1/20 – The Program – The Development of Meta-Systemic Cognition

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Like I am sure many other readers of the *Integral Leadership Review*, I have a deep appreciation of the need for humanity to take a giant leap in consciousness if we are to successfully tackle the collective challenges we face. Humanity is edging ever closer to crisis. The old ways of doing things simply won't cut it if we are to successfully tackle challenges such as climate change, globalisation and a financial system in seemingly constant turmoil. I recognise these issues, but I often struggle with determining what my contribution can or should be. These issues seem so enormous and intractable. It can all seem quite overwhelming. So I have constantly asked myself – what should my role be in contributing to the successful evolution of humanity.

I recognise that to contribute to the solutions, I need to undertake a significant amount of self-development. And I have done my best. My bookshelf is filled with books on meditation, integral theory and practice, adaptive leadership and change, among other things. But while I have an intellectual commitment to all of these topics, I had generally failed to incorporate these practices into my daily life. I have written plans, set aside time for meditation and done my best to develop a more systemic way of thinking. But while I have had the 'will' I had not found the 'way'.

This frustration led me to seek out practical training that would develop both my self-actualisation and cognitive capacity. My search led me to undertake a recently developed ten-week program designed to develop the capacity for meta-systemic thinking. It is simply called 'The Program'. The Program combines practices derived from meditation and exercises in developing cognitive capacities with the aim of developing a new type of individual. This type of individual will be able to act in a way that furthers the successful evolution of humanity. For me, undertaking The Program has been the beginning of a new way of living life.

The program has been jointly developed by two Australians – John Stewart and Victoria Wilding. Stewart is the author of *Evolution's Arrow: The Direction of Evolution and the Future of Humanity*, *The Evolutionary Manifesto* and the accompanying *Strategies for Advancing Evolution*. Stewart's central theme in these texts is that the future evolutionary success of humanity is only assured if human beings consciously and intentionally develop the capacities to support evolution. Failure to do so will ensure humanity is a failed experiment.

Wilding is Principal of the Shift Foundation. The vision of the Shift Foundation is "to create a more unified, life-affirming, sustainable global society where the self-interest of individuals, corporations and nations is aligned with the interest of the planet as a whole".

I was privileged to undertake the program in a one-to-one coaching format with Stewart. Each Thursday evening we would spend an hour via Skype working our way through the ten-week course. I would then undertake homework exercises over the next week and report back on my experiences at the beginning of the next session.

The Program is split into two five-week components.

The aim of the first five week component of The Program is for the participant to be able to dis-embed from ongoing thought, feelings and emotions. Dis-embedding means much the same as the more commonly referred to phrase of being 'in the present'. This is outlined by Stewart in *The Evolutionary Manifesto* (24):

In this mode, thoughts and feelings may continue to arise, but the individual can let them pass by without acting on them or becoming involved in them consciously. They lose their power over behaviour. For example, unfair and unjust treatment may evoke feelings of anger, but the individual is free to let the feelings go by and instead choose to respond calmly and wisely. Or an impending difficulty may cause worrying thoughts to arise, but the individual is free to let them go by, without getting involved in them.

Individuals in this mode are said to be in the present because they are not continually bound up in thoughts about the past or future. The freeing up of consciousness enables the individual to respond to challenges creatively and intelligently, rather than habitually. Thoughts and feelings continue to provide the individual with adaptive information, but they no longer dominate behaviour. All the resources accumulated by the individual are free to contribute to the development of adaptive responses.

Because it leaves the limited capacity of consciousness as free as possible, being in the present enables individuals to be far more aware of what is going on around them and within their own mind from moment to moment. Consciousness is experienced as being more spacious and of wider scope. Experience is more vivid.

Being in the present also enables the acquisition of genuine self-knowledge. It is only when individuals are in the present that they can stand outside their thoughts and feelings and observe them objectively. Furthermore, because thoughts and feelings no longer jerk awareness around incessantly, being in the present is experienced as calm and peaceful—the peace that passes all understanding.

A fully developed capacity to be present in the midst of daily life fundamentally changes the experience of being conscious. A new kind of human being comes into existence.

