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Imperfect Beauty:

Hierarchy and Fluidity in Leadership Development

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"The privilege of a lifetime is to become who you truly are."
Carl G. Jung

Abstract

While the hierarchical nature of leadership development is well acknowledged, it can under-represent the fluidity of change both within individuals and across groups. We suggest the heavy weighting on rankings (often termed vertical development or altitude) underplays the continuous interplay of lived experience and hierarchy in the development process. We explore the complementary forces of a hierarchical order of human development with an imperfect and fluid process, in which change is contextualized, dissonant and enigmatic. We invite ongoing inquiry into this combination of hierarchy and fluidity, believing it to be one of the critical matters in helping people transform themselves and their worlds.

Keywords: leadership development, action-logics, Transforming, Global Leadership Profile

Introduction

The purpose of this article is to join with you, our reader, on a spirited exploration of an apparent contradiction in developmental theory as applied to personal and professional growth. While the hierarchical nature of the developmental map is well acknowledged, this perspective may obfuscate the essential messiness and mystery of adult development, if applied overbearingly. We understand the maturation of consciousness over the lifespan to also be characterized by fluidity, through lived experience such as the interruption of the unexpected, adventure, loss, love, success, surrender, union, worry, conversation, revelation, and more. These processes along our human journey find expression in the expansion of our consciousness as we develop from-one-action logic to the next and they leave their unique marks on us all. We explore this expansion as described by Torbert (1976, 1987, 2004, 2013) and Cook-Greuter (1999, 2003, 2004), and which is built on the work of predecessors including Loevinger (Hy and Loevinger, 1996; Loevinger & Wessler, 1970; Loevinger & Blasi, 1976), Piaget (1954), Kohlberg (1969), and contemporary Wilber (1986). Our intent is to bring to light the inherent hierarchical order of human development while reverently holding up the untidy fluidity of the process, that being the contextualized, dissonant, enigmatic nature of human development. With specific attention on the Transforming action-logic, we highlight the imperfect beauty of development, within each of us and across us all.
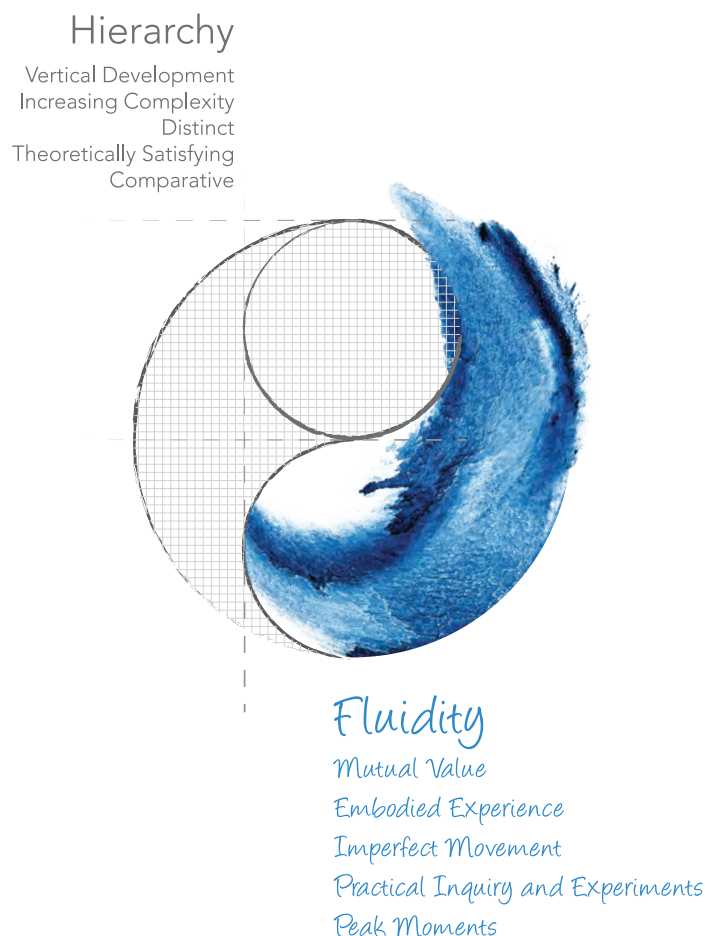
Hierarchy and Fluidity in Development

