

What is “Self?” Three meanings in the context of IFS

I was initially really disappointed that my workshop at the 15th Annual IFS Conference was scheduled for the very last time slot on Sunday morning. I figured that half of the attendees would have already left for home and those that stayed wouldn't be interested in something as theoretical as “Orders of Self.” I had already pared down the six hour workshop to fit the three hours I asked for and now I only had an hour and a half. I decided to try to make the workshop more experiential and less didactic.

The guided meditation that I devised led the participants through a series of steps focusing on each of the *orders of self* taking them from first to eighth and back again into the immediacy of the moment at first order. When they opened their eyes I invited them to talk about their experience.

“When you got to the part about how we were each choosing to be someone who was listening to what you were saying, I just tuned out.”

It seems that fully half of the participants either fell asleep or went to a place of reverie of their own creation while I droned on. Note to self: Don't have participants close their eyes in a workshop the morning after a dance to *One Drum*.

A second thing that I learned was that I still had way too much content. Even paring it down, I still only got through about 2/3 of what I wanted to do.

But the biggest surprise was how much people wanted to talk about the theoretical. The developmental aspects of the model seemed to help many of the participants put the presentations by Dr. Goldie and Dr. Gangadean into a larger perspective. Many of the participants found the framework to be both useful and provocative at the same time. And there was one issue that we kept coming back to: “What do you mean by *Self*?”

All the way home [it's a six hour drive for me] I was pondering this question. Here is what I came up with.



My forty-year old Merriam Webster's Seventh New Collegiate Dictionary has five headings for the word “self” with multiple definitions beneath each one. Those are followed by several pages of hyphenated words beginning with self, as self-deception or self-effacement. These of course predate the focus on the *self* in psychological circles with developments such as Self Psychology. In a search for meanings on the Internet I came across a web page on the work of Heinz Kohut which asks visitors to submit their own definitions for Self Psychology.

Clearly, there are many definitions of *self*, so a consensus on what is meant by the word is unlikely. We can, however, be clear about what *we* mean when we use that word.

As I play back the conversations that I had and overheard at the conference, I can see that there were at least three distinct meanings that we use. The first is a very general understanding of self as the place from which we are observing our experience. The second is the intra-psychic structure that we are trying to create when we “get into Self” or when we ask parts to step back. The third is the energy that we have to work with when we are able to “be in” or to “come from” that structure. This is often referred to as Self-energy. To distinguish between them I will refer to them as *self*, *Self*, and *Self-energy*.

When we talk about our *selves*, we are referring to that aspect of our experience that is the place from which we observe. It is the “eye” from which I see what is going on with me. As we get to know our parts and develop a “parts detector” which identifies when others are speaking from a part or switching between parts, we become able to see that there are many different perspectives from which we view our experience. One way that we talk about this is to acknowledge that all parts have a *self*. Viewed from this point of view, we can see that we have many *selves*. There are many ways that we each identify “who I am.” The “I am,” also known as the Ego, is both a durable structure that helps us negotiate life, particularly in relationship to others, and is something to be transcended if we are to experience higher states of consciousness.

The *Self* is a particular manifestation of our awareness that has a rather specific meaning within the framework of Internal Family Systems theory. This is a core structure or potential structure which everyone can access. It is not simply a specialized part. It is, rather, an aspect of who we are at our deepest level. It is brought to awareness by a kind of discipline or practice that places the focus of our attention on the parts themselves. By looking with calm compassion on each of the parts that arise in our awareness, offering them any attention that they may be seeking, and then gently asking them to step back out of the spotlight of our awareness, we create a sort of clearing or open space in our awareness. From this vantage point we discover that we are looking at our experience from a place of particular creativity and connectedness.

When we are able to move our awareness to the place that IFS calls Self, we notice that this structure has particular qualities that are not static, but dynamic. They are a kind of energy which we sometimes refer to as *Self-energy*. This energy can be compared to the flow which athletes sometimes experience at times of peak performance. Self-energy can be felt as a bubbling up or cascading down, but often seems to come from beyond us, simply using us as a sort of conduit.

Some people that I have spoken with about these three understandings of self have noted that Self-energy just seems to be a quality of Self and thus there doesn't seem to be a reason to distinguish between them. It is my experience,

however, that there is a distinction to be made. I have, from time to time, had a spontaneous experience of Self-energy when I had made no effort to “get into Self.” As Dick has pointed out elsewhere, this is not the same as the oceanic experience sometimes referenced by meditators, but is more connected to the current physical manifestations of our experience. When I am working to get into Self, I am not trying to connect to Self-energy in the sense that I am not summoning a memory of the experience and trying to recreate it. I am rather attending to the parts that are arising in my awareness in order to create the space that allows Self to more clearly manifest. Once I am firmly and calmly in that space, I can simply trust that Self-energy will arise.