The exercises in The Program are designed to equip the student to be able to dis-embed from his/her thoughts, feelings and emotions and to *own* them, not to be owned *by* them. Stewart took me through a number of techniques to achieve this. For example, I chose two meetings during a week at work to act out of character and noted how my internal thought processes during these meetings. At other times I would expand my awareness and observe the entire space of a meeting rather than remain (as we all normally do) within a narrow focus. The student learns that acting in a way contrary to what others expect of you is actually far less painful than you would first think. These exercises therefore give the student a glimpse of the possibilities available by viewing the world differently and having a full range of responses open to them.

The Program is underpinned by the development of 'internal scaffolding'. Internal scaffolding is designed to ingrain the processes into the student learns during The Program into their daily life. Or, as Stewart says, it enables the participant to be able to move at 'right angles' to the way they would habitually behave. It gives an individual the freedom to choose the best way to act and intervene in any given circumstance.

Crucial to the development of internal scaffolding is the concept of an 'internal reference point' within your body. The concept of the internal reference point and practices used to develop it are taken from Kleopatra Ormos's CD 'Induction to Meditation' which accompanies her book – *Journey of the Human Sculptor: What Your Thoughts Cannot Tell You*. In The Program, students must undertake one of the exercises in Ormos's CD twice a day. Stewart and Wilding provide some explanatory notes which give further context to the exercises on the CD. These exercises teach you how to develop an internal reference point on which to focus your attention while you watch thoughts, feelings and emotions go by without becoming embedded within them. As The Program progresses, the participant is encouraged to undertake Ormos's exercises without the CD.

In essence, the internal reference point and practical implementation of the exercises on the CD into everyday life become the internal scaffolding to ensure that the student can constantly become better at dis-embedding from thought, feeling and emotion and act more wisely and effectively.

It is important to clarify here that there is no one 'correct' internal reference point. I found that my most effective internal reference point was to focus on feeling my fingers. I understand from Stewart that his internal reference point is a feeling between his shoulder-blades. Each person will be different.

Through the development of internal scaffolding and the internal reference point, The Program is a step beyond those approaches that give you the realisation that your values and habitual processes are impeding your goals but don't provide you with the means and practices to overcome this. Kegan and Lahey's *Immunity to Change* is one such approach. Immunity to Change is a four step process that helps the student identify their goals and what is impeding the achievement of those goals. But you only recognise these limitations in an intellectual sense. Whereas The Program provides you with the tools and techniques to free yourself from these limitations.

The development of my internal scaffolding improved throughout The Program and has continued to do so in the weeks since I completed The Program. I more easily see colours and depth in objects and am more awake in my daily life. I can act more wisely in response to challenges at work and in my personal life. I spend less time 'worrying' and can more easily access higher capacities in exercising judgment.

The success of this approach also explains to me why I have had so many false starts in my self-development. I can have the best of intentions, but unless I have developed the internal scaffolding to rely upon, any 'new' approach will not be sustained. This also explains why so many purely meditation and spiritual-based approaches to self-development tend to fail. You could spend years at a meditation retreat but unless you employ your techniques in relation to the real world, the techniques will fail as soon as you engage with the world.

With the completion of the first half of The Program, it was time to move on to the second five week component – the development of meta-systemic cognition.

Stewart and Wilding believe that the development of meta-systemic cognition needs to be at the centre of a 'second enlightenment' where a significant enough proportion of humanity moves beyond analytic-rational capacities. If a significant proportion of humanity does not develop greater mental capacities, we are doomed.

Before moving on, it is important here to clearly understand the link between the two components of The Program – dis-embedding and meta-systemic cognition. Stewart and Wilding argue convincingly that only after dis-embedding from ongoing thought, feeling and emotion can an individual have meta-systemic cognitive abilities open to them. To do otherwise would be to try to use intuition, insight and wisdom while having ongoing thought in your mind. This would not be productive. As Stewart writes in *The Evolutionary Manifesto* (21):

The key impediment to developing a comprehensive capacity for systemic modeling is that thinking prevents it from working effectively. We can't do both at the one time—we cannot operate intuitively and wisely, silently drawing on our models of complex systems, and at the same time engage in concentrated thought.

This is because the capacity of consciousness to process information is very limited. The processing capacity of consciousness is easily filled, leaving no room for other functions. We are able to be conscious of only a very tiny part of the information detected by our senses at any moment. We can listen to and follow only one conversation at a time, and when we are engaged in deep thought, the rest of the world disappears.