Consider the dance of opposites known by mankind for millennia. The opposing yet complementary forces of the light and dark, the logical and intuitive, reactive and

reflective, body and spirit, feminine and masculine, are all part of how humankind has come to understand itself. The exceptional arises from the marriage of such great opposites and has been recognized by all of the major sacred and philosophical traditions since the dawn of humanity. William Blake, through the lens of transcendence and imminence, beautifully described this union, when he said, "Eternity is in love with the productions of time" (Blake, 2014). It is this complementary relationship that inspires our exploration of adult development.

We depict this image of union, or constant balancing of tensions, using the energetic principles of yin and yang. This captures our 'inter-independencies' in the natural world, highlighting how complementary principles working together are greater than their parts. Here we bring together the two parts of a) static, ordered hierarchy and b) dynamic, chaotic fluidity which, when united, represent movement in human development (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Hierarchy and Fluidity

Hierarchy
Vertical Development
Increasing Complexity
Distinct
Theoretically Satisfying
Comparative

Fluidity
Mutual Value
Embodied Experience
Imperfect Movement
Practical Inquiry and Experiments
Peak Moments

The Exceptional and Transformational in Leadership Development

A developmental journey asks of each of us, to inquire why we are here in this time and what our purpose might be, to come to know ourselves in a more integrated way and in that, understand how each of us might align our purpose with the larger shared purpose. This, in turn, asks that we become ever more open to what is happening in our everyday worlds, to the patterns (helpful and unhelpful) in the workplace, pervading narratives in societies and beyond. As we do so, we make more room for the birth of the exceptional leader and inspired organizational action. This, in part, is what Torbert and Herdman-Barker are referring to when they describe Transformational leadership (Figure 2). Transformational leaders are welcomed for their openness and ability to recognize complex interconnections and make decisions in ways that increase the ability of their firms to compete globally (Levy et al, 2007). Through their attention to the scale of global matters, they offer the capacity needed to attend to our common concerns, the healing of ourselves and our planet (Harvey, 2009).

Figure 2. Transforming Action-Logic

And, it is this urgency we feel toward the many endeavors we face including climate change, the global economy, and widespread violence (Knefel, 2015) that propels some of the fervor alive in developmental consulting today: transform to later action logics to "save the planet", "save the organization", "save the market"! Some consulting firms are explicitly devoted to 'creating' more leaders at this Transforming action logic. Yet in our monetization of development and the drive for Transformational leadership we'd be well advised to remember the balance of yin yang. For, ironically, we may find ourselves caught in the dogma of eras gone by, that of believing that there is a prescriptive way out of the problems we have wrought; holding to a simplistic hierarchical notion of leadership capability, belittling the worth of one end of the development "scale," deifying the other and so obscuring the complexities of the developmental process.

Where a continuum exists, as it does with action-logics (Torbert et al, 2004) it is tempting to undervalue the earlier frames of reasoning by speaking as if the later ones are god-like, and then wondering why people don't value earlier and different ways of reasoning or appreciate the often untidy nature of change. Standing firmly on the side of hierarchical development risks a separatist view, where the "developed" (Transforming leaders) are seen to have arrived and those responding from earlier action-logics to be relatively lacking in worth. This would be a disappointing return to the hero endgame approach to leadership. And so, let us take a closer look at the development pathway that tempts us into imbalance where later trumps earlier and hierarchy overwhelms fluidity.

Global Leadership and the Developmental Action-Logics

The basic proposition of developmental theory is that adults make sense of the world by relating to problems in sequentially more complex and comprehensive ways, and, in so doing, are more able to respond generatively to the challenges of modern life. Torbert (and other scholars such as Cook-Greuter, Kegan, Loevinger, Piaget, and Wilber) have studied this developmental sequence, (Cook-Greuter, 1999; Kegan, 1982, 1994; Loevinger & Blasi, 1976; Torbert, et al, 2004). The developmental arc describes the individual's ability for a deeper, broader and more dynamic worldview, thus allowing for a more expansive capacity in problem solution and timely action.

