



Evolution as a Spiritual Journey

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Most people think of evolution in physical Darwinian terms, from the perspective of the evolution of species. My purpose in this paper is to show evolution in a different light, from the perspective of the evolution of human consciousness.

We can think about the evolution of human consciousness in two ways: as a cultural phenomenon beginning about 200,000 years ago when modern man (*Homo sapiens*) emerged as the most successful strain of the genus *Homo*, or as a personal phenomenon that affects all of us, stretching from the moment we are born to the moment we die.¹ It is this latter perspective that I propose to explore in this paper.

A Psycho-Spiritual Approach

My approach is psycho-spiritual, having its roots in transpersonal psychology. Transpersonal psychology is an emergent school of psychology that integrates the spiritual aspects of human experience with modern psychology. "Transpersonal" refers to the experiences we have of our transcendent nature, a sense of our larger identity that goes beyond the narrow confines of the ego-self to embrace the broader horizons of the soul-self.

Your *soul* is the reason you exist in this three-dimensional physical reality. It is a field of conscious awareness that exists in the energetic realm of the fourth dimension of reality, beyond space and time, in the quantum energy field. It is an individuated aspect of the universal energy field from which everything that exists in our physical world derives its existence.

Your soul projected itself into your physical body shortly after your conception and imbued every atom and cell in your body with conscious awareness and the will to survive. The will to survive, which is found in every living creature, is the soul's will to be present in physical form in our three-dimensional reality. The reason your soul incarnated into your body is to support the evolution of consciousness here on Earth. In pursuit of this objective, your soul has two strategic purposes that you can choose to align with or not: first, to lead a values-driven life and second, to lead a purpose-driven life. Your soul cannot fulfil these purposes unless your ego is able to shift into energetic alignment with your soul.

Your ego is a field of conscious awareness that is associated with your body. Like every atom and cell in your body, your ego is imbued with the will to survive, the soul's will to be present in three-dimensional reality. Whereas the purpose of the



conscious awareness of your atoms and cells is to keep your body alive, the purpose of the conscious awareness of your ego is to keep the body safe from harm in its physical, social and cultural environment. Thus, your atoms and cells take care of the body's internal stability, whereas your ego takes care of the body's external equilibrium, its interactions with your physical, social and cultural environment.

Basic Needs and Growth Needs

From a psychological perspective, every person on the planet grows and develops in seven distinct stages. We begin this journey by attempting to satisfy our basic needs (the needs of the ego). When we have learned to master these needs to an adequate level, we continue the journey by attempting to satisfy our growth needs (the needs of the soul).

Basic needs

A *basic* need is something that is important to get, have, or experience in order to feel physically and emotionally safe in your framework of existence. Abraham Maslow² referred to them as “deficiency” needs. You feel anxious and fearful when you are unable to satisfy your basic needs, but once they are met, you no longer pay them much attention. The reason you feel anxious or fearful when these needs are not met is because they are intrinsic to your physiological and psychological well-being. Unless you are able to meet these needs, your ego will not be able to experience a sense of internal stability and external equilibrium in your framework of existence.

When circumstances arise that allow you to meet any unmet deficiency needs, you will feel a surge of happiness – a temporary relief from anxiety and fear – but the happiness normally dissipates quickly as your mind refocuses itself on searching for opportunities to meet your other unmet deficiency needs.

If you worry often – if you have unresolved conscious or subconscious fears – the chances are that you will never get beyond the third stage of psychological development.

When you have unresolved conscious and subconscious fears you will always be on the lookout for threats that align with these fears. Your life will become an unrelenting search for what is missing, punctuated by brief moments of happiness, when you are temporarily able to satisfy your needs.

The reason for this is that our minds are programmed to scan the information we receive from our senses, first for threats that align with our fears and second for opportunities to meet our unmet needs. Only when you reduce your fears and



anxieties and have mastered your deficiency needs is your mind able to focus on finding opportunities to satisfy your growth needs.

From an evolutionary perspective this makes perfect sense because if we are not able to protect ourselves – stay alive and keep ourselves safe – there would not be much purpose in seeking opportunities to meet our other needs.

