Grabbing the Tiger by the Tail

Conversation with Robert Kegan, Harvard Graduate School of Education, March 23, 2000

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Claus Otto Scharmer

COS: I'd like you to share a little of your personal story, the journey that sets the context for your work.

Robert Kegan: I was born in Minnesota at mid-century, in the middle of America to middle class parents as the middle child. I'm accustomed to being in the middle of things. I was born right smack in the middle of the 20th century; I'm 50-ish. I'm also a clinical and licensed psychologist, so I've spent a lot of time deep in the middle of my own family dynamics and those of many, many others, but I doubt you really want to hear about it all.

One of my most formative experiences was the confluence of coming of age intellectually in adolescence when the country was in the midst of breaking open and becoming much more self-reflexive. This happened first around issues of civil rights and the social and governmental arrangements between black people and white people and then, eventually, the war in Vietnam. That served as a kind of crucible, or a "holding" environment. It was personally very wrenching as a young man to tentatively develop positions and political stands that were at odds with my own family, my own reference group. That gives you an experience, both of considerable risk and of loneliness and living kind of out on the edge.

I. Swimming Against the Stream

Even in this country today, there are a lot of people who say, "Well, everybody was against the war, weren't they?" They have very little understanding of what it was like in the early years.

That was a very powerful experience of feeling like you could take a stand against a dominant discourse, a dominant social arrangement. You could feel part of a gathering counter-consensus that would actually move the nature of a great nation's dispositions in another direction. It was a very heady experience. It may have been over-valued by the members of my generation who came to feel as a result, perhaps, that they could actually run something or lead something. But that was certainly a very powerful, formative experience.

At the same time, it led me personally in a different professional and intellectual direction. I had intended, during my college years, to go on to graduate school in the field of literature and English and to be a rather traditional kind of academic, probably an English professor…. And then something happened. Like Bill Clinton, I got a very low number in the draft lottery and was drafted. This wasn't just disruptive to my plans; it was disruptive to my developing values. I was unwilling to serve in the war.

COS: What year are we now?

Robert Kegan: 1968. I was informed by my draft board that if I accepted the [Cambridge] fellowship I would be met at the airport in London and advised of my rights to return to the country or to never again come back. In fact, I would have been an exile. I wouldn't have been able to return until Jimmy Carter got elected president and pardoned all the people who had fled the country.

That was a very, very difficult time. It seemed like I was developing a kind of personal vocational power, moving down a track, and all of a sudden I run into a brick wall. I seriously considered leaving the country. I considered going to jail—I had friends who did that. Neither seemed to me like workable options.

I ended up teaching kids and got a kind of deferment that was rescinded each year. I was redrafted year after year, and each year for three years the head of the school had to go down with me to the draft board and plead my case and claim that if I were taken away the school would crumble and the kids would go on drugs and that I was serving my country best by teaching in a classroom.

The result was that I created a little political sanctuary for myself there for a number of years…. In that sanctuary, I found that I had a love of and a gift for teaching and working with kids. I was able to do so in ways that were more expansive than what I imagined I'd be able to do as an English professor, where I'd be making literary texts the main object of my affections. I did have and still do have a great affection for those texts. However, I came to sense in myself a range of interests and a desire to be a part of a bigger context for the world of teaching and learning than what I could be as an English professor.

In a sense, I fell in love with, or backed into, what I later realized was psychology. I got very interested in the kids' minds and hearts and the ways in which they developed—or didn't…

So since I was almost a political prisoner, prevented from going to graduate school, I had the time to confect the kind of doctoral program I would want to go into. At that time, I heard that Harvard had an experimental, very 1960s-ish, interdepartmental doctoral program where you would get admitted to a committee rather than an academic department. You could, through your own efforts, make connections to a number of different departments and develop your own program. When I was admitted to that, Patrick Moynihan, who later became the senator from New York, was the chairman of this committee. The people had to have some connection to education in its broadest sense, but a lot them were interested in education more as anthropologists, and some of them were public policy people. I had this weird collection of interests in learning from a psychological and literary and philosophical point of view. Over the several years I was teaching kids in Minnesota and corresponding with Harvard, we were able to work out this doctoral program.

I came here to Harvard into this interdisciplinary, self-designed doctoral program. That interdisciplinary spirit has been a part of my work and my life ever since. Michael Jung likes to say that you can take a great institution like McKinsey and think about all the ways it has a great reputation and is very, very successful. And you can do the same thing about a great university like Harvard. But, he says, you could also look at McKinsey from the perspective of a different planet and say, well, if you have the kind of resources and attractiveness to recruit the brightest minds in the world and gather them together in this organization, wouldn't you have a right to expect that the kinds of value they would add to the world would actually be considerably greater than what they've done?

I feel the same way about great universities. If you stand at a distance, away from the highly socialized nature of university life, and say, if you have the capacity and extraordinary resources to bring together some of the most talented, brightest, passionate, most disciplined people, who through years of living have demonstrated the capacity not only to be creative, but to drive something through to completion; have the emotional maturity to get along well enough with people to be successful and hired into this faculty; and you have them all living right next to each other every single day—wouldn't you have the right to expect that that collection of persons would have given more to the world than what Harvard has given? It's the interdisciplinary spirit that raises questions like that.

