

Find Your Stage of Consciousness

By [John Lamy](#) 2008 January-February

BEFORE YOU CAN HELP END THE CULTURE WARS, YOU NEED TO KNOW WHERE YOU STAND

I live in the Rogue River Valley of Southern Oregon, one of the most beautiful places on earth. The mighty Rogue cuts between mountains that are carpeted with ancient redwoods, firs, and deciduous trees of all kinds. But recently we committed an act of almost suicidal stupidity; we closed all 17 of our public libraries for lack of funding. In earlier decades, timber companies clear-cut the trees, which had two consequences: it ravaged our beautiful hills, rendering the place ugly and inhospitable for people and wildlife; and it filled the government coffers, which financed the libraries. Many rural Oregonians felt it was their God-given right to continue the clear-cuts. Eventually, however, environmentalists (like me) prevailed; the trees were spared, but the libraries got the axe.

For more than a year our libraries have remained closed, casualties of the culture war, that profound conflict of value structures that's played out daily on the six o'clock news. How can we better understand what creates these conflicts? What can we do to help? Contemporary philosophers including the late Clare Graves, Ph.D., Don Beck, Ph.D., Christopher Cowan, and Ken Wilber have developed a remarkably useful way to frame such conflicts and to help us move beyond them. The first key is to understand how our own values and the values of our society develop over time.

Research by psychologists spanning more than half a century and more than 50,000 interviews worldwide reveal that our cognitive development happens in stages. Each stage of development represents a leap in consciousness that brings on a new set of values. We make a jump in consciousness, embrace a new set of values, then we plateau - often for years or decades - then we jump again.

Researchers have classified these stages of consciousness and value structures in a variety of ways. The classification system I'm presenting here is called Spiral Dynamics,

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which was first proposed by Clare Graves and proved useful during reconciliation after apartheid in South Africa.

The box below outlines the first seven stages (there are more, but space is limited). To avoid word-association baggage, the stages are often named with colors, but I will add in familiar names to get us started. As you will see, these stages apply to an individual consciousness as well as to cultures and humankind collectively. Each stage has both healthy aspects and unhealthy aspects. The healthy aspects give birth to each stage, while the unhealthy aspects call in the next stage.

IMPLICATIONS OF STAGES

The first implication is that two fundamental elements are strongly linked: our stage of cognitive development and our basic value structure. For example, a person whose conscious cognition has developed to Autonomy (typically in late adolescence) will place a high value on independent, rational thinking and will often treasure education, travel, and life experiences. On the other hand, a person at Law and Order will value order, stability, and going "by the book." When people plateau at Autonomy or Law and Order and stay there during adulthood, those values become the basis for their actions, their choice of companions, and their votes.

The second implication is that we each move through the stages in order; you can't skip ahead. A continuous stream of new people enters the early stages and masters the wisdom of those stages as they move along. So we've got to expect many, many people at earlier stages. They're in process, just like you.

The third implication is more challenging. In an ideal world, an individual proceeding to the next stage would carry forward the wisdom of all the previous stages. Unfortunately, more often than not, something else happens.

BATTLES BETWEEN THE STAGES

Research behind the first six stages (what are called the Tier One Stages) turns up this profoundly disturbing fact: each Tier One Stage is deeply convinced that its value

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structure and its outlook on life are the only legitimate ones! All others are either wrong or evil. For example, the rural folks here in Oregon (Law and Order) feel that the Eastern liberal media (Green) send them pornography and violence that undermine the basic family values on which our country is founded. Conversely, the media mavens believe that those rural Oregonians would readily give up freedom of the press to preserve their family values.

This deep values-based sentiment helps explain why my liberal friends (Green) have had such a visceral, pre-rational response to the Bush White House (Law and Order), and end up much less effective than they could be. The bumper sticker that reads "Anyone Else for President" is not going to win the election or build a better world.

SOURCE OF THE ANIMOSITY

To understand the animosity among Tier One Stages, it helps to look at the stages' cultural roots. Put simply, each new stage was a reaction to a previous situation gone rotten.

For example, during the Dark Ages (approximately 500-1000 C.E.), much of Europe was dominated by warlords and thugs (Power), who freely abused the serfs under their control. The appearance of a system of law (Law and Order) was such a relief, such a breakthrough, that it swiftly (within a few hundred years) replaced the idea of lawlessness as a way to live. (Of course, there are still holdout Power-dominated places today, crying out for Law and Order.)