Torbert defined the term action-logic to reflect the movement and flow within each 'stage,' and has described each action-logic as containing an octave of action-logics within itself. Each later action-logic includes all of the prior action-logics, and is discovered through a process of seeing through and thus invalidating the taken-for-granted assumptions of the previous action-logic (Torbert, et al, 2004). The transformational process between action-logics occurs (if at all) as each person faces challenges in everyday life that their current approach cannot resolve, and so tries new ways of seeing, understanding, relating to, and engaging with life (Torbert, et al, 2004; Herdman Barker & Torbert, 2011; Herdman-Barker & Erfan, 2015).

What people actively notice, describe, reflect on and ultimately act upon is intimately tied to their action-logic. This internal process of making sense of the world is

what, in part, gives rise to an individual's values, beliefs, assumptions about self, others and work. It guides awareness, skills and interests, relationships and satisfaction, and life goals. Thus it is profoundly useful in understanding leadership and the ways in which leaders develop themselves and create conditions for their colleagues' development, all part of leading organizational transformation (McCauley, Drath, Palus, O'Connor & Baker, 2006). For readers interested in the inter-independent effects of colleagues' development on one another, such as two vice presidents both actively committed to sharing their power, see Wallis, 2012, 2014, 2016.

For our purposes here, we depict, briefly, the seven most common action-logics. From the Opportunist action-logic attempting to manipulate the outside world by winning any way possible, often through the use of coercive power, to the Alchemist who consciously and generatively disturbs systems through the use of mutually transforming power (Torbert, 1991). In between, we find the Diplomat action-logic following the rules and norms of the group, conforming, the Expert attending to the mastery of knowledge and its appropriate use, the Achiever conscientiously applying self evaluated standards to ensure good social/organizational outcome, the Redefining, reappraising the value of processes and personal directions and the Transforming action-logic, applying timely attention to the many pressures in the system, supporting, principled, individual and organizational alignment.

Helpful as this hierarchical structure is in supporting leadership development, (laying out an invariant order acts as a scaffold for personal change so that we may have an idea where we are heading); it can become a self-limiting mechanism when excessively relied upon.   We suggest in this short paper that today's love affair with hierarchy and "our inclination to order items by ranking them in a linear series of increasing worth" (Gould, 2006) limits developmental flow if it is not intricately woven into a practice of ongoing action-inquiry and reflection. Development is not all about vertical hierarchies. This is why the Global Leadership Profile (GLP) (Action Inquiry Associates, 2015; Torbert, 2014) does not simply measure the flow of action-logics (across fallback, centre of gravity and emergent tendencies) but strongly advocates that equal emphasis be placed on active inquiry into lived, relational, experience.

Hierarchy and Development

The allure of hierarchical structure in life has laudable qualities. Groups and individuals appreciate the efficiency of a clear structure and order. Measuring, separating and describing individuals into categories is familiar and makes matters understandable enabling us to develop a common language and together find a way forward. But when harnessed absolutely to the concept of increasing worth, the natural, organic, and imperfect nature of development is relegated to the background as if to say it doesn't exist, or is not valued as part of either the group or the growth processes.

All action-logics have value, individually and collectively. Yet set out on a page, the list loses its sense of wholeness and integration. Development, let us not forget, is a human event that occurs over years and across decades; we live and breathe our

transformations, we feel and observe their presence in the behaviors of others and sometimes we try to chase them down because they seem so illusive. Let us remember, as individuals and together in groups we are dynamic, interdependent and reactive. A vertical track cannot describe individuality completely. And, indeed, society thrives on difference and range. To use the hierarchy fruitfully, we need to look for, recognize, and inquire into this sometimes, chaotic motion if we are to helpfully support it.