The three *selves* in the Orders of Self:

I want now to try to answer some of the questions that came up in my workshop about the Orders of Self from the base of these three meanings for *self*. I will offer some words of introduction to the model for those readers who were not at the workshop, but I recommend that you look over the [handouts](#) that I produced for the event if you want to go deeper with this. If you are a visual learner, I especially recommend that you take a look at the [chart](#) that depicts the eight orders with some suggestions about how various aspects of life look different at each order.

To briefly summarize the argument of the workshop:

Everything that grows does so through a series of stages in a developmental process. These stages come in a specific order and one cannot skip a stage or do them in a different order as each one builds on the one before it. This is true for an insect which transforms from egg to larva to pupa to adult. It is true for an oak which matures from acorn to seedling to sapling to adult.

One of the things that develops is the ego, the I am, the *self*. The point of view from which we see our experience shapes the experience that we see. We behave differently depending on the perspective from which we look at life.

Robert Kegan, Harvard professor of adult learning, has researched and written about the stages of development of the point of view from which we look at our experience. Referring to these stages as *orders of mind* or *orders of consciousness*, he has authored and refined an instrument to measure where people are in their development. This instrument is well validated empirically. The first four stages in my Orders of Self are identical (as nearly as I can tell) to his four stages. He speculates on a fifth stage, but as an empirical scientist he doesn't go beyond that. His studies show that most adults have made it to stage three and are struggling to make it to stage four. You just can't do research on a stage above where most people are.

Nevertheless, I am not so constrained and am happy to speculate on small samples and anecdotal observations. I have come to the belief that what is beyond Kegan's fourth order (4^o) is the world of Dick Schwartz and IFS. Specifically, that the Order of Self next above the one that most folks are

functioning at is the one at which we become keenly aware of our own multiplicity and the one above that is the one where we first access as a stage of development (not just a state of being) the deep creative energy that is the world of Dr. Ashok Gangadean's double brackets. It is this 6° of *self* that is the *Self* of IFS.



So, let's just do a quick review of the Orders of Self. I am postulating the existence of eight orders. This is arbitrary on two counts. The first is that we are talking about a continuum that I have decided to break into eight pieces. We could do four or twenty or probably just about any number. There are certainly sub-stages in the stages as I have defined them. Eight just seems like a good number and the stages work out in ways that are easy to remember and helpful in understanding ourselves.

The second is that there is no reason to conclude that the eighth stage is the last one. It is the upper limit of my imagination, and that imagination is primarily fueled by my understanding of other people's experience. There may well be stages beyond the eighth to which consciousness will some day ascend.

The eight stages are first of all broken into four tiers. These are the personal, the inter-personal, the intra-personal, and the trans-personal. Each tier is made up of two stages. The lower stage is one in which we are constructed by circumstances that are beyond our control and the upper stage is one in which we discover a sort of mastery of our experience in the face of the demands of the lower stage.

At the personal tier, the circumstances that construct the *I am* are the physical experiences in the sensory realm. I am hungry. I am warm. I am appreciated.

At the inter-personal tier the circumstances that construct the *I am* are the demands that our relationships with others place on us. They are the roles that we are expected to play. I am a student, a soccer player, a parent.

At the intra-personal tier the circumstances that construct the *I am* are the polarizations that exist between the many parts of which we are made. These are the residue of the trauma of our lives. I am afraid of snakes. I am driven to succeed. I am a loser.

At the trans-personal tier the circumstances that construct the *I am* are the peculiar conditions that frame this life that I have been born into. This forms the basis of what I may understand to be my purpose or my calling.



Finally, I want to take a walk through these stages in the progression of the Orders of Self.

Even before I am born I begin to become aware of sensory experience. I know the sound of a beating heart and I can hear the music that my mom is dancing to. I am living in a blissful existence in which all of my needs are anticipated. Then all hell breaks loose. The formerly safe surroundings start to attack me and squeeze me and I am pressed through a canal that is much too small for me. When I finally pass through it I am greeted into this new world by bright lights and strange sounds and the compulsion to fill myself with this thin fluid, this air, which surrounds me. I don't like it. I want to go back.