By the late Middle Ages, however, Law and Order had gained ascendancy and gone bad as well. The church-sponsored Crusades and Inquisition used violence and torture to assure conformity to its version of law and order. So a new stage, Autonomy, stepped in to tame Law and Order's excesses and eventually to promulgate democracy.

Because the new stage solves the problem of the previous one, it tends to dismiss the values and contributions of the old stage. The new stage often looks at people in previous stages as backward and stupid. The result: hostility and alienation among the stages. An analogous process takes place in each individual as he or she develops

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through the stages. You see it clearly among children, the best friends who suddenly have nothing in common and hate each other, only to become best friends again when they get back to being at the same stage.

Even highly developed Greens play a part in interstage animosity. Green has a powerful good side. Green has seen the abuses of hierarchy and conforming to a "higher power." Green welcomes transparency to government, with open meetings and a distaste for secret good ol' boy dealings. Green is inclusive and egalitarian, valuing all points of view. Green is also sensitive to the plight of those who can't speak for themselves (e.g., the trees), and attuned to the interior life.

But when Green is starkly confronted by strong opposition ("Let's clear-cut the forest and reopen the libraries!"), Green can flutter like a heart in fibrillation. Green wants to include all points of view, but . . . not that view! Thus, paradoxically, Green can be less effective at leadership than Law and Order and Autonomy, and thus loses elections.

Green can also reason that since all views are equally valuable, I guess I'll go with . . . mine! In other words, Green is susceptible to sliding clear back to Power's ego-assertiveness and narcissism. From there, absolutely no compromise is possible, working together is gone, even listening to the opposition is gone.

THE RISE OF TIER TWO

Integral, the first stage in the second tier, is the new player appearing in our generation. It is the first stage to see and appreciate the wisdom and values of all the previous stages. Integral understands that the animosity among stages is killing us, and that the unhealthy versions of the stages are polluting the planet even faster than industrial waste. Integral is capable of ending the war between stages and helping each one manifest its healthy form and contribute to the overall system in its own unique way.

Listen to Integral talking: "Of course we need rules and regulations, and a strong military (Law and Order) . . . otherwise families and cultures will fall apart. We ripped the Law and Order out of Iraq, reducing it to Power, and see what happened. We need accountants and production workers and government bureaucrats who follow the rules.

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And by the way, those Oregon Law and Order folks are exactly right: we need to cut back on the violence and pornography because it is hurting our families.

"And of course we need creative thinking and individual insight (Autonomy) . . . otherwise there's no innovation. We need engineers and doctors and marketers who can break out of the box. Creativity is challenging work, and we need to support and affirm those enterprising souls who contribute in this way.

"And of course we need sensitive, insightful people who are in touch with the interior life (Green) . . . otherwise we'll destroy the planet and have hollow, materialistic, alienated lives. And by the way, those media mavens are just as right as the Oregon folks: we must have freedom of expression, or we're locked into medieval thinking. We need us all."

Integral has walked in those many shoes, remembers them, and knows how they work and how each one can contribute. Integral can do a better job at managing this exquisitely complex system, with a light hand that acknowledges the value and genius of each and every stage.

SOLUTIONS THAT DON'T WORK

One might now think that a solution to the culture wars is simple: just get everyone to move to Integral or above, thereby seeing the big picture and making the appropriate compromises. Of course, we want every person to develop to his or her highest potential, and we should build structures that encourage that kind of development. But it takes years to move to the next stage, because there's a lot to learn at each one. And as soon as someone moves up to the next stage, someone else moves in to take his or her place. More important, it's arrogant to tell people to move to another stage, and it doesn't work. What does help is to educate people on the principles of the stages, and encourage them to understand and avoid the unhealthy forms. To get a better sense of the healthy and unhealthy aspects of each stage - and your own progress - spend some time with the self-test on the following pages. Keep in mind that this self-test is a work in progress, and we would appreciate your help making it better.

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John Lamy's experience as a manager with Hewlett-Packard/Agilent inspired his forthcoming book, *The Values War*.

