

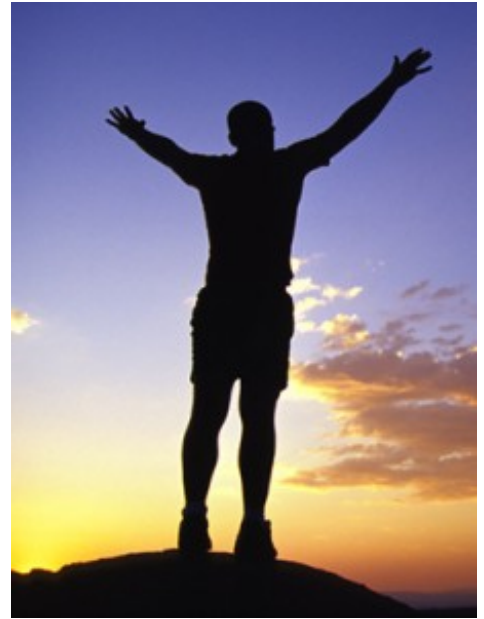
Transformative Learning & the Tao of History: Spirituality in the Postindustrial Revolution | Part 1

By Brian Milani,

Transformative learning is first and foremost about the realization of human potential. Since the rise of [postmodernism](#), such explicit concerns have been distinctly out of fashion in academic circles, but seem to be growing in most of the social movements.

Although I stressed the inextricable connection between individual and social change in my book, *“Designing the Green Economy: the postindustrial alternative to corporate globalization”* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2000), I concentrated on the social and ecological potentials of postindustrial development. This essay builds on that analysis, but focuses more on the implications of authentic postindustrial development for the evolution of human consciousness, a topic that is even more alien to the academy than social and ecological potentials. This alienation is not simply because postmodern thinking disparages any large social or historical vision, but because the very topic of spirituality or higher levels of consciousness implicitly challenges the kind of scientific-rational thought that holds sway in academia.

Despite this attitude, spiritual tendencies have been steadily growing in all the new social movements over the past two decades. There is also a growing body of sophisticated writing on consciousness and history, integral and transpersonal psychology, humanity’s “wisdom traditions”, and science and spirituality which go far beyond flaky New Ageism, religious cultism and narcissistic yuppie “personal development”. To mention only a few of the writers who have influenced this essay, there are [Lewis Mumford](#), [Dane Rudhyar](#), [Jean Gebser](#), [George Leonard](#), Herbert Richardson, [Dorothy Dinnerstein](#), [Mircea Eliade](#), [Ken Wilber](#), [Sri Aurobindo Ghose](#), [Fritjof Capra](#), [Thomas Berry](#), [Brian Swimme](#) and [William Irwin Thompson](#). Most of these thinkers not only have strong ideas about human potential, but a belief that these potentials change and evolve.



Post-industrialism and Human Creativity

The central thesis of *“Designing the Green Economy”* was that there have emerged over the past century “new productive forces” (NPFs) based in human creativity (Block & Hirschhorn, 1979). The NPFs are products or outcomes of material accumulation, but hold the promise of moving to a new level of qualitative or non-material development. Early last century, economic development began to move into the realm of the *industrialization of culture*. While capitalism has thoroughly commodified them, the new forms of nonmaterial development cry out to be ends in themselves. They have made it both possible and necessary to create economies in which human development and ecological regeneration are not simply by-products of economic development but the *primary means and ends* of economic development. The NPFs have been faintly reflected in capitalism’s so-called information economy; in the rise of white-collar, intellectual and service work; in the importance of science, technology and education; in all kinds of cultural industry and the rise of mass consumption; and even in the emergence of new social movements more defined by quality of life.



By and large, however, the net effect of industrial institutions on the NPFs has been to repress, distort and channel them in ways antithetical to real development. Industrialism sees them as a threat because fully unleashing them would mean fundamental changes in the form, content *and* driving forces of economic activity. They offer the possibility of displacing industrialism’s primary factors—cog-labour and physical resources—with human creativity and natural ecosystem flows. In so doing, they demand a fundamental

redefinition of wealth from quantity to quality, from *accumulation* to *regeneration*.