Growth needs

A *growth* need is something that enables you to feel a sense of internal alignment with who you really are: not the false self, created by the ego through your parental programming and cultural conditioning, but your true self or soul-self. Abraham Maslow also referred to these as “being” needs; a way of being in the world, with minimal fear and anxiety, which allows you to feel a sense of alignment with who you really are at the deepest level of your being.

When you are able to satisfy your *growth* needs, they do not go away, but they engender deeper levels of commitment: you want the feelings you experience when you are in alignment with your true self to become a permanent way of being. The joy of alignment you feel comes from being able to live a values- and purpose-driven life.

When you are in alignment with your soul, your life has both meaning and significance. Without meaning your life has little significance and without significance your life has little meaning. The feeling of significance arises when you realize you are able to make a difference in the world to your family, friends, colleagues or humanity in general. Finding meaning and making a difference are integral to satisfying your growth needs.

Maslow describes the relationship between our basic needs and growth needs in the following way: “Man’s higher nature rests on his lower nature, needing it as a foundation ... The best way to develop this higher nature is to fulfil and gratify the lower nature first.”³

Stages of Psychological Development

The seven stages of psychological development are shown in Table 1. Column 1 names each stage of psychological development, column 2 indicates the approximate age range of each stage of development and column 3 describes the needs we are trying to satisfy at each stage of development.



Table 1: The seven stages of psychological development

Stages of psychological development	Approximate age range of each stage of development	Needs associated with each stage of development
Serving	Late 50s to early 70s	Satisfying your need to lead a life of significance by being of service.
Integrating	Late 40s to early 60s	Satisfying your need to make a difference by actualizing your purpose.
Self-actualizing	Late 30s to early 50s	Satisfying your need to find meaning through activities or work you are passionate about.
Individuating	Late 20s to early 40s	Satisfying your need for freedom and autonomy by becoming accountable for your life.
Differentiating	Eight to early 30s	Satisfying your need for recognition and acknowledgment for your skills and talents.
Conforming	Two to eight years	Satisfying your need for love, respect and belonging at home and work.
Surviving	Birth to two years	Satisfying your physiological and nutritional needs.



From Basic Needs to Growth Needs

Once you have reached your late twenties, your ability to move from focusing on your basic needs, the differentiating stage to focusing on your growth needs, the individuating stage, will depend on many factors, the most important of which are as follows:

(a) *The level of psychological development of your parents.*

If the pressures to conform to the values, beliefs and traditions of your parents are strong, you may find it uncomfortable to explore your own values and beliefs. Your family may not understand why you want to be different or what you think is wrong with their way of being.

(b) *The level of cultural evolution of the community and society you are raised in.*

If the pressures to conform to the values and beliefs of the community and society you belong to are strong then you may risk censure, excommunication or even imprisonment if you begin the process of individuation. Your desire to have the freedom to explore your uniqueness will be viewed as a threat.

(c) *The level of education you attain.*

Unless you engage in some form of public or private education (or international travel) that is beyond the level attained by your parents, you may not be able to surpass their level of psychological development.

(d) *Your will power to explore your full human potential.*

It takes immense will power and courage to explore the higher stages of psychological development if the pressures to conform from your family, community and society are large. If you proceed, you risk cutting the bonds that enabled you to meet your basic needs. You risk isolation and loneliness.

For some or all of these reasons, the majority of people in the world never move beyond the third stage of psychological development. There is too much at stake, particularly for women and people living in authoritarian regimes. What holds us back is our fear of not being able to meet our basic needs; what pulls us forward is our search for meaning and significance.

The first three stages – surviving, conforming and differentiating – are stages of ego development that we all naturally pass through from the moment we are born until we become young adults. How well we are able to master these stages of development, satisfy our basic needs and develop a healthy ego, will determine, to a significant extent, our ability to engage in the higher stages of development.

Whereas the first three stages of development are about learning how to survive in the parental and cultural framework of your existence, where you are dependent on others to fulfil your basic needs, the fourth and subsequent stages of



development are about discovering who you really are outside of your parental programming and cultural conditioning, embracing your true self and becoming fully independent.