STAGES OF CONSCIOUSNESS

As you read through the description of the stages below, imagine a person growing up from infancy to adulthood, experiencing each stage, learning its value system and its unique skills. Think of yourself and your kids passing through the stages. And simultaneously imagine humankind's march through history along the same stages.

SURVIVAL

- Automatic, instinctual
- Staying alive, meeting biological needs
- Newborns
- Began with Homo sapiens

MAGIC

- PRE-RATIONAL: Forming tribes around rituals to improve survival
- Bonding families together
- Ceremonies, emotional intelligence
- UNHEALTHY: superstition, gangs, ethnic warfare
- Began about 50,000 B.C.E.
- 10% of today's population

POWER

- Assertion of individual self, aggressiveness
- Creativity, heroism, stand up when needed
- UNHEALTHY: narcissism, rage, dictators
- Terrible two's
- Began with city-states about 4000 B.C.E.

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- 20% of today's population

LAW AND ORDER

- Order and stability, hierarchy, convention, "by the book"
- Glue that holds society together, discipline for kids
- Meaning and purpose from higher power
- UNHEALTHY: fascism, religious extremism
- Began with monotheism about 3000 B.C.E.
- 40% of today's population, largest single group

AUTONOMY

- Independent rational thinking, pragmatic, assertive, materialistic
- European enlightenment, democracy, equality, justice
- Science and technology, material abundance
- UNHEALTHY: hyper- materialism, environmental destruction, personal alienation
- Began about 1750
- 30% of today's population, highly influential

GREEN

- Egalitarian, consensual, caring; promotes interior life, diversity
- Environmental movement, feminist movement
- UNHEALTHY: resistance to hierarchy and authority, narcissism
- Began about 1875
- 10% of today's population

INTEGRAL

- Holistic, inclusive: "We need all the stages!"
- Works to integrate and heal the larger community
- Big reduction in personal fear
- UNHEALTHY: materialism

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- Began about 1950
- 1% of today's population

BEYOND INTEGRAL

Increasingly transpersonal, recognizing the self as a fluid construct of our bodies, our communities, and our environment

SELF-TEST: Stages of Consciousness

The pioneering psychologist Abraham Maslow used the phrase "resistance to rubricization" to describe how most people approach this kind of assessment. Many of us don't like to be categorized in any framework and can come up with plenty of reasons for not doing it, and for feeling bad about our answers even in advance of getting the score. Relax. This is a teaching tool to help you learn about the stages. This test is also a work in progress. We would be grateful to hear your thoughts and reactions.

Each group of questions begins with a short series of open-ended questions to allow you to be transported mentally into a space associated with that stage. Then answer the next four questions. Each stage in Tier 1 has both healthy and unhealthy aspects. The first two questions cover the healthy aspect of the stage. The third and fourth questions cover the unhealthy aspects. If a question doesn't make sense to you, give it a low score. Use a pencil so you can go back and change your answers if it seems appropriate.

Use the zero-to-six scale as follows:

- 0) Virtually never
- 1) seldom
- 2) sometimes
- 3) equally yes and no
- 4) fairly often
- 5) Frequently
- 6) yes, virtually always

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MAGIC

Where in your life do you experience the numinous, the magical, and the positive inspiration of connection with something bigger? Do you respond to ceremonies, symbols, special rites? Do you routinely immerse yourself in those situations? Are you sometimes deeply touched by moments in nature? Do you set up and seek out such experiences? Are these experiences more or less frequent as you age?

1. How strong is your connection to the numinous (ceremonies, symbols, nature, art, family celebrations, rites of passage)?
2. How intuitive are you (read a roomful of strangers, read an unfamiliar situation based on gut feeling rather than analysis)?
3. How superstitious are you (cross your fingers, say a silent prayer before a golf shot or an exam)?
4. To what extent do you tend to put your primary identity ahead of the world (white, black, Jew, Arab, Irishman, liberal, conservative, businessman, environmentalist, straight, gay, Christian, atheist . . . whatever it is for you)?

POWER

Do people experience you as a powerful presence, a force to be reckoned with, or are you more retiring and quiet? When it's appropriate, can you take a stand, even make a big stink? Do you? What are some examples? Do you overdo it? Do you find yourself breaking the rules just for fun? Are you a party animal, or do you shy away from that kind of wildness?