In fact, the way we create knowledge in silos of different departments and disciplines and, how little, even within a given department, people actually communicate with each other in any meaningful way is a problem…

II. A Blind Spot of the 20th Century

If you asked me about one of the blind spots of the 20th century, that would be one of the biggest. We have not yet learned how to collaborate in deep ways that would actually take advantage of the differing kinds of gifts ad capacities that people have….

Many people have had the experience of glimpsing the ways in which collaborative work can sometimes produce a much more stunning result than anyone could have done on their own. But for the most part, the

whole way in which universities are structured means you have a couple of thousand extraordinarily gifted people all living largely independently of each other, which, if you looked at it as [someone] from another planet, is really absurd. But no one sits around each day and says this is the most ridiculous arrangement I can think of.

Here [at Harvard] you have one of the most privileged situations, thousands of millions of endowment dollars, lovely geographic common space, and you bring all these people together and then build structures that keep them from actually having to work on the really hard challenges of human collaboration. We don't know how to do this. That gets reflected in lots of other settings as well.

I Wasn't Too Impressed with Any of the Disciplines.

That was just a brief harangue. As an intellectual I grew up in these interdisciplinary ways of operating that saved me from being too terribly impressed with any one discipline. The normal socialization of an academic is you get very impressed with the heroes and the quietly agreed-upon leading questions of a given discipline. You also learn forms of contempt for other disciplines. We used to say that a liberal arts education was to be able to develop a Marxist critique of Freud and a Freudian critique of Marx.

In a certain way I was saved from that. I wasn't too impressed with any of the disciplines. None of the leading figures were the people I wanted to become, exactly. As I matured, that gave me the capacity to have an appreciation for the inevitably limited, but still ingenious, qualities of any of the separate disciplines.

COS: And, before that you had your encounter with "real reality."

Robert Kegan: Yes, that's right.

COS: Tell us about the beginnings of the antiwar movement in your college during the 1960s.

III. The 1960s: Grassroots of the Antiwar Movement

Robert Kegan: I went to Dartmouth College, a rather conservative, New England, Ivy League college. It's built around a little classic New England town that has a common—not like those lovely European squares, but just a common grazing patch. The town gets built out from that common. Everybody has to walk through it, it's the center of the village.

There was a time at the very beginning of the antiwar movement when on Wednesdays, all around the United States, there would be a certain place you would go and bear witness to your opposition to what the country was doing. We were trying to bring attention to the war, raise the question as to whether this wasn't an international tragedy. The idea was to just stand in silent witness for one hour. Initially, especially in many contexts, that was actually a personally dangerous thing to do.

On the Dartmouth campus, there were just a very few students who did this, who were largely despised. I remember football players who walked by us and spit on us, called us queers and so on. The faculty just walked by us in embarrassment. That went on for weeks and weeks. That's why the very first time one of your own faculty members came and stood with you, or more than a year later when a football player came, it was just incredibly moving. I graduated in 1968…. The commencement speaker, who had to have his speech distributed and approved in advance, alerted a number of us that he was going to give a completely different speech than the one that had been approved. It was going to take a very strong stand against the war. This had never happened at an Ivy League commencement speech at that point…. He said this was going to be a scary thing to do. We asked him how we could support him and he said if we all wore armbands in support of what he was saying, he'd draw a kind of strength from that, and he'd mention it in the talk so he wouldn't feel so alone….

When he went up, we—maybe a fifth of us—took out our armbands and tied them up and he began talking.

As he spoke, the position he was taking became clear. It was a very measured talk. It was not meant to be inflammatory. It was given with conviction and the importance of having this other view heard. As he

started to talk, you would hear someone yell out Shame! Or Traitor! behind your back. Then after a while people started pounding on their chairs. These were your own parents. I mean, the people who were behind us were our families, who'd come to celebrate with us. Here they were, pounding on their chairs and drowning him out and saying he was a traitor.

The talk ended and the graduation ceremony ended soon after. It was such a scene of the anguish that I'd been in for the last couple of years. The whole common was littered with these little, clustered family groups who were awkwardly standing together. Parents were enraged at their graduate son who they were supposed to be proud of—this was supposed to be a happy day. You'd see the little sisters running around and not understanding why everything had become so awkward and strained. People weren't actually being happy at what they understood was supposed to be this happy day: graduation. It was a perfect culmination of a year in which thousands of kids were killed and Martin Luther King was killed and Robert Kennedy was killed. It was just an unbelievable time to have come of age.

IV. Moving Beyond Third-Order Consciousness

This is the kind of developmental context that pushes you beyond the third order in my theory, the order of consciousness in which you're kind of identified with the given arrangements and you take them as real. The move beyond the third order is when you pierce that veil and are able to step back from and look at the givenness of your culture, of your family, of its values. Not necessarily to reject them, but to be in a position for the first time to decide about them. That was a powerful early developmental move into young adulthood.

COS: What gave you the strength? What were the sources of the strength that allowed you to stand up?

Robert Kegan: I sort of feel like those are the kinds of questions that lead to answers that any listener ought to be suspicious of, whatever answers you get. I can give you coherent answers to that kind of a question, but I'm never sure that that's something I have a complete grasp of.