My book tried to demonstrate how industrial capitalism is intrinsically a system of quantitative development, based in money, matter and scarcity, and how it is also a class society, based in relationships of domination that are inimical to human and ecological regeneration. I also argued that, in this situation of new developmental potentials, social movement strategy can and must be transformed from *oppositional* activity that might redistribute society's wealth, to positive alternative action that *directly creates* new forms of qualitative or regenerative wealth. Contrary to most writings of pop postindustrialism, authentic postindustrialism cannot manifest on the crest of some external, inexorable "megatrend", it must be created consciously by a grassroots redefinition of wealth.

In my book, I showed how initial possibilities for postmaterialist (or qualitative) development were subverted by postwar capitalism's deliberate perpetuation of scarcity through waste production. I described how the 1929 crash and the Great Depression, following the boom of the twenties, constituted a spontaneous system shutdown in response to the threat of abundance. It was a structural crisis of overproduction. But, as I said, it was more than a crisis of the overproduction of material things; it was also a *crisis of the overproduction of working class power*. The new importance of science and technology not only resulted in growing productive capacity. It also gave unprecedented new cultural powers to the working class that could potentially undermine the cultural monopolies upon which class rule has always been based. For this reason, the postwar Fordist Waste Economy was premised on the waste not only of nature's materials but also of human developmental potential. The waste economy could perpetuate quantitative economic growth, while keeping people chained to cog-labour, traditional sex roles, political leaders, and alienated forms of leisure and material consumption.

Transformative learning today depends not just on an understanding of how human and ecological potentials have been distorted and redirected by the industrial system, but on understanding these potentials in terms of larger evolutionary processes.

The human powers expressed by the NPFs today have been nurtured by a process of individuation carried on by civilization over the past several thousand years. Some of these powers—rational-scientific knowledge, technology, etc.—have been directly developed by class society; other powers have developed *underground*, so to speak, and are now exploding to the surface. The individuation driven by civilizational development has, until now, always been partial. It has either been a partial dependent individuality—as expressed in [bourgeois individualism](#) and industrialism's specific form of gender dependence. Or it has been a holistic individuality, confined to limited niches of mystics and artists in society. Today powers of holistic creative development must be generalized to every human being. This is not just a moral imperative, but is absolutely necessary to our survival as a species.

Wisdom Traditions, the Perennial Philosophy & Levels of Reality

Making a rigorous argument for consciousness in evolution is beyond the scope of a brief essay, but here I can offer a rough description of this standpoint with broad brush strokes. Hopefully this will both allow the reader to get a feel for the big picture and allow me to explore some implications and relationships.

Contemporary perspectives on spiritual evolution build on venerable "wisdom traditions" and what has been called the "perennial philosophy"—although many of its essential elements predate philosophy itself, being expressed in the mythology of primitive (hunting & gathering) peoples. Virtually all forms of the perennial philosophy express a "vertical" understanding of reality. That is, they believe in *levels of reality*, with the highest level, and source of the other realms, being the timeless Absolute (or God), while the lowest level is temporal material existence. The Absolute is the most "real", and the material world the least; while the intermediate realms are variously described as archetypes or forms of spirit, soul, ideas, etc. depending on the tradition—in precisely the reverse order of what our modern secular world considers real. The material world of historical time and death is the "horizontal" realm—what many traditional cultures consider the "profane" in contrast to the "sacred" vertical realm (Needleman, 1975; Schuon, 1975; Eliade, 1961; Wilber, 1981).