As a result, sequences of conscious thought fully occupy consciousness, and prevent us from using other capacities. In particular, thought crowds out conscious access to the models and pattern recognition processes we need to understand complex systems. When we are embedded in thought, we have little access to skills, intuition, insight, wisdom and other forms of knowledge and intelligence that are not coded in thought. It is only when we are 'in the present' rather than absorbed in thought that we can act from the whole of our self, drawing on all the resources and skills we have built up over our lifetime.

This is a major impediment because our consciousness tends to be dominated by thought processes. Consciousness is continually loaded by our imagining, rehearsing, justifying, analysing, commentating, fantasizing, worrying, etc. Our consciousness is rarely free to observe what is happening moment to moment. Its narrow bandwidth is continually filled with thinking, leaving us with little awareness of our environment.

In essence, approaches that focus solely on mindfulness and dis-embedding from thought do not develop the cognitive capacities of individuals or enable them to judge how and when to act in the world. Similarly, approaches that delve straight into cognitive development do not account for the need to be able to dis-embed from our habitual responses and processes to effectively implement the cognitive insights.

In the development of meta-systemic cognition, The Program refers to the four quadrants of meta-systemic cognition (see figure 1). These are adapted from Laske's four quadrants of dialectical thinking. They are *process*, *context*, *relationship* and *transforming system*. Specifically:

>   **Context**: Seeing everything that exists as part of an organized, multi-layered whole, usually synchronically (at a particular point in time). (e.g. understanding a beehive by describing only its structure and its environment).
>   **Process**: Seeing everything in the process of undergoing unceasing change. (e.g. understanding the processes that bring the beehive into being and make it vanish).
>   **Relationship**: Seeing that everything shares a common ground. (e.g understanding that without describing the relationships between the bee hive's main components – the queen, the drones, the

worker bees, that the hive has not been described or understood fully).
Transforming System: Seeing everything as a transformational system, combining aspects of Context, Process, and Relationship. (e.g. understanding the beehive is a living system transforming through time).

Context	Process
Relationship	Transforming system

Figure 1: The four quadrants of meta-systemic cognition

The first few weeks of the second component of The Program centre on understanding the difference between meta-systemic cognition and analytical-rational cognition. To do this, Stewart and Wilding provide the student with analytical-rational statements and ask the student to assess what is being left out in terms of process, context and relationship. The student then develops their own examples to reinforce the differentiation between the two cognition types. Key to this process is the use of 'mind openers'. Mind openers are questions that someone can ask you or you can ask of yourself that help you understand what you might be leaving out in your understanding of an issue in terms of process, context and relationship.

I found developing my own examples of meta-systemic versus analytical-rational cognition difficult at times. It was relatively straight forward to identify the short-comings of the analytical-rational statements. I was also able to identify context and process examples without too much effort. However, dis-entangling relationship examples from process and context examples proved a real challenge for me. I also found it easy to come up with meta-systemic examples of understanding in my fields of expertise (for example, politics and economics) but much harder in areas of life with which I am less familiar. Family and social life also provide a source of such examples but these can also be difficult to differentiate between context, process and relationship.

The good news is that these are exercises you can practice in everyday life. You can read a newspaper article and surmise what the journalist is missing in terms of the four quadrants. You can also watch two or more people debate an issue on a news program and work out what each is missing in their cognitive/systemic understanding. I found I was getting better at this for each week of the The Program and have continued to do so since completing the course. It is a foundation I can continue to build on.

Towards the conclusion of The Program, Stewart asked me to provide an example from my work or personal life that we worked through using a meta-systemic process. This is done through the construction of a mental model where you visualise the issue and 'dance around' that mental model with the use of mind openers ensuring you have considered the four quadrants of meta-systemic thinking. This is in contrast to the standard abstract-rational approach where to learn more about a topic, instead of visualising the issue you would go and read as much as you can to become 'enlightened' on the subject. Stewart stressed to me that to develop meta-systemic cognitive capacities, constructing a mental model and testing it to ensure it considers the four quadrants of meta-systemic thinking must be undertaken prior to 'reading up' on a subject. Once you learn more about the issue you can then go back and see where your mental model needs to be revised to take account of what you have learned. Again, this is difficult, but you get better the more you practice.