I'm sure that the experience of growing up Jewish in the state of Minnesota, which is a highly Scandinavian, Protestant environment, is part of it. It was very different than growing up Jewish in, say, New York City, where even Asian cabdrivers speak with Yiddish inflections because it's just such a saturated part of the culture of Manhattan. To grow up Jewish in Minnesota is already a strong experience of living on the margins….

Of course, my own children have seen this very strong rift between, for example, the Jewish community and the African American community in the United States. There's an enormous amount of anti-Semitism and racism between the two groups today. My experience was a completely different one. I grew up in the period in which there were very, very strong links between Jews and black people. There were very strong mutual identifications with the histories of each group. I grew up in a big, public high school and it was just a melting pot of the United States, and my friends and the people I stood with tended to be people on the margins. So that was a position that was not unfamiliar to me.

Certainly, a central event in my family upbringing concerned my brother. I was a middle child and I had an older brother and a younger sister, and still do have them**.** My older brother, who was kind of a wild guy, broke his neck as a teenager in a diving accident and was and is to this day quadriplegic. So our family was shaped by this horrible tragedy and by living with a family member who was himself different and continually dealing with difference and disadvantage and people's reactions to that.

But, I don't know. The real sources of personal strength are a mystery. So that takes you up to my early adulthood.

COS: And then you joined the Harvard program?

V. Harvard

Robert Kegan: Then I left college and taught school to get out of the war, and then I came to Harvard. And I thrived in this very self-designed, interdisciplinary program. Eventually I found that I was most drawn to the psychologists, but, again, I didn't want to be quite like any of them. I was interested in bringing together the rigor of the cognitive development line of psychology with my sense that it actually had hold of a very fascinating phenomenon, the phenomenon of the gradually increasing complexity of mind. But I felt that it was being realized at a very pale and diminished level. It was the study of the external description of the structures of mind, rather than the internal phenomenology of them. It was a study of the stages and balances, rather than the upheavals of transition and the gradual, the change and the loss and the kind of suffering that goes on in the process of moving from one way of organizing the world to another. It was largely the study of children.

So I really wanted to bring lifespan and internal phenomenological and existential dimension to what was otherwise, at some level, a very dry cognitive psychology.

At the same time, I felt that humanistic psychology—which was kind of in mode at that time, asking the bigger questions about life's meaning, drawing on European philosophy and theology—was asking the biggest questions, but they lacked any real substantive, rigorous, logical driver, internal power.

I wanted to bring these things together and create a richer developmental psychology that was both powerfully descriptive from the outside, but also powerfully descriptive from the inside—the internal experience of being a growing person and thinking about the context and support of development….

Initially, I thought of it for enhancing empathic practices, largely clinical and counseling kinds of things. I was interested in the ways in which this richer developmental theory could enhance the work of psychotherapy. That was my initial ambition.

COS: So that was sparked by your own practice of counseling?

VI. Grabbing the Tiger by the Tail

Robert Kegan: No, I think it was initially backed by a creative apprehension of the materials for a much deeper understanding of the phenomenon of development. It was a feeling that the cognitive development people, like Piaget, had tools more powerful than they knew, and that they were not bringing them to rich enough questions. Those who were asking those questions lacked the tools. I somehow felt this is the sense of the person in the middle. The middle child in middle America, born at mid-century to middle-class parents—the kind of mediating quality. I think I had a deep education for basically synthetic activities, the capacity to bring disparate elements together into the creating of something new….

During those years I had extraordinary spiritual experiences when I realized that I had an unusual connection to both of these fields. I would have experiences of reading Piaget or the more philosophical side—**I remember Paul Tillich, the theologian—where I actually felt that I was inhabiting the text, where I could feel like I knew where he was going to go next. I knew in a way that was astonishing to me how connected I was to the inner rhythms—and I realized that I understood it from the inside out in a way that I could tell other people didn't.**

It was like a form of intimacy with ideas, like some sexual union, it was an erotic experience. I've never had an experience quite like that. That was in these two differing realms that had no communication with each other. I realized there was some way in which I could bring them together, and that something powerful was going to come from that.

Michael Jung was teasing me when we were in Brussels. He said, well, you wrote The Evolving Self in 1982, that's 18 years ago. Isn't it time for another big breakthrough? I may never have another breakthrough quite like that. There's a certain way in which you might be lucky if you have one of those experiences in your life. There are all kinds of interesting places that you can go from there. But that kind of move was just a unique kind of thing…

Because the war in Vietnam prevented my conventional professional development, I gave up on any thought of planning out a professional life. I shifted into just following my own interests. I had very little thought as to where this was actually going or what professional role I was going to have. I just knew I had grabbed a tiger by the tail. I was onto something and I was just going to ride this thing as long as I could. It was incredibly exciting at an aesthetic level and at an analytic level. Making something and seeing into it. At a certain level I knew it had all kinds of practical implications, but at another level, it was just a purely reverencing kind of activity. You're sort of in awe of nature as you come to see its parts, or you're putting something together. It was intrinsically very satisfying.

I found other people were interested and let me teach a course about it and so on. Then I started writing about it. I've had a very passionate, idea-driven, and what-are-its-practical-implications kind of career ever since. I tell my own graduate students not to follow me or think of my life course as a good model, because it is a professionally dangerous path and I worry that very few people will come out as well as I happened to. I didn't do any of the conventional things that you're supposed to do….

