

A HIERARCHY OF CONSCIOUSNESS

By Stephen Kiesling

Dolls by Crystal Star

Decades of research worldwide suggest that cultures evolve in stages, a hierarchy like nesting Russian dolls elegantly described in the eight colors of Spiral Dynamics — and tested against apartheid. Surprisingly, the most dangerous stage may not be toward the bottom where people fight for survival, feudal power, and market share. Instead, it may be where we are...

On November 30, 1998, *The New Yorker* ran a remarkable and caution-ary feature by journalist Douglas Preston on Chaco Canyon, New Mexico, and that most mysterious civilization, the Anasazi. Chaco, with its magnificent stone Great Houses, was the hub of a huge civilization spreading over 50,000 square miles, a civilization that ended right after lunch, circa 1150 A.D., without anybody cleaning the pots. Afterward, their legend grew and grew, until their civilization became a parable of Utopia. They were said to be a profoundly spiritual people who lived in harmony with nature; a people without rich or poor or even a ruling class, who governed by consensus. In 1987, Chaco Canyon was a Mecca for that great hand-holding called the Harmonic Convergence and at least one archaeological site has since been closed because so many people buried crystals or had their ashes spread there. One extreme of the story claimed that these “highly evolved beings” left the earth in space ships.

But, as Preston detailed, the Utopian tale of the Anasazi ignored one gnawing problem: piles of human bones that looked to archaeologists like “food trash.” Bones with polished ends from being stirred in a pot and then cracked open for marrow. Bones representing thousands of people over hundreds of years. In case there was any doubt about what happened to these boiled and shattered bones, archaeologists found human feces deposited upon the stone hearth of the family that apparently became the dinner, and the feces in turn contained the remnants of human flesh. In other words, the Anasazi were not an evolved society at all. Their leaders ate those who disagreed with them.

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Ouch! Why repeat this brutal story here? Well, one simple reason is to reinforce a point that historians and archaeologists and anthropologists have been making for years: Utopia, so far as science tells us, is not behind us. Modern societies are far from perfect, but they tend to be evolving for the better.

The second and more complex reason for this jolting tale is that those of us struggling along on our spiritual journeys — especially the roughly 24% of the American population identified as the Cultural Creatives — of which you, dear reader, are likely a charter member — often find ourselves attempting to embrace everything and everyone equally. Not wanting to oppress anyone, we want to deny that certain ways of being in the world are higher or lower. In our fight against oppressive hierarchies, we have a tendency to embrace romantic

myths like the Anasazi. What we often don't understand — and what has now been demonstrated in psychological studies involving ten of thousands of people worldwide — is that the point where we try to deny that hierarchies exist turns out to be a fairly distinct stage in a larger “hierarchy of consciousness” — and it's not the top.

One Brief History of Higher Consciousness

The idea of evolving levels or a hierarchy of consciousness is nothing new. Back in the sixties, psychologist Abraham Maslow identified a progression in consciousness from A-values (survival needs like food and sex and shelter) to B-values (“higher grumbles” like choosing a career). Meanwhile, the late Clare Graves at Union College in New York was figuring out more specifically what these stages

1 Beige
Thinking: Instinctive. Concerned about food, water, and procreation.
Politics: Clans who fight to keep place in the survival niche.

2 Purple
Thinking: Animistic. Concerned about rites, rituals, taboos.
Politics: Tribes who fight to protect the myths, ancestral traditions.

3 Red
Thinking: Egocentric. Concerned with gratification, glitz.
Politics: Feudal who fight to dominate and plunder.

4 Blue
Thinking: Authority. Concerned with discipline, traditions, and rules. Lives for later.
Politics: Nations that fight to protect borders, homelands, hearth, preserve way of life, defend “holy” cause.

5 Orange
Thinking: Strategic. Concerned about material success, status, and growth
Politics: Corporate States who fight to extend economic spheres for access to raw materials and markets.

6 Green
Thinking: Consensus. Concerned about equality, feelings, authenticity, sharing, and caring.
Politics: Value communities who fight to punish those who commit “crimes against humanity” and protect the victims.