As the meta-systemic cognition component of The Program developed, I realised another connection between the first and second components of the course. If you let it, meta-systemic cognition can often send your mind racing about all sorts of actions you should take and possibilities that are open to you. There is a risk at this point of worrying or becoming embedded in thought. Therefore, it is important to dis-embed from these thoughts using the techniques learnt in the first half of The Program to take the wisest course of action open to you.

The Program concludes with the development of a four-page action plan for each student.

I have decided to share my personal action plan with readers of the *Integral Leadership Review* (see Attachment A). I hope sharing this plan gives further insight into The Program and its benefits.[i] As you can see, the plan is something I can undertake as part of, not apart from, my daily life. As someone with a busy job and a young family, this is very important. For me, this will be a living document and I plan to review this plan every six months and update it as necessary.

As mentioned at the beginning of this Note, undertaking the ten week program has been the beginning of living a new kind of life. But at the end of The Program am I master on meta-systemic cognition? Hell, no! I would not say that meta-systemic thinking is something that comes to me naturally at all. But as Stewart told me, if this

was easy, we would all have these capacities innate within us. The important thing is that I now have the structure and internal scaffolding to continue to develop these abilities. I can continue this evolutionary development as part of everyday life. I have taken a step on a path on which I am determined to continue. Whereas once I would avoid getting out of my comfort zone and testing my cognitive capacities, I now look forward to these opportunities and relish them.

I will continue my self-development that was supported by The Program. This is likely to include seeking to become a facilitator for The Program in future. Stewart found during our ten weeks together that our interaction further spurred his development as he assisted me in grappling with challenges along the way. If The Program is undertaken in a one-to-one coaching format[ii], it will need as many facilitators as possible if it is to reach a wide range of people. Perhaps with further development and adaptation, The Program can become more effective in a group setting.

I hope this Note has piqued the interest of readers of *Integral Leadership Review* and you explore the themes tackled in The Program. I believe The Program provides an exciting way forward for integralists wishing to develop their cognitive capacities. Having read *Integral Life Practice*, in my view, the lack of a process for cognitive development is a shortcoming of that approach. Indeed, I have an action plan I composed after reading *Integral Life Practice* that has remained in the bottom drawer of my bedside table ever since. I found Integral Life Practice something that time needed to be set aside for, not something that was an increasing part of everyday life. The Program is a wholly different approach.

About the Author

Mark Roddam is an economist with a deep interest in leadership, evolutionary theory and cognitive development. He lives in Canberra, Australia.

If you would like more information on The Program please contact John Stewart at his website www.evolutionarymanifesto.com or you can contact the author at higgsbosonblues9@gmail.com

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ATTACHMENT A – ACTION PLAN

Time period

- The initial period of this action plan is 6 months.

PART 1 – DIS-EMBEDDING

Daily practice

- Under take formal practice twice a day. This includes:
  - Doing the exercises on Kleo's CD. Using the CD some of the time and not using the CD at other times. I would particularly return to the CD if I felt the self-scaffolding I have developed deteriorating.

- Visualising being in situations where my habitual processes and practices are impeding my goals, particularly where I have advance notice where a situation may be coming up and/or reviewing a situation where these processes and practices have impeded my goals.
- Visualising calling up emotions and feelings that will promote actions to achieve my goals

Staying awake in daily life

- Using my internal reference point and expanding my visual horizons to stay awake. This would be in all situations but I would focus on:
  - During one on one conversations to feel both my internal reference point and the person to be genuinely engaged with them.
  - During meetings at work, particularly using the practices to be 'on the balcony'
  - When walking, particularly to develop a sense of time and space
  - To 'feel' external objects and 'see without looking'
  - Developing, through practice, a return of feeling to my internal reference point when I drift into thinking.
  - Developing, through practice, a return of feeling to my internal reference point when faced with stressful situations.
  - Identify specific actions such as walking through doorways or around corners, beginning typing, opening a door, looking in a mirror, etc. that develop the practice of waking up.