There are, of course, many ways in which theoreticians have acknowledged development as more of a fluid phenomenon, including, for example, our tendencies for fallback, when individuals use earlier action-logics during times of stress, fatigue, or grief (McCallum, 2008). Dr. Don Beck describes sweeping patterns of beliefs and values that guide and shape our choices and identities. Spiral Dynamics, which represents diverse worldviews by eight memes or values systems, places one's experience in the larger context of human psychological development, all of which is present in each one of us. We are each part of the "never-ending upward quest" that Beck describes (Beck & Cowan, 1996). Furthermore, different lines of development have been studied by scholars such as Howard Gardner, best known for his theory of multiple intelligences including musical, visual, verbal, logical, bodily, interpersonal, intrapersonal, and naturalistic. He held that each individual possesses a unique blend of all of the intelligences (Gardner, 1983).

Moreover, Torbert has long observed that different contexts require different action-logics, and so, the equal value of and necessity for all action-logics in the developmental sequence is of paramount importance (Torbert, 2008). Additionally, Torbert's notion that each action-logic fits together in an octave of development highlights the continual ascending and descending flow of everyday action. We can see this at play, for example, when an individual whose primary action-logic is later stage (e.g. Redefining) uses an earlier action-logic (e.g. Expert) to negate the view of a person on a conference call when she wraps up the call by repeating all views expressed except that of the person she wanted to diminish. In this example, too, we see illustrated the important distinction between competence and capacity. This meeting leader has the capacity to facilitate the call with shared power (Redefining), but chooses to use unilateral power (Expert) to depreciate her colleague in front of the group. Although her centre of gravity is Redefining she sets forth, in that moment, an Expert action and so draws our attention to the continuous and fluid movement across action-logics.

Hierarchy and Success

Yet, in spite of our substantial understanding of the fluid nature of development, 'hierarchy' remains a prevailing mindset in practice. It is easy to imagine the later action-logics as an Achiever goal to be reached, a mental framework that prizes the highest levels of corporate political power and wealth. This can be seen in brief popular articles and programs that present the later action-logics using the practices of earlier action-logics. For example, workshops directed at developing leadership effectiveness by identifying a list of competencies to master, or tools to incorporate in one's toolkit, are often designed and delivered with an Achiever mindset.

By way of example, let us consider the goal of Frank, VP Operations for an Austrian manufacturing company and his attraction to the hierarchical notion of development: "Being able to get the most out of our people and our system is exactly what we want from our leaders…You know, today's pressures mean that we need to think on our feet, plan ahead and have fresh ideas that can roll out internationally and across multiple boundaries…meaning, we need more people at the Transforming action-logic".

Frank reasonably links the Transforming action-logic to groundbreaking leadership. Transforming individuals are often experienced as ready to disturb well-worn organizational and personal paths: Innovative. They tend to attract a reputation for strategic thinking, as they are awake to the multiple pressures enacting on them and, cognizant of this, they pause and re-imagine. They do the unimaginable they are, sometimes uncertain and more often than not, inviting…yet this does not weaken their authority. We could go on at length about their, often, increased ability to zoom in and out, to passionately attach to a cause and to highlight the vagaries of power and so on…but we'd simply be repeating what is stated, with confidence, in many publications.

Is it surprising then, that hard-pressed, powerbrokers, like Frank, diligently copy down the Transformational "shopping list" from Figure 2? Should we be startled, given the focused delivery culture of most organizations and the wealth of publications on late stage leadership, that people seek a point-to -point correspondence with this list? Or, that in reaching to emulate exactly the leadership strengths described, organizations look for precise "next steps" to deliver Transforming action-logic? This action-logic is tasty and seductive. It assures us that 'all will be well" as Transforming people are not only systems – aware, alert to both market threats and opportunities but they are, amongst many things, aware of the importance of principled action and are impassioned.

Imagine the shock, then, when a person, profiling at Transforming acts defensively in a team meeting or, conversely, exhibits a gentle touch, shunning the political stage or the rewards of a delivery culture. How can this be? Surely this weakens developmental theory and undermines its claims around leadership capability, does it not? We argue not, as we suggest that the Transforming frame is a broad church that is being cramped, unwittingly, by our attraction to the lure of neat categories. The danger is that Transforming action-logic is the new Achiever-spirited goal seen at the turn of the 20th century and in that, disguises the authentic, diverse, organic nature of human growth and development.