But, alas, there is no going back. I am left with the task of trying to make sense of what is happening to me. I need to get some sense of mastery. My first discovery is that there are some things that I like, that please me, that satisfy me; and there are some things that I don't like, that upset me, that hurt me. The second thing that I notice is that when I bite on my thumb I have a very different sensation than when I bite on my blanket. Some of this stuff is me and some is not me.

So early in the process I learn to make two distinctions. I learn to differentiate hurt from satisfaction, repulsion from attraction, bad from good. And I learn that I am not the same as the other. But because the good/bad split happens before the self/other split we end up with a four-fold division of experience. There is the other that satisfies me, the self that is satisfied, the self that is hurt and the other that hurts me. It is only with time and consistency on the part of the other that I begin to be able to see that the other that hurts me is the same other that satisfies me. The mother that makes me take a bath is the same as the mother who cuddles me afterward. This is the same other...the same mother.

Thus begins a process of differentiation and integration. I become able to see that this is not the same as that. But I also begin to recognize that this fits together with that. And my ability to do this leads me to ever greater and greater mastery over the flood of sensory experience that surrounds my day to day existence.

By the time I have finished grade school I have mastered most aspects of fine and gross motor coordination, I have developed most of my language skills, I understand subtle social cues, and have a clear sense of myself as an autonomous human being. I am the master of my experience.

And then, once again, all hell breaks loose. I become an adolescent. Not only does my body become foreign to me by changing shape, growing hair, and having some really bizarre sensations and urges; but the focus of my attention begins to change. Now it is really important to me what others, particularly my peers, think of me. My relationships gain an importance they never had before. What is more, those relationships now seem to be making more and more demands on me. If I want to play in the soccer games, I have to be at practice. If I want to

keep my job at Burger Doodle, I have to show up for work and be there on time. If I want to keep Susie as my girlfriend, I have to call her every night.

So the focus of my developmental growth shifts from the personal to the interpersonal. This doesn't do away with the personal. I still need to remember how to bathe myself. But to the degree that I have those skills down, I can move the attention to how I am going to get my papers done on time and get elected captain of the squad.

There are several skills that I need to master to be able to handle this. First of all, I have to be able to know just what is expected of me, to hold in my awareness the demands that these relationships are making of me. If I don't know when my next shift is at Burger Doodle, I'm not likely to show up. I will, therefore, lose my job. I not only have to know how to discern what others expect of me, I have to have a way of holding that information in my awareness with sufficient clarity that I can act on it.

Now on Thursday I am due at Burger Doodle at 3:00 and have a shift until 7:00. Soccer practice starts at 4:30 and I have a paper due Friday in American Lit and Susie is expecting a call. Clearly something is going to have to give. So now I have to know that there are conflicts, be able to decide which of the demands I am going to meet, and be able to negotiate those relationships in such a way that the relationships remain intact. If I am not careful I can get fired from Burger Doodle, get kicked off the soccer team, get dumped by Susie, and fail American Lit.

Kegan's research indicates that most adults in our society are able to make it this far; that is, they can show up at 6°. And my sense is that most adults feel as though they are done when they do. Further development isn't necessary. But more and more, Kegan argues, we are in a society that is expecting more.

There was a time, not too long ago, when I might have known that I was going to be a blacksmith because my daddy was a blacksmith. I might have known that I was going to be a mother, a farmer, a servant, a king just by the circumstances of my place in the social fabric in which I found myself. But now we are offered the opportunity to decide who we are going to be in the sense that we can determine which roles we will play and which responsibilities we will take on. We are not simply responding to the demands of the world around us; we are creating who we are going to be.

This is a much bigger step than it may appear at first glimpse. Not only is it developmentally a big step, but it is also socially a big step. Most of the people around us are also struggling with this stage of development so we may not have good models. And many of us are actually in communities in which we are discouraged from making this step.

For the last few thousand years, the 4° function of deciding what were the right roles to play and what the appropriate responsibilities were for each of those roles was something that was done by the religious institutions of a society. Only a few people had the right within this system to make these decisions and certainly no one had the right to decide for themselves. That was just too dangerous. Many still feel that way. We can't, as many proclaim for example, just allow a couple of men to decide that they are going to be in a marriage with each other.

It is a very big step for us to claim for ourselves the 4° function of determining what the roles are that we will play and the responsibilities that we will fulfill in those roles. This movement to 4° can look a lot like we are simply regressing to a 2° petulance and impulsivity where we give ourselves license to do what we want when we want to. And, indeed, we must be careful that this is not what we are doing.