I didn't have the right kind of publishing credentials to be promoted in an elite research-oriented university. The nature of my forms of inquiry, which bring together an analytic and aesthetic way of working, are not quickly valued as orthodox, kosher research. For years, I had a weird rank here, as a lecturer. After I'd been here so many years, they decided I should be a senior lecturer. I was never on a promotable tenure track. It's only been in the last few years that my colleagues on the senior faculty have decided that what I do should be esteemed not only with respect to my capacities as a teacher, which were never in doubt, but as a knowledge creator. It's only recently I've had the rank of being a full professor. Just recently a new chair was created in adult learning and professional development. I'm going to be the first occupant of that chair….

VII. Feeling the Fire of Creating from Nothing

COS: You started talking about the inner fire that you ignited, or that was ignited, by reading these books. Is it still like this or did that only happen a very few times in your life?

Robert Kegan: That kind of fire?

COS: Yes, that kind of being in union with what you do. That was not just on reading one book, it was the pattern that describes your journey.

Robert Kegan: That's right. It wasn't even so much reading the books. It was getting the books in relation to each other, and thinking up the new ideas that would come from having them, almost animus and anima, breeding them together and creating their children.

I regularly have experiences that hearken back to that in the sense of feeling very excited to be in the presence of creating something new. But not on that scale. The thing that we're creating anew doesn't yet rise to the scale of a whole new theory or way of doing social science. I think that the work that I've done since The Evolving Self, the bringing of that theoretical lens to a kind of analysis of culture as school and the hidden demands and so on, all the work that's in In Over Our Heads, represents a very satisfying refinement of the theoretical ideas and is building strong intellectual bridges to their applicability. You now have people all over the world who are essentially making the same mental move that I was doing in In Over Our Heads. They're looking at various kinds of activities and social organizations and asking themselves an entirely new question. What are the mental demands implicit in the things that we are asking people to do here in order to succeed? This is a question that I think we could well bring to leadership and organizational development.

It's very satisfying to feel like I'm getting traction on the suggestion that, among the cultural artifacts that people create and social scientists study—like how we educate our young, heal the sick, care for the elderly, handle disputes, build up legal systems, and so on—there's a whole other item that should be added to that list. What should be added are the mental demands, the claims on the minds of the constituents of this culture. And that's another cultural creation. What does it take to succeed? To be a man in this culture, to be a woman? To be a leader? What is the match between the complexity of the demands we're making on people, the mental demands we're making on people, and their own internal psychological capacities?

What upward provisions does a culture or an organization make to help people master that curriculum by actually growing and developing that? I think that's a very important question.

The next book project I'm involved in writing, with Lisa Lahey, looks at the ways we can support these kinds of bigger learning so that we can create new forms of learning and teaching relationships that actually support these kinds of developments in adulthood. That is another synthetic enterprise. It draws on a lot of different wisdom literatures about what supports development, everything from Buddhist practice to problem-based learning.

So when you have a big earthquake, there are aftershocks. Some of these developments—and I still feel like I'm riding the waves of that energy—might turn out to be more important than the original apprehension in other people's minds. But, for my mind, everything really starts from there. I can go back and look at things I've written and think, ugh, this is a pretty raw and distorted way of stating what I think I understand much better now.

The feeling of creating something out of nothing really started 25 years ago. That was my Big Bang. That started the intellectual universe for me. How many times does the sun have to get created? But it's still glowing and things are still growing as a result….So when Michael says, when's the next thing? To me, it's like saying well, when are you going to find another woman and get rid of this wife and get another one?

But I think that is the nature of finding something in life that excites you so much that you find some place to bring it to, so it has a home. It has a home in the university and you can, in today's world, use the university as a context to find yourself in all these places. One day I'm working with judges who sit on the bench and make decisions all their lives, and the next day I'm with people who are thinking about how we change medical education, and the next day I'm with European business consultants who are thinking about why half of what they recommend to organizations never gets implemented. How is it that I find myself in all of these contexts?

There are certainly moments when I'm sitting on an airplane thinking this is amazing. You know. This is just amazing. But, to me, it's all just one piece. That's very different than coming into a university and thinking, What am I supposed to do to succeed here? What's going to be expected of me next in order to get promoted to the next thing? Where you actually come to the university to work on its terms. I never came here to work on its terms. I just sort of started working here and never left. So it's just a place that's turned out to be the place where I do my work. Of course, the university punishes you, in a way, for operating that way. They don't take you too quickly into their inner circles and they look at you askance and with suspicion. And they should. Because in a way, you're not playing the game. But the game I have been playing has been a wonderfully satisfying and rewarding one.

VIII. Embodied Theory In the Author's Journey

COS: How does your own journey reflect the essence of your theory?

Robert Kegan: My theory is a kind of attending to—reverencing and nurturing—the mysterious lifegiving, negentropic processes in the universe. It includes the possibility that things in the universe do not only run down and entropically participate in this activity of increasing randomness and decay. It says that living things have the capacity to also run up. Although my eyesight is physically deteriorating and I have to wear glasses and so on, my psychological vision is actually getting keener and keener, with good luck and good supports. **That's a miraculous counterprocess in the universe, the process by which things can actually become more complex and contain more energy, become more ordered. That's really what development is about**.