Although these levels can be expressed as a hierarchy, the inner traditions emphasize that these levels are not found outside human beings, but within—what Rudhyar (1979) called a “holarchy”. They stress that the Absolute or God is not a Big Person *out there*, but a “Ground of Being” that forms the substance of everything. The “otherworldiness” of the perennial philosophy refers not to an afterlife, but, as the Sufi says, to “worlds within worlds” in the present moment (Feild, 1983). In the material world, Ultimate Reality is “veiled” (the Hindu *maya*) in unconsciousness, but with sufficient self-work and grace, humans can become sensitive enough to directly experience the higher levels. While the human being lives *in* the material world, he/she is not *of* it, and the human has the possibility of *directly experiencing* the Ground of Being.

As noted, the wisdom traditions see the Ground of Being as both the essential substance underlying, and the creative source of, the material world. A typical cosmology of the [perennial philosophy](#) sees life and the material world as originating from the playful emanation of God—the Divine losing or “forgetting” itself in successively denser layers of soul, mind, body, animal, vegetable and mineral consciousness. In short, the world was created through the dismembering of Oneness into the multiplicity of being.

This self-alienation of the Divine into the material world is the reason why, in the view of the perennial philosophy, the human project is defined by a deep yearning (either conscious or unconscious) for a return to source, or “union” with the Ground of Being. Humans, as increasingly “self-conscious” beings, are both more aware of their separation than other species, and more driven by a need to overcome this separation. As the Sufi mystic [Rumi](#) put it, we are like reeds cut away from our ground in the muddy reed bed, and then pierced with nine holes to make an instrument (the reed flute). As we allow the wind or breath of life to pass through us, our cries of separation are the music we make, expressing our yearning for Union.

Human beings, however, are not defined only by this yearning for union, according to the perennial philosophy, but also by the pull of the ego—the human’s separative sense of self—and by the appeal of materialistic pleasure, including compulsive or self-indulgent relationships to food and sex. From the spiritual perspective, the ego is an illusory sense of identity, created by habitual interpretations of our roles. As Rudhyar (1979) described, the ego is an improvised social construction derived from relationships at the circumference of the human being’s field of consciousness. It fulfills a *control* function, and helps us negotiate the social world, but it might be quite out of touch with the person’s deeper Self, which is more connected to ultimate reality. In any case, the human personality is considered by the perennial philosophy to be something of a battleground between Self and ego. Even when a person becomes aware of the struggle, choosing for the Self over the ego is not a simple choice because the quest for union can be sublimated into all kinds of substitute ego-projects, often with good intentions.

Evolution as Remembering

A primary concern of this essay is the attitude of the wisdom traditions to *time*. To these traditions, the temporal world, and ultimately the historical world, is the realm of materiality, change and death—the profane “horizontal” realm (at the base of the *holarchy*) that must be abolished, primarily through constant awareness of the timeless Absolute. This can be done individually—by a disciplined transformation of the “[doors of perception](#)” (Huxley’s words) to permit the direct experience of the transcendent. Or it can be done collectively, through rite and symbol, as a kind of ritual attunement to higher realms—as lesser substitute for direct experience, but more possible for more people.





Before philosophy—that is, before civilization, writing and metaphysics—primitive humanity maintained an essentially “vertical” perspective mythically, through its cyclical worldview. As Eliade (1959, 1961) has described, what was truly real for First Humanity were the achievements of the gods, ancestors and heroes in “that time,” the Original Time. Everyday events like building a shelter, consummating a marriage, and preparing a meal took on reality only insofar as these acts “repeated” the original act in “that time”. In fact, such acts were not repetitions, but actually *participation in the original archetypal act*, a way of abolishing profane time and **living in an eternal present moment**.

With the rise of civilization, the role of ritual and symbol in religion served the same purpose. That is, rites and rituals acted as forms of collective attunement to higher realms, approximating the direct mystical experience of deeper timeless reality. Time was still something to be abolished, or at very least subsumed; but the rise of agriculture, material accumulation, division of labour, and planning, necessarily meant a growing awareness of time. It was inevitable that before long the first history-affirming religions would appear. Judaism led the way, as the cyclical world view was projected into the temporal realm, giving the Chosen People a historical mission in dialogue with the Father God.