Hierarchy: The Attraction and The Obstacles

Research studies and consulting stories are plentiful in pointing to a relationship between the capacity to reason at this action-logic and, as described above, an increased ability to see complexity in events. Our dear colleague Bill Torbert (author of one of the top ten leadership articles ever published in Harvard Business Review) (Rooke & Torbert, 2005) contributed significantly to getting the message out that

working with later action-logics can bring about marked change in organizations. His work serves to stretch the organizational mind around mature leadership …revealing how it may be nourished and identified across international borders.

What, then, is the problem? The problem is making this action-logic analogous to heroic leadership. Such a leap is seductively convenient and inconveniently misleading. Our current drive (powerfully endorsed by organizations) for solution and clarity lures us into accepting groundbreaking leadership and late action-logics as indistinguishable when actually the relationship is messy. As many leadership practitioners observe, late action-logic is powerfully related to mature leadership qualities but it is not a sufficient precursor for their full embodiment.

Moreover, transformational "leadership" is but a narrow band descriptor of this late stage of reasoning. Other bands of artistry (comic, poetic, visual, philosophical, and dramatic, to name a few), as well as nature and embodied awareness and so on, co-exist and, importantly, hint at a very different tone and form of Transformative action. But, their presence goes unnoticed. They are not synthesized into our appreciation for this action- logic. Our current tendency is to expose the leadership muscle and in so doing overheat this element of development, and we do so to its detriment and our peril. Look again at the words in Figure 2 and notice how each Transformational characteristic pulses in a familiar Achiever rhythm whereas, in reality, the Transforming action logic beats with many different accents and melodies, such as creative virtuosity, exuberance, grittiness, genial humor, aching vulnerability, spatial awareness, vehemence, idealism and potent imagination, to name but a few.

Yet, as we engage in discussions with leadership communities we tend to adopt conventional terms including effective influencer, systems aware, long- term planning, collaborative action, innovative, zooming "in and out." And, typically, we utilize organizational tools such as slides with lists of characteristics, action points to communicate growth and bar charts to support validity. Time and time again the story of movement into later action-logics becomes increasingly one of effective delivery and strategic planning, communicated through bullet points. So what? The qualities listed are laudable but they are written in Achiever shorthand, missing much of the Transforming grace and granulation. They serve to appeal to our audience but do little to support either our understanding of Transformational reasoning or what constitutes a stretch in Leadership.

And we don't intend to diminish the Achiever action-logic as a similar phenomenon can occur there as well. Consider viewing the Achiever action-logic using a frame that appreciates flow, particularly as an individual might experience the developmental movement from Achiever to Transforming. The Achiever can be improving competencies such as increasing self-awareness, leveraging conflict, and developing subordinates in ways that surface tensions, even if done in ways that rock the boat and don't lead to resolution in the short term. Many profiling in this frame will focus on taking action against societal injustices and intervening in order to make a difference in family life. Others will be attentive to friends and colleagues, stepping into address issues of

personal concern. Many, like those in other action-logics, will be humorous and initiate alliances through the delightful force of their personality. The Achiever perspective stands alongside the later action-logics in its value. It is an integral part of the development continuum and does not deserve concealment or rejection.

The Challenge: Developmental Stuttering

Why do we let ourselves be drawn into a purely hierarchical mind-set? Why would we think of ourselves, at any action-logic, as firmly set in shape? Why is a Transforming leader (one of the latest action-logics) perceived as a plank of uniform strength? What is leading us to such a lopsided drive for development that we run the risk of losing the visionary power of hierarchy? Perhaps the tendency to overplay vertical development is rooted in a conforming, definitive, (Expert, Achiever) mindset that prioritizes solutions and our competitive spirit. Transformational change, however, is more likely to emerge from an enlarged and appreciative perspective that combines the insights of hierarchy with the liberating power of fluidity, collaborative action, inquiry and inclusion. In the figure below, we depict that attending to both the hierarchical nature of the map and practical lived experience supports developmental flow (Figure 3).