In my own life, I've taken a very developmental path. The choices that I've made, although not for the most part conscious, have been choices on behalf of how I can stay in a mode where I have a chance to keep developing.

I think that at some point, I came to feel that the universe is not holding tightly to some mysterious answer or secret that it is our job to discover, but that rather life is a continuous question. It's not about an answer.

Life is really asking a question. And we are the answer. In the choices we make and the ways that we shape our lives, we keep answering this question, answering it and re-answering it.

Although I've paid certain prices for living my professional life as a university intellectual in a rather unconventional way, in the end I think it has allowed me to stay in a very creative space. In other words, I have never written an article for the purpose of having a publication on my vitae. I've never taught a course because we needed the course taught even though it didn't come from my heart. That's a very privileged way to live in a university.

COS: It is.

Robert Kegan: I suppose another way in which my life is a sort of expression of my own theory is that I can see the way much of **my adult life has been a glorying in what I would call fourth-order capacities—that is, where you have a certain sense of your own power to make choices, to shape the nature of what your life is going to be like. I have a very strong feeling that the choices you make are incredibly important.** You can really screw up your life your choices matter. One of my avocational passions is poker. I play a lot of poker all around the country. With the Native American tribal casinos we have now, you can find a good poker game almost anywhere in America within an hour or two hours…. One of the things that

poker recreates is the way in which your decisions really lead to forms of abundance and success or forms of poverty and ruin. I have had a feeling, for quite a long time, that we do have an enormous amount to do with what our lives become.

Now, you know, I've reached a point in my development where some smaller part of me is moving beyond the fourth order. I have certain forms of suspicion about my sense of my own powers to shape things. This is in a more ironic or more bemused kind of stance. I've come to question how much I can actually author and control**. I began to see the potential riches that can come from experiencing yourself as a part of something bigger than you that you participate in but that you really cannot completely get your arms around—that's frightening to me and, at the same time, I experience it as a kind of opening to a richer existence….**

My interest these days is less about strengthening a theory I created and more about what we can do with it now. I'm interested in the way a practice is not only informed by theory, but informs the theory and actually refines and changes the theory. It's the same part of me that's excited about collaborations with people—some of whose ideas bother the hell out of me—or my own impatience with and recognition that a very psychological perspective is incomplete. It's incomplete for thinking about some of these more complex kinds of change issues that require an organizational and systemic bent of mind as well as an individual one.

I can often become impatient with more organizational thinkers and feel that they're quite naïve at a certain level. They don't think deeply enough about the individuals in an organization. Really to become a learning organization, you've got to have a sophisticated notion of the individual learners in that organization. At the same time, I recognize that I'm naïve about ways of thinking about an organization as something more than just a collection of individual psychologies. And **I feel like no one has quite the full dialectical grasp of both the individual and organizational dynamics.** I enjoy and look for opportunities to think with and collaborate with people who have the kinds of sophistications that I like in a way that, ten years ago, I think I would have shied away from.

COS: You just described the element or foreshadows of the fifth stage of consciousness, where your self, as you said, is really transcending its boundaries and becoming part of something larger. Would you say that the other experiences that you described earlier in your life—the Big Bang and going with the flow—would those also be an example of that? Or even the Dartmouth experiences? Would you consider those examples or foreshadows of this fifth consciousness?

IX. Fourth-Order Consciousness

Robert Kegan: If you're asking do I actually think that I, in these earlier experiences, was coming at them and apprehending them in ways that actually had fifth-order structures, I would say no. I would say that the

Dartmouth experience was really much more about the move from the third to the fourth. The fish crawling out of water for the first time and actually seeing that there is such a thing as water. It was that kind of move.

The move from the third to the fourth order—which, by the way, is the major developmental move in adulthood—is the transformation I spend the most time talking about and working with my students in the adult development courses that I teach…. **There's a tremendous power in the move from the third to the fourth order. In the history of humankind, it's only been in the last little blip of human history that so many persons have been able to even pierce beyond the third order.** They are actually able to stand back from their own cultural surroundings and look at the nature of these arrangements and make decisions about whether this is what it's going to mean to them to be a member of this tribe or to live their life in this way**. It's essentially the transformation into what we today call modernism**. It's the capacity to have a kind of personal, internal authority that can actually reflect on and look at the basic implicit religion that for most of human history was just what it means to be inductable into a tribe and to be its member….

It's a good question because it reminds me how creative one can be even within the confines of the fourth order. In our longitudinal research, we never find anybody who's moved beyond the fourth order as a real center of gravity until mid-life.

COS: Mid-life being?

X. Fifth-Order Consciousness

Robert Kegan: Mid-life being in the forties. Not before the forties. Very few people move beyond the fourth order, but when they do, it's very rare to see anything like that before people are in their forties or older.

As I say in In Over Our Heads, this is one of the extraordinary features of being alive at this time. A hundred years ago, that's the age at which people died. If one asks the question, why are we, as a human species, living an additional twenty-five years longer than we used to live?, the glib answer to that is medical science. That is no answer at all. That's the means. Why are humans arranging themselves and spending their energies to develop the medical science that allows people to live an additional 25 years? Ask that and you're asking a different kind of question. The thought that occurs to me is that there's a kind of species-wide wisdom where we are trying to live longer so that we can develop further. And in developing further, possibly save ourselves, and preserve the species.