7 Yellow
Thinking: Integrative. Concerned about natural systems, multiple realities, knowledge.

8 Turquoise
Thinking: Holistic. Concerned with collective individualism, cosmic spirituality, earth changes.

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of human consciousness might be — and how they might become useful for creating a more peaceful world. In studies involving thousands of people, what Graves found were not so much discrete stages of consciousness but “a spiraling process marked by progressive subordination of older, lower-order behavior to newer, higher-order systems as man’s existential problems change.” In other words, Graves found that each level of consciousness remains within us even as we progress up and up.

Next, Don Beck, Ph.D., and Christopher Cowan expanded Graves’s description of spiraling consciousness into the colors of Spiral Dynamics. As Dr. Beck explains, the spirals nest together like Russian dolls: We don’t leave one stage for another; instead, each new spiral envelops all those levels that were already there. The worldviews at each layer are “nested truths.” In other words, the worldview is the way the world looks at that level — which is why communication between levels is so nearly impossible. People at different levels are reacting to very different realities.

While the colors take some getting used to, they have been shown to be very helpful, especially in racially charged conflicts like those in South Africa. Using the language of Spiral Dynamics, a situation is no longer black vs. white but blue vs. purple or orange vs. green. More importantly, the focus is no longer on types of people (which don’t change) but types in people (which can and do change.) Beck made more than 60 trips to South Africa and was commended by both Nelson Mandela and Zulu leader Mongosutho Buthelezi.



The World as a Kaleidoscope

Don Beck explains that Third-World societies are dealing, for the most part, with lower levels — beige, purple, and red. Staying alive, finding safety and dealing with feudal-age conditions matter most. Second-World societies are characterized by authoritarian (blue), one-party states, whether from the right or from the left. First-World nations are centered in orange, a free-market-driven and individual-liberty focused worldview. Green, yellow, and turquoise are emerging in the “post-modern” age, but we have no traditional language beyond First World.

But, as Beck reminds us, there are systems within systems within systems. “So many of the same issues we confront on the West Bank (red to blue) can be found in South Central Los Angeles. One can experience the animistic (purple) worldview on Bourbon Street as well as in the Republic of Congo. Matters brought before the city council in Minneapolis (orange to green to yellow) are not unlike the debates in front of governing bodies in the Netherlands.”

The possibilities for using the colors are many and varied — and there are several books dreaming up more, notably Ken Wilber’s latest, *A Theory of Everything* (Shambala, 2000). But the main point to remember here is that the vast majority of the world’s people are ethnocentric: Only about 10% has reached the multicultural green stage of the Cultural Creatives. For the rest to reach that level they will have to progress step by step from purple to red to blue to orange. Unfortunately, the egalitarian greens, who tend to see all hierarchies as oppressive, have a tendency to destroy blue.

Greens think ridding the world of blue will naturally raise people, but what it often does instead is drop them into red and purple. In South Africa, for example, apartheid was built on a blue foundation on which white South Africans had built a strong, orange capitalist state. When apartheid was dismantled, the country was thrown into tur-

moil. Of course apartheid needed to go, but this dynamic helps to explain that the people of South Africa need time to create their own blue order to replace the European version. By the same token, authoritarian blue countries like Singapore may appall greens, but the blue order there contains a hot ethnic purple and red core. Abruptly knocking out the blue would unleash chaos. Instead, what needs to happen is to build individual autonomy and achievement, and move the blues up to orange.

The good news is that when we leap upward from green to yellow — as Ken Wilber is convinced the Cultural Creatives are poised to do — we become conscious of all the steps of the ladder that got us to this very privileged position. More importantly, we can better support the steps of other people and countries coming up behind us. It is easy to forget how fortunate we are and to lose sight of the real work ahead by clinging to dreams like the Anasazi — but, if we’re lucky, somewhere along the journey, reality bites and we are forced to move up.

For updates on Spiral Dynamics see Spiraldynamics.com ❖

And Where Are You Hanging Out?

My World is

- A. a natural milieu where humans rely on instinct to stay alive
- B. a magical place alive with spirit beings and mystical signs
- C. a jungle where the strongest and most cunning survive
- D. an ordered existence under the control of the ultimate truth
- E. a marketplace full of possibilities and opportunities
- F. a human habitat in which we share life’s experiences
- G. a chaotic organism forged by differences and change
- H. An elegantly balanced system of interlocking forces.