediate experience.

8. Transformative technologies

Looking at the world through the lens of developmental lines can help to reveal what is happening under surface of the change that we hope to manifest in our lives and in the lives of others. It becomes very valuable to distinguish between simple change and actual transformation. Transformation requires a movement

to a higher stage of development. This movement can be very difficult to attain and often involves pain and struggle.

In order to make the shift to a higher stage of development—in our case to a higher Order of Self—it is necessary to have a process or a technology that supports the transformation. There are many examples of technologies for transformation.

a. AA and Twelve-step: from 2° to 3°

Perhaps the best known and most widely used technology for personal transformation is that authored by Bill Wilson in the founding of Alcoholics Anonymous. The 12 Steps of AA has proven to be a very robust way for many people to make the transition from 2° to 3° in a durable manner.

The movement from 2° to 3° requires a willingness to let go of one's own will and submit to the will of the others who make demands on our lives. We have to be willing to get up and go to work even when we don't feel like it. Because of the spiral-like qualities of developmental lines, one level may often feel similar to another level. At both 2° and at 4° I get to decide how I am going to act. The difference is that at 4° I am taking into account the demands of 3°; i.e., how others expectations inform the relationship.

For some people, these demands prove to be too much. If I can't please my boss or my wife, I might as well go get drunk. I do know how to make the choices that will change my experience in the moment. And if I like how getting drunk changes my experience, I may choose to escape.

The problem with this strategy is that it works...in the short run. But it makes things worse in the long run. I can have all sorts of insight into what is going on with me that I choose to drink and have a clear wish to quit drinking but if I get stressed out enough, I will turn to my old friend who helps me out. And then I feel better. And then I feel worse.

AA takes very seriously the developmental task of moving from 2° to 3°. First of all, I have to admit that I can't do this on my own. I am powerless, there is a source that can save me, and I will turn my will over to that source. Then I must have a very clear sense of what is expected of me. I have to go to meetings, work the steps, and call my sponsor. There are clear demands on me and I am told who I am to be if I would experience the promises of sobriety.

b. Al-Anon and Landmark Education: from 3° to 4°

Similar to AA in many respects is the companion program Al-Anon. It is for those who are close to people in the grip of addiction and it is to help them end behaviors that are enabling for the addict and to do a better job of genuinely caring for themselves. The principal difference between AA and Al-Anon is that addicts are not able to be fully present at 3° and the co-addicts or co-dependants are overly attached to a 3° concept of who they are supposed to be for the other.

They tend to be too willing to be who the addict tells them they are supposed to be and not sufficiently free to claim who they need to be for themselves [which would ultimately be of benefit to the addict].

There are also many for-profit training and education programs that promote technologies for transformation. One with which I am familiar is Landmark Education. It uses a fairly intense group process to confront attendees with ways that they are looking at their own lives and allowing their expectations to limit their own choices. By this process the participants are encouraged to envision themselves and their relationships in ways that are free of prior limitations.

c. *Creative Conflict Resolution: from 2° to 3° to 4° to 5° to 6°*

Psychotherapy generally can be understood to be a kind of technology for transformation. There are many roles that are constructed to support transformation including teachers, coaches, and pastors. Each has its own methodology for supporting transformation to a higher order.

Creative Conflict Resolution is a structured program using psychotherapeutic processes and principles for the purposes of affecting growth through stages of development. In particular it recognizes that the movement to a higher level on any developmental line is essentially a creative process of conflict resolution. There is something about the current perspective that isn't working. The attention is focused on what isn't working and on the outcome that one is trying to create and then one discovers a new way of being that is not centered on changing the other but on changing oneself.

d. *Various meditation techniques: from 6° to 7° to 8°*

There are a number of meditation techniques that one can use to affect a greater level of awareness at the seventh and eighth orders. These can build the capacity to witness one's experience [valuable at any level], build compassion, and allow one's awareness to rest in higher states of consciousness. I have experienced many of these techniques but I cannot claim any particular expertise in this area.

I only want to point out that the transformation that they support can be at a level above where many practitioners are starting out. I know of no evidence, for example, that Vipassana Meditation has been shown to be an effective intervention for chemical dependency. This is not to say that such techniques have no value in addressing 2° issues or that children cannot benefit from learning to meditate. Only that a more focused intervention that addresses the specific developmental needs is likely to be more helpful.

9. *Some applications of the theory*

I have found the Orders of Self to be a map that has many uses. I offer here just two applications that have come up recently and that show different aspects of its utility.

a. Over-protective parenting

I just came across a reprint of an article from Psychology Today about how parenting styles today are raising a nation of wimps. The assertion is that parents are too present in the lives of their kids in a manner that tries to protect their kids from any unpleasantness such that kids are soft and unprepared for life as adults. Setting aside for a moment the observation that many parents are clearly under-involved in their children's lives, what can we say about the developmental effects of parents who shield their children from frustration?

At 1° we are subject to sometimes overwhelming sensory input. We must learn how to moderate and negotiate that input to be able to rise to a stable 2° sense of Self. At 3° we experience the demands of others on how we are to perform. We learn how to negotiate the stress and get the paper done on time and make it to practice and find someone else to take our shift at Burger Doodle. If someone else steps in and handles the stress for us, we learn two things. One, we learn that this is more than I should have to manage, and two, that it is more than I am able to manage. What we don't learn is how to manage it. Thus, over-protective parenting causes developmental delays and can be crippling.