The evolutionary arguments for my mind are always at the wrong end of the lifespan. They're always about what is it that will lead to reproduction and make you the winning male and make more offspring and let the babies live. But if you want to take this idea that life seeks to sustain itself and preserve itself, maybe the most dramatic way in which we see that taking place is not about the ways in which we're trying to make more babies and keep them alive and so on but the other end of lifespan. It's in the ways in which we are trying to create the conditions that will lead to more complex orders of consciousness, which we wouldn't have had enough time to develop if we're going to die in our forties. Now we can start to develop new ways of imaginatively seeing into our possibilities and essentially save ourselves, negentropically, from the entropic disasters that lurk just around the corner…

XI. The Nature of the Self

COS: What is the nature of self and how does it change as you move through the orders of consciousness?

Robert Kegan: The deepest natures of self are unchanging. They have to do with seeking to make our inner and outer experience cohere. They have to do with a kind of tendency to not only make experience cohere, but to become identified with that principle of coherence. At some level, some side of the self seeks to preserve the current life form as a way of making sense.

I say—with apologies to Whitehead, who said there were two big forces in the universe, basically entropy and negentropy—there's a third big force in the university, which I would call dynamic equilibrium. It is neither about everything falling apart nor becoming more complex. It's not about fixity and stasis, either. It's

about the dynamic, ongoing, countervailing processes that hold things pretty much as they are. It preserves a certain kind of meaning-making system, the balance of what is subject and what is object. We come up against all kinds of experience and seek to make sense of that experience in a way that preserves the balance, which you could call "knowing," you could call "defending."

We run up against perturbing, disturbing experiences which throw the balance off temporarily, but the balance is very hardy and it tends to wave its big arms and right itself. We keep assimilating experience to this balance.

Eventually, though, we come up against experiences that actually disturb the balance sufficiently that, although it feels to us like going off a cliff, actually lead to some higher-order balance. I think the self is participating in these powerful processes, kind of endlessly, restlessly, creatively, ceaselessly.

Now, the other thing we can talk about is the distinctly different balances or equilibria that get created, and the ways in which they are successively more complex, more ordered, contain more energy, have broader reach, permit more choices, and can do more. We can describe the differences in the evolution of consciousness, but we can also see the similarities between a five-year-old and a very complex middle-aged person in terms of the way in which they live their lives out of a given balance and defend that balance. It's just that they are different balances.

Now, what I think is very interesting is the way in which leadership increasingly is about leadership for processes of change. There are very few organizations that come to leaders and say, "We'd love you to be our leader and we want you to just keep everything the way it is." You're almost always leading for change, change that is sustaining, that gets deeply internalized. Much of that change turns out to be a demand for a negentropic leap of imagination or a demand for development or a demand to reorder ourselves in some more complex way.

XII. The Blind Spot

I think another blind spot of the 20th century is a naïve fascination with perhaps the possibilities of change, a lack of respect and reverence for the miracle of fundamental, developmental, negentropic change, a tendency to think we can coast on the momentum of the information age to accomplish all our goals. It's only a developmentalist who can point this blind spot out. If you actually spend 20 years following people longitudinally, re-interviewing them every three years with a tape recorder like you're doing, looking at the ways in which they're changing or not changing over time, you cannot help but become impressed with the possibilities of gradual but qualitative transformations of mental capacities over time.

But you also cannot help but be impressed by how powerful are the forces that tend to keep everything from changing. **I think the big blind spot is that we have not had a sufficiently deep appreciation for the ways in which meaning-making capacities involve, most of the time, continuous manufacturings of non-change. It's almost like a reverse engineering of the Buddhist idea of each moment we're creating anew**.

Each moment more often we are actually creating the conditions by which things cannot change. That's why actual change is a really extraordinary thing. Any leader who does not have a sufficiently sophisticated respect for how powerful the countervailing forces are is going to have a very hard time succeeding. You end up throwing enormous amounts of energy into a balance and creating apparent change. You can resolve to lose ten pounds or realign the intentions of an organization.

You can diet and lose the ten pounds and put enormous leaderly energy into getting an organization to realign its intention. But that just disturbs the balance and, much of the time, the organism waves its arms and rights itself again. You regain the ten pounds, and usually a little bit more than the ten pounds. The organization goes back to its original focus and status quo.

Unless you have a sense, from the inside out, of how the balance is continuously manufacturing non-change, it's much less likely you're going to be able to actually perturb it….

Until we have a deep apprehension of the ways in which there's a powerful system holding things pretty much as they are, it's very unlikely that lasting change is going to occur.

COS: So what are the most powerful inhibiting forces that you see at work?

Inhibiting Forces

Kegan: What [Lisa Lahey and I] have tried to do is create a new learning technology that surfaces people's powerful inner contradictions. Those inner contradictions are essentially the elements that keep the balance in place. Of course, there's this paradox in that when you can actually see the contradiction you've actually begun to step away from it or move it "to object," as I say in my books.