To fully embrace these higher stages of development you must be prepared to let go of the values and beliefs you assimilated during the first three stages of your psychological development that do not align with who you really are. You must begin to embrace the values and sense of purpose that reflect your true self.

Because of poverty and the cultural and political circumstances in which a large proportion of people on the planet live, most people never get to the fourth stage of psychological development. They live in a state of dependency, unable to achieve independence, because their time is so wrapped up in satisfying the needs of their day-to-day existence that they never have time to question who they are or question the cultural and religious beliefs they learned during their childhood and teenage years.

This is one of the major evolutionary benefits that modern economic and social development has brought: by alleviating poverty and introducing democratic governance we have enabled the masses to meet their basic needs and given them the time and freedom to think about and pursue their growth needs.

If you are fortunate enough to live in a family, community or culture where your uniqueness is celebrated, higher education is easily available and you are encouraged from a young age to be independent (think for yourself), then you may begin to feel the pull of your soul towards the higher stages of psychological development – towards individuation and self-actualization – during your teenage years.

In some rare cases, we find people – let us call them mystics – who attain the higher stages of psychological development without seemingly passing through the lower stages. They naturally evolve into soul consciousness without having experienced any significant ego needs. They tend to spend a large part of their lives in deep meditation unconcerned by their basic human needs.

The Evolutionary Journey

The following text provides a brief description of the key characteristics of the seven stages of psychological development.

Surviving

The quest for survival starts as soon as a baby is born. The infant instinctively knows that it must establish itself as a viable entity if it is to remain in the physical world. At this stage, it is totally dependent on others to care for its needs. During the first



stage of psychological development, the child needs to establish its own sense of identity, separate from its mother, and learn how to exercise control over its environment so that it can get its survival needs met.

If, for whatever reason, the child is unable to get its survival needs met because its parents are not vigilant enough, it is abused by its parents or it is left alone or abandoned for long periods of time, the child's nascent ego will likely form subconscious fear-based beliefs that the world is an unsafe place and that other people cannot be trusted.

If, in contrast, the child's parents are attentive to its needs and are watchful for signs of distress, then the child will grow up with a sense of security and the feeling that others can be trusted. The feeling of being able to meet your physiological survival needs is the first and most important need of your ego-mind.

Conforming

During the next stage of psychological development, the conforming or self-protective stage, young children learn that life is more pleasant and less threatening if they live in harmony with others, particularly their parents. The task at this stage of development is to learn how to feel loved and safe in your family group. Adherence to rules and rituals (conforming) becomes important because they consolidate your sense of belonging and enhance your sense of safety.

At this stage, children also learn beliefs and behaviours that allow them to maximize pleasure and minimize pain. If punishment is used to assure conformity then the child may adopt a strategy of blaming others to avoid reprimands. If the child believes the rules, reprimands or punishments are unjust or unfair, they may develop a rebellious streak.

If for any reason (usually because of poor parenting) you grow up feeling unloved or that you do not belong, your ego may develop subconscious fear-based beliefs that the world is unfair and that you are not lovable. Later on in life you may find yourself constantly seeking affection and wanting to find a group or community that accepts you for the way you are.

If, however, your parents treat you with respect and consideration, but firmly insist that you live by the rules, you will grow up feeling secure. Feeling loved by others and a sense of belonging to a group or community is the second most important need of your ego-mind.

Differentiating

During the next stage of psychological development, the differentiation stage, children want to feel recognized for the things they do well. The task at this stage of development is to develop a healthy sense of pride in your accomplishments and a feeling of self-worth. You want to feel good about who you are and you want to feel recognized by your parents and peers.



Your parents are instrumental at this stage of your development for giving you the positive feedback you need. If you fail to get this feedback you will grow up with the subconscious fear-based belief that you are not good enough. You will feel driven to prove your self-worth. You may become highly competitive, attempting to seek power, authority or status, so that you can be recognized as someone important or someone to be feared. If your ego-mind does not get the reinforcement that it needs, you could grow up with a feeling that no matter how hard you try, recognition escapes you, the successes you achieve will never be enough. Feeling a sense of self-worth or pride in your accomplishments is the third most important need of your ego-mind.