When seen from a developmental perspective it becomes clear that the parental task is not to shield children from stress but to expose them to frustration in doses that push them to do just more than they think they can do. We must do for our children what they cannot do for themselves, but we must also not do for them what they can become able to do for themselves.

b. A case example of therapy of a couple

A couple that I have had in therapy recently ended therapy feeling very satisfied with the current state of their marriage and the intimacy that they enjoy in it.

I first met with Frank fifteen months ago when he was referred by another client. He was almost ready to quit the marriage. Bouts of drinking, compulsive spending, and numerous affairs on the part of his wife, Judy, had Frank almost ready to give up. He felt she should be accountable for her behavior so he demanded that she write a letter to friends and family confessing her misdeeds. He had given her three months to get her act together or else he would boot her out. He wanted to be sure that he had done everything he could to restore the marriage.

Frank was using a 2° solution to a 3° problem. He didn't like the agreement that they had about the nature of their relationship [Judy's excesses] and so he was committed to making her be different. He had given her an ultimatum. Judy for her part was also using 2° strategies for changing her experience. Neither seemed able to move to a 4° perspective on the problem.

Over the course of last year each has taken the Building Healthy Relationships program to learn the techniques of Creative Conflict Resolution. After

completing the first phase of the program they each participated in separate groups for several weeks and then we began to work with them together.

What we quickly⁴ discovered was that each was being a really good screen on which they could project their own fears. On Frank's part, he has as a core issue a fear of being hurt. He is hurt when Judy acts out. On Judy's part, she has a core issue of being found to be unacceptable. She feels rejected when Frank is angry at her financial or lifestyle choices. So the pattern in their relationship has been that he gets scared and tells her that she is unacceptable. She in turn feels the rejection and acts out in ways that scare him. Each thus is creating a relationship that is very different from what they both want.

On the other hand Judy can fully appreciate how much her behavior is devastating to Frank and she really wants to change it. Frank is able to see how his criticism of Judy is wounding to her and he wants to be more supportive.

In sessions together each addressed recent conflicts in their relationship in which they were triggered by the other's behavior. Frank was able to witness Judy's internal conflicts [5°] over her decision to spend money on a trip with her daughter and thus he was able to learn how this was not personal [2°] and to let go of seeing it as a violation of their agreement about money [3°] and instead to be able to be supportive of her [4°].

Judy was able to witness Frank's internal conflicts [5°] over her decision as a repetition of his relationship with his mother that he had to care for and to see how this was not personal [2°] and to let go of seeing it as a rejection of his relationship with her [3°] and instead to be able to be supportive of him [4°].

Thus by being able to both access 5° and to witness each other at that Order of Self they were able to move to a stable 4° that allowed them to transcend the mess that they had made at 2° and 3°. They are both appropriately cautious about their ability to sustain this transformation, but they also know they know how to repair the relationship should it get damaged again.

[A note to IFSSM practitioners: You will note that the movement to 5° is another way of saying that the person is developing an awareness of their parts. This awareness at 5° allows for a more durable presence at 4° and thus more stable relationships with others. I am with Mike Elkin here that we may not actually need the presence of Self in the IFS use of that term (that is, we may not need to be able construct our awareness of Self at the 6°) but may only need a reasonably competent manager (that is a part of one's self at 4° that can reliably hold the reins).]⁵

10. Last thoughts

I have found the Orders of Self to be a very useful model for understanding how we move from one sense we may have of ourselves to another as we develop

through ever more complex and adequate perspectives on who we are. It provides a framework for seeing where we are coming from and for guiding the processes of transformation in ourselves and in others.

A map must accurately describe the territory if it is going to be useful. It is especially helpful if it is one that can be easily brought to mind. I find this map to be simple enough to remember yet complex enough to be helpful in negotiating some vitally important terrain. It has application for personal development, conflict resolution, communication practice and theory, and for psychotherapy.

In the [chart of the Orders of Self](#) I have listed some aspects of life and how they appear differently at different orders. For example; in the column on *good and bad* I have charted how these concepts are likely to appear to someone at each stage of development. These are meant to be suggestive of how the Orders can inform how we look at things and, conversely, help to determine the Order from which someone may be operating.

I welcome your questions and comments.

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¹ As a short hand I will use the notation 1° to refer to the First Order of Self, and so on.

² While these aspects appear internal, they are “externally constructed” in that they are the product of life experiences, most of which are from outside the realm of our choices.

³ I am using the term *state* in just the way that Wilber uses it, but Wilber speaks of *structures* where I use the term *orders*, and Wilber sometimes uses *levels* when I use the term *stages*. Beyond this difference in terminology I am pretty sure that we are talking about the same thing.

⁴ Frankly, it was more quickly than usual. But then, don't we always write about our successes more than our failures?

⁵ I recently asked Mike about this quote. He clarified that he was only talking about working with phobias when he made this comment. Nevertheless, I stand by the assertion that we only need to have a 4° manager available to do parts work.