We're creating a new learning technology for moving things from subject to object. The biggest sources of inhibition are usually deep running commitments to what we experience as self-protection. Or we experience them as a protection against disaster, which is really only the upheaval of the equilibrium that we've identified as ourselves.

No matter how genuinely committed we are to forms of change, we have countervailing commitments to preserving the balance, staving off disaster, and keeping ourselves "safe." Together, these two forces are the inner experience of a contradiction, and interestingly at an epistemological balance, as well, a way of knowing, of making sense.

Individuals have these inner contradictions and continuously manufacture non-change. Organizations also have inner contradictions and dynamic equilibria that sustain them, keep them from killing themselves. Lisa and I are especially interested in helping people develop new relations between themselves and these dynamics.

COS: What is the nature and essence of self?

XIII. The Source That Stays in Need of Us

Kegan: Since about the 1940s we've had a form of self theory within the field of psychology. This is the idea that our internal and behavioral responses are not just moment-to-moment responses to stimuli, but that there is something like a central organizing tendency, or the ego, the meaning-interpretive dimension of human personality. You can locate a sort of psychological or epistemological center of gravity, a central tendency that is consistent over a period of time. It is what gives us the experience that knowing you today means that there's something I know about you tomorrow as well….The self, in my mind, speaks to this dynamic activity. It's an activity that has a lot of similarities to what Freud meant by the ego—the kind of interpretive, executive functioning of the self makes experience experience. It's a creative kind of process by which you try to bring things into whole. It's an imaginative kind of process.

…You want to know about its essence, its source? We would have to talk about the dimensions of soul and spirit. **Is meaning-making coming from each of us as individuals or is there some way in which it's drawing on the life force itself?** I am a fan of Henri Bergson's philosophy of creative evolution. I think some of those ideas are very appealing, especially if you step back and take a kind of species-wide view of this activity.

It's an extraordinary collection of creative processes. They are probably derived from some common source. You can call that God, if you want. I've sometimes said that when we pray to God we acknowledge our dependence on some force bigger than us and that when we actually change and grow we're acknowledging God's dependence on us. The life force in the universe may need us in some way to keep growing as much as we need it.

Now, how questions of this philosophical nature have to do with your project on leadership is interesting and I guess up to you to figure out.

COS: My experience is that when you go into these workshop settings—which should be a three- or so-day event—if you allow for a certain process to evolve, you get to a point where the group or the community can create a space that allows people to access some elements of this fifth-order consciousness. I mean, who

you are and who you could become is sort of changing, it's transforming, it's accessing a deeper or higher place or whatever.

It is not something to do with just one individual, it has to do with this inter-subjective space. I would just track my own experience. I would say, well, probably, as you move through these orders of consciousness, also the space where the self is located really changes.

Kegan: That's right.

COS: From your ego to some other manifestation of self. Francisco Varela was using the term "virtual self." It is more diffused, more distributed, and manifesting or getting at sources at the periphery, rather than at the center. I found that interesting and it also matches a number of experiences I have had.

When these groups get to a deeper place, then this question, So what are we going to do? does not evolve. Does not come up. Because that is exactly the experience you talked about in your journey.

Kegan: Right.

COS: So when I look at how you describe the fourth order, and also how you describe the conversations, I see the elements of the integration. I see this intellectual activity, how you put together the system. You put together different pieces and put together something new, something larger. But that was only one part of your story. The other part of your story, of the Big Bang story, was how you were in this self-transcending experience, how you get into the flow and how, in a way, you become a vehicle or a device for the process of creation, which is larger than just yourself.

And then, when I look at your theories, I really see that in the fifth order. So I wonder whether there are elements of it already before you turn 40? Do you know what I mean?

Kegan: Yes, I do. Is it possible to have self-transcendence of different sorts within the context of a given order of consciousness, or is self-transcendence necessarily participating in the fifth order? That in itself is worth asking.

There's also the possibility that when we talk about a central organizing tendency, a center of gravity, that doesn't mean that there aren't times in which you actually construct the world according to a much simpler principle. Or, in the case of what you're talking about, maybe you can have momentary apprehensions or breakthroughs or experiences of a more complex order of consciousness, which you can't sustain very long initially.

What you're saying about the workshop is it's possible in certain intensive learning experiences to have—and perhaps through a lot of collective participation and scaffolding and support—a temporary apprehension of a different, more complex way of experiencing yourself, which you cannot sustain for long outside the workshop. But, still, it has a certain value if it doesn't become invisible to you. If you can at least remember it, or it creates the notion of a space between the way you normally tend to be and some other way that you could see or experience yourself, that's valuable….

What would you say your own actual field is or you own particular interest in relationship to all of this is?

COS: I try to look at these from the angles of the first person and then from the social, the third person. I try to understand the process of social reality formation as a function of the place from where you operate. The space from where you operate would be another way to say the development stage of yourself. It is more context-dependent. In a certain context, I can operate from a different place and then, the next day, in a different context, I am not able to replicate that.

So I try to understand the process of coming-into-being of social action. There's a longer story behind that.

So the self seems to me really a no-thing. Maybe what I'm not sure about is whether one could simply say self is just the source of action, so it's where action comes into being. And this source can be located in different places, can operate at different levels.

Robert Kegan: Then would you say a social group can have a self also?