So gaining competence at 4° is not something that happens all at once in all aspects of our lives. It is something we learn to do bit by bit. Kegan gives a great example of this in his book, *In Over Our Heads*. To paraphrase:

A woman [I'll call her Angela] who has two daughters has been separated from their dad for two years. One day as she is grocery shopping with the eldest, the 9 year old, they see a woman who is obviously pregnant. Angela uses this occasion to begin a conversation with her daughter about how babies are born and the facts of life. Her daughter [I'll call her Olivia] is very attentive and curious and Angela has a warm sense of connection with her. Then Olivia asks, "Since you and daddy aren't together, who are you having sex with?"

Angela is frozen. The truth is that she has been seeing someone when the girls are with their dad but she doesn't think this is the time or place to acquaint Olivia with details of her private life. At the same time, she deeply values honesty and openness. What is she to do?

The "rules" for what a mother does in this situation are not sufficiently clear to her that they offer her any guidance. She is going to have to come up with a way to deal with this and fast. What she finds is that there is a part of her that can step back from the situation and see it broadly and that can tell Olivia, "Your dad and I both love you and your sister very much and we are going to continue to try to find the best way to work together to get you what you need."

Angela discovers that she has a part that doesn't have to answer the explicit question but can hear the need and respond to it in a way that is both honest and protective of her daughter. This new manager that she has discovered is one that will get lots of practice in the years to come. She is moving more and more durably into 4°.

Up to this point in describing the Orders of Self I feel as though I am on very solid theoretical ground. The work that Kegan and his team have done provide me with a solid foundation. But from here on things get a bit more speculative. As we move to 5° we are moving into a realm that fewer people have explored. I have, nonetheless, relied upon some explorers that have done some excellent work as I have drawn this map. And though the territory is not fully mapped and few of us spend much time there, all of us have visited the higher regions.

I have been describing the path through the stages. But from time to time we get off the path and have a spontaneous experience of a higher *state* of mind. That is, even though we may not be able to sustain awareness at this higher *stage*, we can, from time to time, get a glimpse from this vantage point. We may not live on the mountain top, but we have seen the view from there so we have a sense of what the valleys around us are like. So let's use the vision that IFS has given us to speculate on a map of the higher regions.

Assuming I have enough competent managers at 4° that I can create myself in my relationships with my children, my parents, my coworkers, my boss; I will have a greater and greater sense of mastery. I have a growing sense that I can be who I choose to be. Except...I can't.

I decided that I would be someone who shows up for work tomorrow well rested and ready for the presentation to the general manager and here it is 2:00 AM and I am watching a movie I have seen three times before. I decided that I was going to take off a few pounds and here I am with my fifth slice of pizza in my hand. I am not who I say I am going to be. I am of two minds about who I want to be.

When I really sit with an awareness of what is going on when I am not as I would have myself be, I discover that there is the part of me that is convinced that it is in my best interest to get to sleep by 10:00, and there is also a part of me that is afraid that I am going to miss something if I go to bed. When I sit with that part I find that it just wants to stay up like the big kids. But wait; there is another part that is allied with it that isn't really counting on something good happening. It is actually trying to save me from something bad that happens at night. It is a part that remembers what sometimes happens and it is trying to keep me safe by not letting me go to bed.

As I engage in this inquiry into my interior world I discover more and more the rich diversity and complexity that is my self at 5°. The more that I allow myself to be present to this aspect of my experience, the more I see what is going on all of the time. It is a bit like an old Polaroid print that is slowly coming into view except that the way I make it visible is simply to watch it.

If we are to move past 4° we will have to do this sort of interior exploration. This is largely what psychotherapy is about (as distinguished from counseling.) It is support for moving into an awareness of the interior of our experience and to observe and address the conflicts that reside there. This is how we begin to move

from fourth to 5°. But it is also how we move from lower to higher orders generally.

If we go back to Angela in the supermarket with Olivia for just a moment: You may have noticed that Angela discovered “the part that wants to be honest” and “the part that wants to protect” and she discovered that each has a different strategy in mind for how to be. She was able to step back from each of these and to find a new way of being that met the needs of both parts. This observation and stepping back supported a move to 4°.

If we go back to me and my job at Burger Doodle and my soccer practice and my other commitments: You may have noticed that there were separate parts that were each constructed by the demands of others. Each had distinct wishes and I had to be aware of each of them to be able to be at 3°. I had to be able to hold all of the considerations in a kind of tension and know what to do to meet all of the needs as best I could. This helped me be able to show up at 3°.