This growing historical consciousness accompanied a deeper awareness of individuality in civilization. This was admittedly double-edged because *ego*-individualism corresponded to a more materialistic and power-tripping mentality. But there was also a more positive side to this individuation, as reflected in the perennial philosophies. Echoes of evolutionary awareness began to appear in mystical metaphysics. There, the cosmological spiral that had created the material world—the Godhead “forgetting” itself in a downward descent—was reversed, as the yearning for return to Source began to be seen as driving the evolution of life. As Rumi said, “I was a mineral, a vegetable, and an animal,” and will become God. Evolution becomes the **re-membering of Spirit**, as life evolves back through increasing complexity eventually to super- or cosmic-consciousness.

The older wisdom traditions tended to see this evolution in largely individual terms, since their civilizations changed at a much slower speed than ours. But as Swimme and Berry (1992: 223) point out, a basic change in the perception of the world from “an abiding cosmos to an ever-transforming cosmogenesis” in modern times has affected even the perennial philosophy. The notion of evolution as a *spiritualization of matter* that was implicit in some older inner traditions has become an explicit central theme of contemporary writers and thinkers like Teilhard (1959), Aurobindo, Gebser (1985), Wilber and Rudhyar. All of these writers have also given at least some attention to the social/collective dimension of this evolution.

Some of them have pointed out that our development has been affected by much more than this clash between ego and a deeper Self that yearns for union with the transcendent. It is affected by our attraction for a different kind of union: an anti-developmental merging with our physical, instinctual, biological and collective **past**.

The evolutionary process of increasing complexity, individuation, increasing consciousness is necessarily a movement away from unconsciousness, impulse and blind instinct. Contemporary writers like Rudhyar (1974, 1979) and Wilber (1981) have posited that pre-*homo sapiens* humans, like Neanderthal, had an awareness of their separation (and thus their funeral rituals, expressing an acute awareness of death). But they were still largely embedded in a world of instinct, impulse and images, where dreaming and waking states might seem equally real.

The first *homo sapiens*, humans, those of early primitive society, were more fully *self-conscious*—that is, increasingly aware of their separation from the Divine. This sense of separation, and the corresponding awareness of death, has—as innumerable historians, psychologists and philosophers have told us—served as a driving force in the creation of human culture. Perhaps for the first time, humans were aware of possibilities for individual transcendence (as expressed in Shamanism). However, as various writers have pointed out, humans also became acutely aware of their *separation from the instinctual realm of biological nature*. Thus the yearning for union could take a regressive as well as a progressive form: a yearning for a return to the biological womb, for a return to pure instinct. Thus some forms of myth and religion seem to have been less an attempt at conscious harmony with the cosmos than one of regressive merging with organic nature.

Wilber (1981) makes an important distinction between what he calls “Earth Mother” and “Earth Goddess” traditions in various forms of primitive, neolithic and civilized culture, and also in contemporary forms of Earth-religion, neo-paganism, etc. “Earth Mother” religions are suppressive of conscious individuality, which

is (often violently) subordinated to the realm of biology and instinct. By contrast, “Earth Goddess” spirituality is more forward-looking and developmental—supporting both transcendence and conscious re-integration with the natural world. It is the difference between wanting to return to the womb, or maturing to assume full responsibility for our place in the cosmos. Wilber argues that many of the “Eden” myths—of a paradise of spiritual/material harmony in the past, and a subsequent “fall” of humankind—refer not to the primal creative acts that separated existence from God, but to humanity’s first recognition of its leap out of biological nature, and a nostalgia for the unconsciousness of blind instinct. For Wilber, real spiritual development depends on our affirming that we are “up from Eden”, and that our quest for union should take us to higher not lower states of consciousness.

The Dialectic of Consciousness & the Tao of History

One of the biggest mistakes made by some of the theorists of spiritual evolution is in assuming a relatively straight-line path of upward development. This is one of the biggest problems with Teilhard de Chardin’s writings, so identified is he with the supposed progress of civilization. It is also true, to a lesser degree, of writers like Ken Wilber. Our current social and environmental problems, coming on the heels of several thousand years of class exploitation, patriarchy and other forms of domination, don’t seem to indicate a constantly rising level of human consciousness.