Continually looking for opportunities to challenge habitual thought and processes to develop a wiser self

- Whether it be at work, family life, or my social life, look for opportunities to challenge my habitual processes and practices. For me, the most obvious of these is the need to be liked and not to confront issues in the manner an effectively operating person would confront them. However, there are many other such habitual processes that I would continually identify and work on.
- In each six month period I would identify specific instances I can envisage in the next six months to test myself:

Confront more obvious fears

- In a safe environment, get out of my comfort zone in relation to fear of heights or going on rides at a theme park, etc. I would notice the feelings in my as I both approach and undertake these activities and then sense these feelings in subsequent daily practice. At these times I would try to bring myself into the present moment. Then I would relive and dis-embed from these feelings in my daily practice.

Determining the future

- I will combine the dis-embedding and cognitive development practices to determine my future goals and using the practices outlined in this plan to achieve them.
- I would then look for opportunities to activate these goals.

PART 2 – META-SYSTEMIC COGNITION

Developing the habits of meta-systemic cognition

- I will dis-embed to enable myself to think meta-systemically without the distraction of ongoing thought.
- I will develop the habit of dancing around the mental model of meta-systemic cognition when attempting to understand an issue or situation. This will lead to mind-opening questions to ask myself and others, which will, in turn, lead to many more mind-opening questions which will further illuminate the issue/situation.
- I will use intuition, emotion and pattern recognition to engage in meta-systemic cognition.
- I will not 'read up' on an issue before going through a meta-systemic cognition process
- I will develop the habit of meta-systemic cognition by asking a series of mind-opening questions both about myself and any situation I confront. I can practice by using examples I read in the media, confront at work or in my personal life. I will ask these questions of both myself and others. These major questions are:
  - How did we get here? What transformational system is unfolding to produce what has been produced?

- In building my mental model of the system, have I taken account of everything I need to – including process, context and relationship?
- Does my mental model accord with facts and insights gained from elsewhere? Does it need to be re-worked?
- I will continually add to my experience and arsenal of meta-systemic cognition.
- In subsequently reading up on an issue or finding out more about it, I will consequently adjust my mental models accordingly.

Seeing myself as a system

- In developing and strengthening capacity for meta-systemic thinking, I will see myself as a system evolving and changing over time. I will see how my beliefs and habits were formed. If these beliefs and habits are not optimal, I will be able to re-evaluate and re-determine them.
- I will see that my actions and attitudes can impact on the system (including context, process and relationship) that I am observing.
- I will keep my system healthy and nourished by taking care of my diet and exercising.

The ongoing circle of meta-systemic thinking and dis-embedding

- I recognise that, particularly where my meta-systemic thinking relates to relationships, I have a tendency to then embed in thought about the issues uncovered by the meta-systemic cognitive exercise. At these times, it is important to return to my internal reference point and dis-embed from the thoughts that have arisen and may be occupying my intention.

Looking for opportunities

- I will seek out opportunities to get 'out of my comfort zone' and look forward to new challenges that give me an opportunity for meta-systemic thinking. I will look for these opportunities in my work, family life and friendships/relationships.

Pitfalls and challenges

- I recognise the distinct possibility that I could develop the capacity to dis-embed with a view to utilising meta-systemic cognition, to only then work through an issue in a mechanistic analytical-rational way. If I do so, I must return to the mind-openers (on both myself and others) and let mind-openers lead to other mind-openers. I must also ensure these mind-openers relate to the four quadrants of meta-systemic cognition.

The future

- I intend to encourage the development of meta systemic cognition in others. I will do this through using mind-openers and elements I have learnt in The Program.
- Down the track, I could facilitate taking others through The Program.
- My over-arching aim for the future is to continue to 'wake up' and be a self-actualising individual who is utilising his capacity for higher cognition and is doing so to play my part in advancing the successful evolution of humanity.

Review

- After every challenge in which I have attempted to employ meta-systemic cognition, I will evaluate how my capacity for meta-systemic cognition is increasing and evolving.
- I would review this plan every 6 months (or more regularly as the need arises) and see what needs adjusting and assess how I can extend myself further to become a self-actualising individual with the capacity for meta-systemic thinking.

Notes

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[i] I have not included specific examples in the Action Plan that I identify within each six month period which I constantly review and change.

[ii] Stewart told me during the course that he has previously facilitated The Program in a ten-week group format, but this had proven far less successful than the one-to-one coaching format because it is necessary to tailor the course to the specific needs, background, knowledge and experience of participants.

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