1. How frequently are you the one to take command, to jump in and lead the team?
2. Do you sometimes make a stand, raise a big stink, truly attempt to steer the group your way? To what extent?

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3. How often does your anger run away with you?
4. When in conversation, how often does it come back to being about you?

LAW AND ORDER

Is your bank account balanced, is your workbench neatly organized, are you usually on time for get-togethers? Was your childhood home neat? Did you know what was expected of you? Did you have regular chores and expectations? Do you generally abide by the rules? Do patriotic songs make you tear up? When faced with an unfamiliar situation, do you tend to ask for guidance from others or a book?

1. To what extent are you orderly, disciplined, and rule-abiding?
2. Do you read and refer to the holy books of an organized religion, and do those books provide firm guidance for your life? To what extent would people describe you as traditional?
3. Do you feel that our president and the government in general are worthy of respect and should be followed, even if many people say they're wrong?
4. Do you feel that your religion is truly connected to a higher power, and that this connection sometimes overrides other considerations?

AUTONOMY

Try to remember early experiences of thinking for yourself, running counter to your family's or your church's prevailing patterns of thinking. What was that like? What were the specifics? If you did, it may have been around the time of high school. Did your group of friends shift somewhat as you began to break away? Were you strongly rebellious and cantankerous? What thoughts carried you into new territories and deeper waters? How did that feel? Were you quietly reflective, or did your thoughts move you to emotional and energetic rebellion? Did you become more independent and self-reliant? Or maybe your family just generally encouraged independent thought.

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1. To what extent do you truly think independently, rationally, and autonomously? Be careful here: it's easy for wishful thinking to inflate your view, or for low self-esteem to downgrade it.
2. Do you have a strong ego based on your own perceptions and thinking? Do people experience you as strong-minded and solid, almost willful?
3. Do you sometimes say things that are true, but perhaps inappropriate, that might alienate people you are close to? Maybe you're not trying to be a jerk, but might it seem like that to someone watching?
4. You see people who are true believers in a religion or a cause, and you might think them a little infantile, but you envy their enthusiasm. Is that like you?

GREEN

Think of moments when you realized that there is more to life than rationality.

Sometimes these moments can feel like a death, or as though you are going crazy; then you realize that a door is opening onto a bigger vista. Consider the development of your own inner life, your abiding sense of your own awareness. Does that sound familiar, or is it just so much hocus-pocus? How do you feel about the abuse of hierarchy in the church, the government, and within corporations; does all that bother you? Have you joined organizations to save the environment or help those who truly can't help themselves? Are you a good listener, sincerely interested in other people's stories, and do they know that? Do you warmly and actively accept people who are different from you?

1. Have you cultivated an interior life using meditation, prayer, or some kind of regular discipline that stills the mind?
2. To what extent are you sincerely inclusive of real difference in people? Gays and straights, rich and poor, black, white, brown, religious, secular, atheist, everybody . . . truly included in your world. ↯

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3. Do you sometimes find yourself unable to make a decision because there are so many points of view and so many people's opinions to take into consideration?

4. Do you sometimes find yourself in an emotional reaction to hierarchy?

INTEGRAL

As you look around at your friends and associates, do you sometimes have this conflicting feeling: you truly appreciate the range of values that they hold and realize that we do need all of them, but you simultaneously feel out of place? Are you deeply motivated to make a constructive contribution to the world, and if it's anonymous that's just fine with you (though strategically it might be wise to have your name on it)? Do you feel less anxious, fearful, and stressed than most people around you? Have you pursued an interior practice for awhile, and felt some forward movement in your life? As you look back over the last decade or so, do you sense that your attitude toward hierarchy is changing, that you once were uncomfortable with hierarchy but now realize that there is a naturalness to it, that it's built into the system, and while there's destructive, dominating hierarchy, there's also a beautiful, life-oriented hierarchy that we can build on? Are possessions more burdensome than before?

1. If you've been on the liberal side of the political spectrum, can you honestly, enthusiastically, support an authentic conservative value structure as well as your own?

2. To what extent do you feel that there is a hierarchy that is wholesome and beneficial, despite the abuse of hierarchy?

3. As you look around your circle of friends and associates, does it seem that you are less fearful, less stressed, less anxious than others? Do you feel more solid, more quiet, more at home in your own skin? More attuned to the simple joy of being alive and aware in every moment, and less distracted by the ups and downs of daily life?