If you were able to successfully transition through these first three stages of your psychological development without significant trauma and without developing too many subconscious fear-based beliefs then you will find it relatively easy to establish yourself as a viable independent adult in your framework of existence, providing you have the opportunities you need to earn a living that meets your survival needs.

Individuating

During the next stage of your psychological development, the individuation stage, which normally occurs after we have become adults, we begin to transcend our physical and emotional dependence on our parents and the family, the community or cultural group to which we belong and we start to learn how to release or overcome the subconscious fears we learned about not having enough of what we need to survive, to feel loved or to feel good about who we are.

Unlike the previous stages of psychological development thrust upon us as we move from being an infant to a toddler, to a child, then to a teenager, individuation is a subconscious choice; whether we develop the willingness, once we feel secure in ourselves (have satisfied our survival and relationship needs and have a healthy sense of self-esteem), to respond to the pull we feel inside to becoming more accountable for our emotions and more responsible for our beliefs and values.

Learning to be accountable for your emotions involves releasing or overcoming the fear-based beliefs you developed during the first three stages of your development about being able to satisfy your survival, relationship and self-esteem needs. This may require a long-term commitment to personal mastery.

Learning to be responsible for your beliefs and values can be challenging, especially if you grew up in a close-knit kinship or tribal culture or an oppressive authoritarian regime where people are dependent on each other for survival or the pressures to conform are large. If on the other hand, you grew up in a liberal regime with self-actualized parents who took care of your basic needs and always treated you like a young adult by teaching you to be responsible and accountable for your life and your emotions, then you will find the process of individuation relatively easy.



Those individuals who have been brought up by self-actualized parents and live in a liberal democracy may reach the individuation stage before they reach midlife. This is because the parental programming they receive and the cultural conditioning they experience supports them in mastering the first three stages of their psychological development without experiencing any significant fears, anxieties, or traumas.

Once you have learned how to master your basic needs and have established yourself as a viable independent individual in the larger world, rather than the community or culture you were brought up in, you may, after a certain amount of time, feel a natural pull towards the next stage of your psychological development: self-actualization.

Self-actualizing

The self-actualization stage of psychological development involves learning to align the needs of your ego with the needs of your soul and leading a values-driven and purpose-driven life free from fear.

Leading a values-driven life means letting go of the decision-making modalities of the ego (beliefs) and embracing the decision-making modalities of the soul (values). The progress you make in this regard will dictate how well you are able to manifest your soul's purpose. You will need to learn to live with trust, empathy and compassion if you are going to fully actualize your soul's purpose.

Finding your soul's purpose, your calling or vocation, usually begins with a feeling of unease or boredom with the work on which you depend for your livelihood. You may no longer find your work challenging. You may feel blocked in your progress, unable to grow and develop. As you begin to discover your soul's purpose you will feel a pull towards a new activity or a lifetime interest that you have pushed into the background, something more meaningful to you personally. Uncovering your soul's purpose – your sense of mission – will bring passion and creativity back into your life and give you a deep sense of meaning.

Sometimes your soul's purpose unfolds slowly in front of you. You get a feeling or a thought about a change you want to make in your life. The thought keeps coming back and will not go away. So you follow your inspiration: you do what it is you feel called to do. This leads to another thought or an opportunity: you follow that and before too long you find yourself embarking on a journey that brings an increasing sense of meaning to your life.

Finding your soul's purpose and embarking on living a values-driven life represent the first level of soul activation.



Integrating

The next stage of development involves activating your sense of purpose so you can make a difference in the world. As you progress down this path, you quickly realize that the level of difference you can make can be significantly enhanced if you join forces with other people who have a similar purpose.

The people you collaborate with will be people you empathize with, people who share your values and your sense of purpose, people you resonate with who are operating at a similar frequency of vibration and level of consciousness.

Making this shift entails moving from independence to interdependence. The level of fulfilment you feel as you make this shift will depend on the quality of the connection you establish with the people you are working with and the impact you collectively have in the world. Actualizing your sense of purpose and integrating with others represents the second level of soul activation.

Serving

The last stage of psychological development involves leading a life of selfless service for the common good. You will find yourself getting involved in actions to alleviate the suffering of humanity and finding ways to preserve the world's life support systems for future generations, embodying compassion and living sustainably in everything you do.