COS: That's exactly the question. I think that as you move into the fifth-order consciousness there are more experiences of fusion. I'm coming from Germany, Hitler and all of that. So we have to pay attention to the qualities of fusion and whether or not the collective becomes oppressive. But it's a little bit more situated, it's more diffuse, it's more living.

Robert Kegan: Right. I think part of the intellectual work of the 21st century is finding more powerful ways of bringing these two kinds of selves into dialogue and relationship with each other. Practice-oriented people need to have more of a sense of the dialectical relationship between the way each one shapes the other. It seems to me that on one side we've gotten very sophisticated ways of studying the source of action that comes from the person. We then tend to think that organizations are just a collection of these persons.

Then on the other side we have a lot of sophisticated knowledge about the systemic self-dimensions of a group, without much consideration of the fact that within that group there are also individuals who themselves are sources of action. **The leap we need in the next century is a way of bringing these kinds of knowledge together. It's not that you just have individual sources of action who then sometimes clump together in groups. Nor is it the case that the group itself is the sole overriding definer of reality**. You have to keep in mind that there are individuals, each making their own sense of that system.

This goes back to the idea we were talking about before, that the way in which we've created these knowledge silos—these independent, non-communicating knowledge sources—has left us with a very fragmented way of thinking about the complexities of persons living in groups. If we can find ways to really reach out, draw hands across these different ways of thinking, we'll come to some much richer sense of the way each hand washes the other, the way in which each of these systemic sources of action, the individual and the group, are each conditioning and conditioned by the other.

And I think we're going to have to stop there.

COS: Thank you, and that really links back to the first blind spot that you mentioned, right?

Robert Kegan: Yes, that's right. That's good.

COS: So from the systemic group and the individual person, there is also a third thing in between, like the community. Maybe we don't have a good word for that. What you described in your journey was also something which was neither individualistic nor institutional, but something else, where the new comes into being.

Robert Kegan: That's right.

COS: Thank you very much.

XIV. Reflection

Robert Kegan focuses on the dynamic development of the human self and the coping process through which the human self and consciousness evolve in stages. The underlying pattern is that each developmental stage is based on conscious reflection on a taken-for-granted structure of knowing (see table below). Thus, in a person's progression through the various stages the structures of the subject (structures of knowing) in one stage become the object (content of knowing) in the following stage, and so on.

Order of Consciousness	Subject	Object	Underlying Structure
1st Order	Perceptions Social Perceptions Impulses	Movement Sensation	Single point, immediate, atomistic
2nd Order	Concrete: Actuality Point of view: role concept, tit-for-tat Enduring dispositions, needs, preferences	Perceptions Social Perceptions Impulses	Durable category
3rd Order	Abstractions: ideality Mutuality: Interpersonalism Inner states: Subjectivity, self- consciousness	Concrete Point of view Enduring dispositions, needs, preferences	Cross-categorial Trans-categorial
4th Order	Abstract systems, ideology Institution: Relationship-regulating forms Self-authorship, self-regulation, self-formation	Abstractions: ideality Mutuality: Interpersonalism Inner states: Subjectivity, self-conciousness	System/complex
5th Order	Dialectical: trans-ideological Inter-institutional: inter-penetration of self and other Self-transformation: inter-penetration of selves; inter-individuation	Abstract systems, ideology Institution: Relationship-regulating forms Self-authorship, self-regulation, self-formation	Trans-system Trans-complex

Source: Adapted from Robert Kegan, In Over Our Heads (Harvard University Press, 1994), pp. 314-15.

Three themes emerged from the interview. One is the wonder of development. Kegan talks about development as the "miraculous counterprocess in the universe, the process by which things can actually become more complex and contain more energy, become more ordered." A second theme was the intertwined relationship between the individual self and groups or the collective. Because science tends to look either at individuals (in cognitive psychology) or at groups (in group dynamics), it can miss what maybe is most important: how intertwined are the roots of individual and collective transformation. A third theme was the forces of non-change that occur in all developmental systems: "It's almost like a reverse engineering of the Buddhist idea of each moment we're creating anew.… Individuals have these inner contradictions and continuously manufacture non-change." Organizations also have inner contradictions that likewise continuously manufacture non-change. Kegan's work makes us aware of these forces and of how they operate within our own minds (see R. Kegan and L. L. Lahey: How the Way We Talk Can Change the Way We Work: Seven Languages for Transformation, Jossey-Bass, 2000).

XV. Bio

Robert Kegan is a Professor in the Harvard Graduate School of Education and soon to be named the first Professor of Adult Learning and Professional Development. He is the educational chair of Harvard's Institute for Management and Leadership in Education and is co-director of a joint program with the Harvard Medical School to bring principles of adult learning to the reform of medical education. He teaches, researches, writes, and consults on adult learning and the development of mental capacities throughout the human lifespan. He is the author of The Evolving Self

(1982) and In Over Our Heads: The Mental Demands of Modern Life (1994), and (with Lisa Laskow Lahey) How the Way We Talk Can Change the Way We Work: Seven Languages for Transformation. Kegan is also on the faculty of the Massachusetts School of Professional Psychology and is a fellow of the Clinical-

Developmental Institute. He is a licensed psychologist and practicing therapist, lectures widely to professional and lay audiences, and consults in the area of professional development.