Figure 3. Flow and Action Logics

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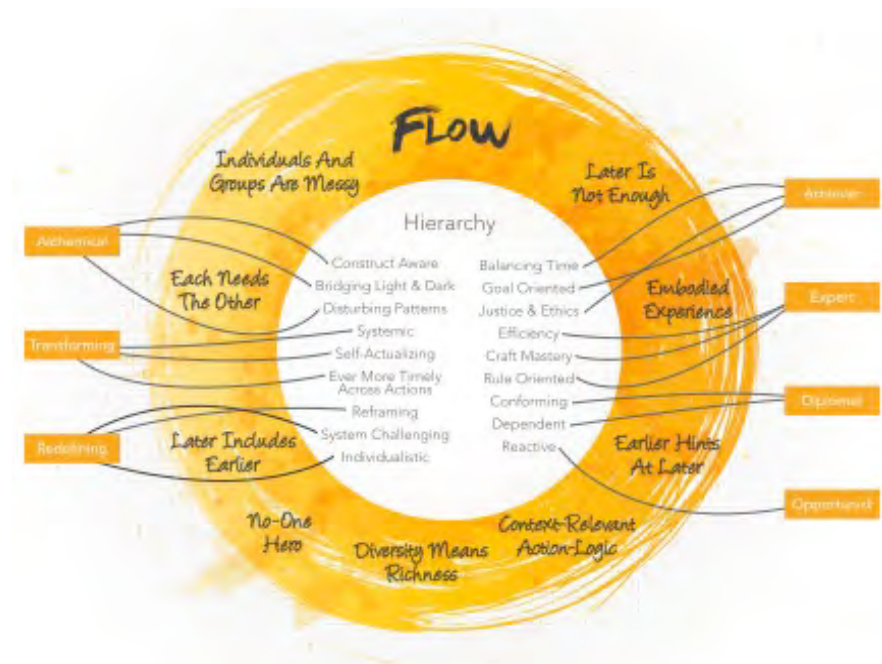
Developmental stuttering starts when we present action-logics as neat packages. Individuals, at work or home, are rarely, if ever, neat hierarchical units. People are exquisitely complicated. Some, who profile at the Transformational action-logic do not, for example, seek to contribute on the big stage, do not feel invigorated in group meetings, nor do they hold a penchant for adept political maneuvering. As one workshop participant from the Austrian manufacturing company put it: "So it's possible, that a Transforming leader can disappoint? If so, that explains how Hank in Operations could profile at such a late action-logic. It was no surprise that he did so, he's brilliant at cutting through the junk, a visionary and stand out leader who helped us to embrace a new culture and structure but a meeting with him can be a real bloodletting. His style sometimes is icy, his manner rigid."

In the same meeting another commented that Anna, Director of Talent, had profiled as Transforming, yet she had vulnerabilities…"Anna is an outstanding facilitator of debate. She reads the room and the broader contexts brilliantly, sees the pressure points and seems to touch the pulse of things again and again. Yet her attention to admin detail is shocking and sometimes she appears under confident. I thought that by Transforming all such glitches would have been ironed out!"

A significant conversation point in that workshop was that people are not machines…even if they are Transforming, individuals have glitches in their operating system, like everyone else! It is entirely possible that a leader profiling and predominantly acting at the Transforming will respond, in certain situations, from an earlier action-logic, just as Anna and Hank appeared to. In the midst of action, individuals at the Transforming action-logic will reveal a range of behaviors. Their centre of gravity may be Transforming but they may cleave to an earlier frame of reasoning in some matters and at some moments as development flow is not uniform.

Practical Inquiry into Hierarchy and Fluidity

This attention to the irregular flow of development raises helpful inquiries. For example, what does our expectation that a later action-logic brings infallible greatness say about the organizational culture? What fears lead us to look for a simplified path to development? What difficult conversations are we avoiding when we underplay the fluidity and imperfections in leadership development? What is the context relevant action-logic? And, how can we release the spirit of our emerging action-logic and enjoy its pull?