It isn’t simply that there have been some stops and starts in human development over the past several millennia, but that the very nature of civilizational progress has taken place *through* alienation and domination, and a more or less violent break with humanity’s biological and collective past.

Civilization dates back several thousand years and is characterized by a permanent economic surplus, large-scale agriculture, cities, classes, the state, patriarchy, independent crafts, and an increasing division of labour. As I described in my book, it is an integrated structure of domination, where various levels of domination reinforce each other—even though these relationships may be somewhat different in different civilizations in different parts of the world at various times. These levels include the domination of humans over nature, of nation over nation, of ruling over working classes, of men over women, and, within human beings, of certain aspects of the human psyche over others.

Such institutionalized violence hardly seems an evolutionary advance over the relatively more harmonious world of primitive hunting-and-gathering or neolithic village life. But civilization has made its positive evolutionary contributions, and even some of its negative ones might yet be transformed and serve a developmental function today. As Rudhyar (1974) has shown, civilization has served as the Great Antithesis in a dialectic of human cultural evolution that we can divide roughly in three stages: the “thesis” of primitive society, its “antithesis” in civilization, and the possible “synthesis” in our emerging postindustrial situation—whether we call it “the Ecozoic”, the New Age or whatever. The rest of this essay will, in one way or another, attempt to elaborate some dynamics of this dialectic, and a few of the implications for a transformative synthesis today.

Because a real postindustrial synthesis would have a distinct “neo-primitive” dimension, we should first look a little more closely at primitive society, the evolutionary *thesis*. Primitive society—a category which here includes a tremendous diversity of human societies—nevertheless exhibits a common integration with the natural world and a mythic/cyclical worldview. Survival for primitive society also required a more collective character, a relative egalitarianism, and a comparative lack of specialization, with division of labour being primarily by sex and age. Primitive humankind’s worldview was expressed mythically and symbolically, not as rational metaphysics.

Primitive humanity had evolved out of biological nature to a new level of self-consciousness, and a greater awareness of mortality and death. But primitive societies’ very means of subsistence demanded continual integration with, and attunement to, natural cycles. Primitive religion and myth were largely earth-centred, and primitive consciousness has been called “mimetic”—or nature-imitating—by some scholars. Primitive consciousness was also largely collective in character. Much of primitive spirituality was cognizant of the deepest possibilities for *individual* human transcendence, or union. Possibilities for such transcendence were expressed in shamanism. But while many shamans might have been able to explore the highest realms



of reality and individual self-actualization, the collective character of primitive life was still primary. Indications are that the shaman took on his/her explorations for the benefit and guidance of the tribe or band, and not generally as an end in itself. By the same token, the ego—the human’s separative consciousness—certainly existed, but major restrictions were put on its autonomy by the priority of reciprocity and collective survival.

Differentiation through Alienation: Civilization, the Ego and Domination

Civilization represented not just greater complexity of human social and economic organization but a Great Negation of nature, and of the ruling principles of primitive society: integration, intuition and collectivity. It has been a massive historical **control project**, requiring not only the negation of nature, but the suppression of what humans have felt is most “natural” *within* us. It amounted to a suppression of the *mimetic* sensibility of primitive society, and a psychic separation from the natural world.



From an evolutionary point of view, civilization appears to be a stage of evolutionary *differentiation*, an attempt to create space from what Marx called “tyranny of nature” (and the power of the collective) in primitive society, to allow new forms of individuation of consciousness. Civilization certainly has created some space from nature, but in an incredibly violent and destructive way, establishing an unprecedented *social* tyranny. While acknowledging that civilization served to create evolutionary differentiation, Rudhyar also called civilization the “Age of Conflict”. As noted above, this conflict involved not simply the suppression of the natural world, but also of other people and many human capacities: those associated with the “feminine” side of the human psyche. Rudhyar, using the yin/yang conceptualization of Chinese philosophy, called civilization a **yang**-izing of human evolution, marked by an increasing focus on the yang/male capacities of the human being: materialism, rationalism, individualism, and historical-temporal consciousness.