4. Is the interior practice you may have built for yourself more and more important and satisfying in your life? Does it seem to lead toward a more outward, generous, inclusive

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attitude, and that possessions (even non-physical ones such as fame and excitement) just seem sometimes to get in the way?

SCORING

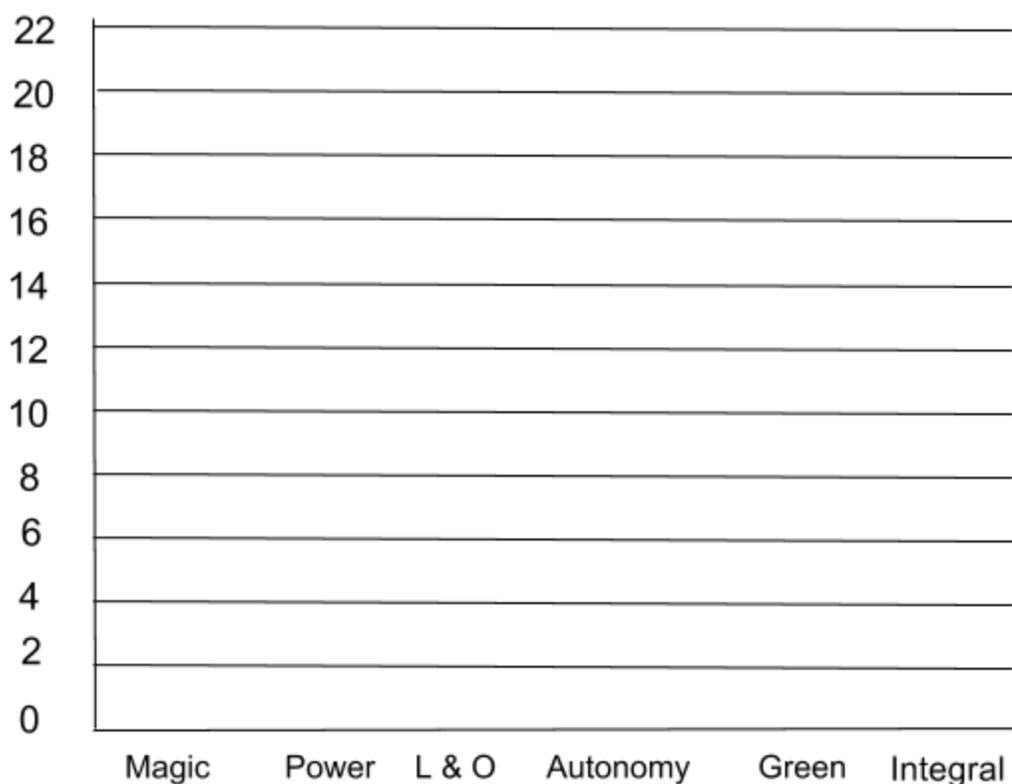
Add together the scores from the following questions:

Stage	Questions 1+2	Questions 3+4	Total
MAGIC			
POWER			
LAW AND ORDER			
AUTONOMY			
GREEN			
INTEGRAL			

On the graph below, draw a vertical bar to the correct height for each of your totals, then draw a divider to separate healthy and unhealthy for the first five stages.

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TALL BARS AND SHORT BARS

Most likely a single bar sticks up prominently that represents the value system where your psychic energy most naturally flows. You are comfortable there; it feels like home. If there are two adjacent tall bars, it's possible that you are going through a transition. Or it may just be the imprecision of this assessment.

Short bars to the left of the tall one(s) represent earlier value structures that you have transcended. You don't identify with that value structure most of the time. But there are many times when you draw from the storehouse of knowledge associated with those earlier value structures. The degree to which that succeeds depends both on how well you mastered that value structure when you were there, and how well you've truly included it in your life as opposed to repressing it into your shadow side.

Short bars to the right of the tall one represent value structures that you have not yet embraced. As you filled out the assessment, the questions associated with these stages

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probably felt a little strange. It is appropriate to have value structures that you've not yet embraced, and may never embrace. The world needs good people at every stage, and being there is all about learning what that stage has to teach you. So, take heart and be where you are!

ABOUT THIS ARTICLE

This document is a reformatting of an [article by the same name in Spirituality & Health](#).