We refer to this attention as returning continually to 1st, 2nd & 3rd person Inquiry (searching for inconsistencies between theory/strategy and action at the personal, interpersonal and system levels). And, for those with an inclination to do so, we also invite 4th person inquiry, sensing into the subtle territory beyond our everyday rational and emotional experiences (e.g. intuitions, peak experiences, synchronicities and so on). Through active inquiry we hope to elevate the fluid side of the development partnership so that we may stay receptive to how our behaviors are manifesting at each action-logic.

We aim to create a state of tension between a) hierarchy and b) the process of life so that we stimulate a change in practice.

This practice of active inquiry, we suggest, offers ongoing potential for personal and group development. We share here an example of a late-action-logic practice for supporting development at the Transforming frame. Known as both the Difficult Conversation Activity and the Learning Pathways Grid, this activity helps individuals identify how they unknowingly may be contributing to the very outcomes they do not wish to have happen in conversations within important relationships (Torbert & Taylor, 2008). It helps to surface our logics-in-action as we respond to different individuals and subjects and so is an opportunity to explore what lies beneath our reactions.

Conclusion

We want to recognize that human beings who assess at each action logic along the developmental continuum constitute a diverse population. Just as humanity is comprised of short and tall, blue eyes and brown eyes, those who dance and those who would rather walk, we need to reconcile the hierarchical nature of the action logics with the fact that there is diversity cutting a wide swath through each one of them. Could it be that the Transforming action-logic is messier than communicated, more than eight or ten lines on a power-point presentation? Are there ways to tease away layers of this late action-logic to find the unexpected? And how quickly does this lurch towards the later action-logic, Transforming, step over the earlier, judging them inferior, demeaning their worth and undervaluing the interplay?

Similarly, we suggest that the transition from the Transforming to the Alchemical action-logic, invites further inquiry. For if, through a failure to recognize the non-dual nature of the yin-yang circle of (arche)-structure and (dynamis)-fluidity, there is a tendency to narrow down the Transforming action-logic, Alchemical leadership too is being minimized. It seems, we need to stay ever more alert to Alchemical fluidity; the precise, continual, artistic, and timely ways of co-enacting-and-interactively-receiving both the arch and dynamis in "each utterance, gesture, and dance among others and within oneself" (Torbert 2015, private communication). This leads us to propose that developmental research instruments offering assessments beyond Early Alchemist be used hand-in-hand with 1st and 2nd person inquiry as we believe that a mature Alchemical action-logic or an Early Ironical action-logic is most accurately inferred in live interaction …*with* supporting insights from instruments.

The aim of our paper was to bring greater inquiry to the complexity of late stage reasoning and to acknowledge that popular descriptions of Transforming action-logic put it into lock down. We believe that there is an ever-pressing need to shake up how we communicate if we are to break it out from its sanitized confines and support human development as it naturally occurs. Our clients appreciate the ways in which we do this with our approach to coaching, the design and delivery of our client workshops, and the relational skills we use in helping them understand the potential in each action-logic and the passion of being a human focused on transformation. We employ a holistic

approach to development work, one that fuses developmental stage theory and actual lived experience, map and practice. Appreciating the light and shadow aspects of each action logic, we explore the strengths and opportunities across the developmental spectrum in the context of organizations, teams, and individuals keen on making a difference so needed in these times…we do so through developmental action inquiry. We explore in-depth the transition from one action-logic to the next in our upcoming book, The Leadership Seven: Transformations and their shadows (Herdman-Barker & Wallis, 2016).

We close with Rumi's expression of the power of passion in the developmental pull that is part of the human journey. It is a steady, compassionate passion, in its ultimate Divine origin that animates us all:

"….
Futile solutions deceive the force of passion.
They are banded to extort money through lies.
Marshy and stagnant water is no cure for thirst.
No matter how limpid and delicious it might look,
it will only stop and prevent you from looking for fresh rivers
that could feed and make flourish a hundred gardens,
just as each piece of false gold prevents you
from recognizing real gold and where to find it.

False gold will only cut your feet and bind your wings,
saying "I will remove your difficulties"
when in fact it is only dregs and defeat in the robes of victory.
So run, my friends, run fast and furious from all false solutions.
Let Divine Passion triumph, and rebirth you IN yourSelf.

- Rumi (translated by Andrew Harvey, 2012)

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