We can even imagine a person with anorexia who is having trouble being able to show up at 2°; that is, to be able to see herself as distinct from her experience. To the degree that she *is* her body and she wants to be invisible to protect herself, she has to make her body go away for her to be safe. It is the conflict between the parts of her that have different ways of constructing what she needs and what to do to meet those needs that is resulting in the self-destructive behavior.

So while the content of the 5° is an awareness of the multiplicity of our selves, that awareness as a *state of being* is something that we can bring to people at whatever *stage of development* they may find themselves. We just have to keep in mind that a *state of mind* is not the same as a *stage of development*.

Similarly, each of our parts has a self at a stage of development. In general it is my experience that exiles tend to be either at 1° or 3°. They are stuck in the trauma of an overwhelming physical experience or of a relationship failure. Managers are most often 4° and firefighters tend to be at 2°.



We are about to make a really big shift here and it can seem less significant than it really is. It is one of those things that we can think we get and then later when it fully hits home we realize that it was far bigger than we suspected. Okay, prepare to make the jump to hyperspace. We are moving on to the 6°.

I am expecting that you will all know what I am talking about here because I am expecting that my readers will all have had the experience of “being in Self” as a state of mind. What I want you to imagine here is what it might be like to have this experience of “being in Self” as a way of being, as a stage of development.

At 5° I am someone who is aware that I am multiply constructed. I notice the parts more and more and I notice the polarities and I am able to consistently speak *for* a part, not *from* a part. From time to time I will be triggered by the circumstances of my life and a part will ask to “drive the bus” and I will just be aware of the urgency of the part to get what it needs and I will be able to be present with it with compassion and clarity and to trust that my creativity will be sufficient to respond fully to the needs of the part.

As I do this I will be able to see my self, more and more, not as the sum of the multiplicity of my parts, but as the Self that holds the parts in a creative tension. The parts are not other than me, but they are something that arises out of the matrix of my experience. They are something that I have, not something that I am. At this point I notice clarity and calm that resonates like a deep bell, a sort of cosmic OM that is the frequency of life itself. This is the *I am* at 6°. This is the Self filled with Self-energy.

All of the transitions from one stage to the next higher one are subtle and gentle and largely invisible to the self as it makes the journey. It is a sort of seamless transformation along the spectrum of my experience. But there is something that happens as we move from 5° to 6° that deserves to be underscored with a bright red line.

Before we begin to reside at 6°, we see those who are different from us as being odd or wrong or even dangerous. At 1° those whose experience is different are mysterious. At 2° order those who do things differently are misguided or foolish. At 3° those who aren't doing what they should are without honor and perhaps deviant. At 4° those whose ways of being are different from mine are beneath me. At 5° I even find parts of myself to be worthy of reproach. But at 6° I can see that all of the parts have a reason for being as they are. The criticism that is present at all of the earlier orders vanishes.

This is the movement from single bracket to double bracket that Dr. Gangadean spoke of. This is the movement from first tier to second tier that Dr. Clare Graves describes in Spiral Dynamics. This is a movement that puts us on the threshold of the divine.

As I rest in the equanimity and peace that comes at 6°, I cannot help but notice that not all around me enjoy the same satisfaction and joy. In fact, I am surrounded by great suffering and torment. This awareness continually inserts itself into my consciousness. I am inextricably connected to all of creation and I long for its release from suffering. I am aware of the privilege that I experience and the burden that I carry. I develop a deep sense of calling and purpose in my life to act on behalf of others. I am at 7°.

And as I rest in the awareness of my place in the larger order of creation and as I seek to be a source for healing and wholeness, I begin to notice more and more that the suffering that I witness is an occasion for calling forth of great

compassion and it becomes harder and harder to see any event as being fully good or bad. The disaster of the flood is the opportunity for community to deepen in its wake. Every down has an up and every plus has a minus and the dualism that is the tension of the created order seems more and more to be just a quality of the is-ness, the such-ness of all things. And I rest at 8°.



As I stated earlier, these higher orders are very speculative for me. Mostly I have tried to draw a line that extends up from the territory that is more familiar to me into the uncharted regions. But I find the map, though faintly drawn in places, serves as a guide to support a movement to perspectives beyond where I can easily reside day to day and moment to moment. It is a ladder that both supports me and bids me to climb higher.

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