The ‘*yin*’ and mimetic capacities of primitive society—intuition, spirituality, collectivity, integration, vertical-cyclical consciousness—could not be completely eliminated by class society, simply because they are essential to human life, but they were suppressed into the realm of the woman, the peasant village, the artist and the mystic. The structure of civilization, according to Mumford (1967), was that of a giant Megamachine, a structure which anticipated, and prepared the ground for, industrial machine organization many centuries ahead. Whereas in industrialization the machine had a technological character, in early civilization the social-economic machine was comprised completely of human component parts. In such a society, men—be they peasants, soldiers or slaves—would be the human cogs, and women, identified with nature, would be something less than human. As Richardson (1971) pointed out, to control nature, men had to control the natural in themselves. So men’s own “natural” qualities were projected onto women, who could be subordinated and controlled externally. In this sense, patriarchy was essential to both class exploitation and the domination of nature.

Men’s character-structures were shaped for “work and war”, and men became essentially human robots. The man’s holistic body consciousness and life energy had to be narrowed and suppressed to the genitals. This created a more compulsive sex drive, which would be both a handy source of tension release and a means of producing an expanding population—something that was needed by agriculture-based civilization.

Civilization made possible new levels of individuation, but these took two antithetical forms. One was a holistic and spiritual Self-actualization, which, as I’ll elaborate later, was a minority phenomenon, limited to very few people, and at times systematically persecuted by the powerful. The other and primary form of individual consciousness, unleashed by civilization from its collective bonds, was ego-consciousness, a more superficial and separative identity, but an aggressive one. As I said earlier, ego-consciousness is endemic to the human condition, and existed in primitive society—but there it was tightly constrained by society. When civilization unleashed ego-consciousness, it took both individual and collective forms—in the sense that sexual, class and ecological domination are also forms of ego-consciousness, based in separation and external control.

The individuation process in civilization took place over a long period. Later we’ll look at the development of holistic individuality, but here let’s consider the development of ego-individuality. It hit with a bang, since some of the earliest civilizations were among the most violent, perhaps an expression of the insecurity of the newly free ego. In these early civilizations, the only official individual or person was the king, who was often

identified with God, or considered divine, and exercised power over life and death accordingly.

Down through the ages, basic notions of personhood or individuality spread to the aristocracy and then to other privileged classes. Especially in trading cultures, after the first “axial” revolutions beginning in 6th century BC, limited forms of representative democracy and citizenship developed in places like Greece. By and large, however, even theoretical individuality was denied to the common people until the industrial revolution.

It is important to qualify this historical account with the recognition that it is not strictly chronological. For thousands of years civilization existed alongside primitive society. As Swimme and Berry (1992) point out, even at the apogee of pre-capitalist civilization around 1500 AD, prior to the great European imperialist expansion, a substantial portion of the world thrived in either primitive/hunting-gathering or simple agriculture, with complex cultures and sophisticated worldviews.

By the same token, there were great differences in preindustrial civilizations. Eastern civilizations, which because of their rootedness in a certain kind of irrigation agriculture, were relatively more “yin”, and balanced in their cultivation of holistic vs. egoistic individuality. The very ecology of the globe also influenced the westward evolution of the most materialistic forms of ego-consciousness: from the Near East, through Greece and Rome, to medieval western Europe, to the birth of capitalism in Britain, to fully developed commercial culture in North America (Rudhyar, 1974; Ribeiro, 1968).

It is this westward expansion of pure ego that conforms most strictly to the paradigm of civilizational development marked by growing materialism, rationalism and historical-secular consciousness. Although these tendencies are common in all civilizations, they only came to their fullest development in western civilization.

[Read Part 2 on 5/25/2011](#)

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