When you reach this stage, you may find your job and your workplace become too small for you to fulfil your calling. You may need to find a new and larger role for yourself in society, you may become an elder in your community, you may become a mentor to those who are facing life's challenges, you may care for the sick or dying or you may find ways to support children or teenagers in dealing with the difficulties of growing up. It does not matter what you do: your purpose will in some way help to improve the well-being of your family, your organization or the community and society in which you live. Deep down, you will begin to understand that we are all connected energetically and that by serving others you are serving yourself. Selfless service represents the third level of soul activation. You fully engage at this stage of development when you become the servant of your soul.

The seven stages of psychological development occur in consecutive order over the full period of our lives. We begin the journey by learning to survive and we complete the journey by learning to serve. We start our adult lives in ego consciousness and if we are successful we end our lives in soul consciousness.



Primary and Secondary Motivations

In order to successfully evolve, you must learn to master each of the tasks associated with each stage of development. Your primary motivation, at any moment in time, will be to satisfy the needs associated with the task of the stage of psychological development you have reached (see Table 1). Thus, if you are at the individuation stage, your primary motivation will be to let go of the aspects of the beliefs associated with your parental and cultural conditioning that no longer serve you, so that you can find freedom, autonomy and independence.⁴

In addition to your primary motivation, you will also have secondary motivations. Your secondary motivations represent the unmet needs of the stages of psychological development you have already passed through, the tasks you have not yet fully mastered.

Every time you move forward on your journey without having fully learned how to master a specific stage, you will find yourself reverting to the level of consciousness associated with the stage(s) where you still have unmet needs.

Thus, though you may have reached the individuation stage of your journey, you may have unmet needs at the surviving, relationship (conforming) and self-esteem (differentiation) levels of consciousness. These can be summarized in the following way:

- Fear-based beliefs about *not having enough of what you need to feel safe and secure* that arise from a lack of mastery of the surviving stage of development.
- Fear-based beliefs about *not feeling loved enough to be accepted (and protected) as part of the group* that arise from a lack of mastery of the conforming stage of development.
- Fear-based beliefs about *not feeling good enough to engender the respect or acknowledgment of your peers and the authority figures in your life* that arise from a lack of mastery of the differentiating stage of development.

If these needs are significant, they will block your progress. This is because your consciousness will not be fully focused on mastering the needs of the stage of development you have reached. Subconsciously, your mind will still be seeking opportunities to satisfy your unmet needs and dealing with your reactions to situations that remind you of these unmet needs. These reactions, which are often emotional, are driven by the fear-based beliefs you learned during the early years of your life about not being able to satisfy your survival, belonging and self-esteem needs. These fears will keep your consciousness anchored in the lower levels of consciousness, thus blocking your soul activation.

Thus, the key to spiritual growth is learning how to master each stage of psychological development so it can become a strong foundation for the next and subsequent stages



of development. What prevents you from mastering the first three stages of development are the fears, often subconscious, that you have about being able to meet your basic needs. What prevents you from mastering the upper three stages of development is your ego's resistance to aligning its motivations with those of your soul.

For a full account of evolution as a spiritual journey, let me refer you to *What My Soul Told Me: A Practical Guide to Soul Activation*.⁵

¹ For a detailed account of cultural evolution, please refer to Barrett, Richard (2012). *Love, Fear and the Destiny of Nations: The Impact of the Evolution of Human Consciousness on World Affairs*, volume 1, Bath, UK: Fulfilling Books.

² Abraham Maslow was an American psychologist, best known for creating a hierarchy of needs. He was one of the original co-creators of the humanistic psychology movement. He believed that every person has an inbuilt desire to realize their full potential.

³ Maslow, A. (1968). *Toward a Psychology of Being*. New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold, Second edition, p. 173.

⁴ For a detailed account of Primary and Secondary Motivations, see Barrett, Richard (2014). *Evolutionary Coaching: A Values-Based Approach to Unleashing Human Potential*, London: Fulfilling Books.

⁵ Barrett, Richard (2012). *What My Soul Told Me: A Practical Guide to Soul Activation*. Bath, UK: Fulfilling Books.