Spiral Dynamics—Which Reality Do We Live in?

By Diana Leafe Christian

Natalia Gasiorowska

What is the Spiral Dynamics[1] model and what does it have to do with community? This proposed model of cultures and human consciousness attempts to explain the values, motives, and beliefs that characterize different worldviews observable in various cultures in history, and that also manifest in stages of human development within individual people.

Our worldview derives from bits of information in our environment—our family, friends, and culture—which coalesce to form our overarching sense of what we find valuable and thus what ideas we allow into our minds. Worldviews can be compared to magnets, attracting bits of information in alignment with our existing sense of reality and repelling the bits that don't resonate with it. Once people and whole societies have solidified a worldview, it becomes part of their identity and thus very difficult to change. Individuals and whole societies will go to great lengths to protect themselves from being affected by other worldviews.

Developmental psychologist Clare Graves, who introduced the Spiral Dynamics model, identified at least eight observable widely differing worldviews or stages of development operating in different cultures and within different individuals. Later Spiral Dynamics researchers Don Beck and Christopher Cowan depicted these stages visually as turns on a spiral, with each turn on the spiral represented by a different color (but only in order to help people easily distinguish between stages). Each stage is believed to emerge out of the previous stage in reaction against that stage's excesses. However, each stage also includes the most useful parts of the previous stage, adding more consciousness, awareness, and nuance to them.

Spiral Dynamics experts don't believe any one stage is inherently positive or negative or somehow better than any other stage. Rather, they believe each stage is a reasonable response of a culture, or of an individual person, to the specific conditions of the local environment, including its social circumstances, dangers, and opportunities.

I believe we in the intentional communities world can benefit from this model to better understand ourselves and our fellow community members. This is especially true in helping us understand why some community members may want to directly address and resolve community conflict triggered by members exhibiting what I call "especially challenging behaviors,"[2] and why other members don't.

The Stages

Red Stage: The Red stage in Spiral Dynamics, for example, is the third of the first six stages after what Graves and others identified as the first pure survival (Beige) stage, and the second animistic, tribal (Purple) stage. The Red Stage is described as warlike and violent, with a "might makes right" ethic. Examples of people and groups operating primarily from Red include warlords in less-developed countries, traditional enemies in tribal cultures, organized crime, inner city gangs, and some of prison culture.

Blue Stage: When people operating mostly from the Red stage grow exhausted with its violence and self-centeredness they can emerge into the Blue stage, ideally retaining the energy and drive of Red but abandoning its violent, chaotic aspects. Blue offers relative safety, order, stability, and certainty—a welcome respite from Red. It's characterized by absolute truths, deference to authority figures and their absolute truths, and hierarchical organizations. Examples include the Roman Army, the Catholic

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People operating mostly from Green value nature and the environment, harmony, idealism, inclusiveness, empathy, and consensus.
Shane Rounce

Church, Fundamentalist religions, and public school hierarchies.

Orange Stage: When people operating mostly from the Blue stage grow weary of its conformity, they can emerge into the Orange stage, ideally retaining the order and stability of Blue but letting go of its rigidity and absolutism. The Orange stage is characterized by individual achievement, material success, a requirement for replicable evidence, and often lack of empathy, rather than by faith based in personal religious revelation or the edicts of religious authorities. Orange is characterized by the scientific revolution, the Enlightenment, industrialization, conspicuous consumption, and corporate culture. Examples of people and cultures operating primarily from Orange include scientists and the scientific method, most IT professionals, Elon Musk, Wall Street, the movie character Gordon Gekko, the United States, and most countries in Western Europe.

Green Stage: When people realize that scientific and technological advancements and material success don't necessarily yield happiness, they can move into the Green stage, ideally retaining the organizational ability and need for evidence, but letting go of Orange materialism and lack of empathy. Green is characterized by inclusiveness, empathetic connection with others, social consciousness, pluralism, emotionally authentic relating, and relative truth rather than absolute truth. Green is exemplified by the social sciences, academia, nonprofits, environmentalists, social justice activists, the Transition Movement, Nonviolent Communication, non-hierarchical organizational structures, and egalitarian decision-making.

In each of the stages above people usually feel *certain* that the way they see reality is the one true Truth, and therefore can perceive anyone who appears to value different things or operate in a different reality as just plain wrong, ignorant, deluded, stupid, or even dangerous. For example, while people who operate mainly in the Green stage value diversity and tolerance, they may also be so convinced they're right and that others need to think, feel, and believe as they do that, paradoxically, many Green folks can also be intolerant of people operating from other stages or worldviews.

Spiral Dynamics Nuances

Spiral Dynamics scholars insist that Blue is not "better" than Red, and Orange is not "better" than Blue, just as a sixth grader is not "better" than they were when they were in the first grade. Rather, the sixth grader had to first experience and build on what they learned in the first grade before they could move through all the subsequent grades to finally arrive in the sixth grade.

In fact, Graves gave an ethical warning when describing Spiral Dynamics, insisting that people and societies have a right to be just as they are. Instead of looking down on or trying to change people with a worldview or stage different than ours, we should use our knowledge of these worldviews, these stages, to better understand and interact with them. This is especially important in community.

Moreover, a culture or civilization may be characterized primarily by one stage, but that culture and its individuals can exhibit attitudes and behaviors of different stages at different times, depending on people's circumstances and what's necessary for their survival or comfort. In this way, as cultures and individuals grow and change and become more aware with new insights and new experiences, cultures and individuals may gradually shift into the next developmental stage on the spiral.

Furthermore, while we as individuals can operate primarily from one stage, we can also exhibit the attitudes and behaviors of adjacent stages, depending on our circumstances. Additionally, the different stages don't occur sequentially in history like the rungs of a ladder, nor are cultures and individuals solely characterized by just one stage. Rather, while each stage emerged in various civilizations and cultures at different times in human history, each stage continues to exist. All of the eight identified stages exist right now in the world.

The First Six Stages—Scarcity and Survival

Spiral Dynamic scholars describe the first six worldview turns on the spiral, including Green, as coming mostly from survival and scarcity. They see the scarcity issue of the Red stage as lack of power; of the Blue stage, lack of safety; of the Orange stage, lack of success; and of the Green stage, lack of harmony. As noted earlier, in the Spiral Dynamics model,

people in each of these stages believe their reality is the only legitimate reality. So each stage is characterized by an "us vs. them" mentality, with people feeling frightened, baffled, or repelled, and convinced that those other people are wrongheaded, don't know how to live properly, and may be dangerous too. In the Red stage, the alien others must be annihilated; in the Blue stage they must be corrected or punished; in the Orange stage they must be dismissed and disdained. And in the Green stage—which I believe often predominates in intentional communities—those "less spiritual" others must be or converted and re-educated.

We communitarians who come primarily from Green tend to assume we're more conscious, more environmentally aware, and more spiritually evolved than those poor sods operating mostly from the fundamentalist, authoritarian Blue stage, or the materialistic, soulless Orange stage. We fortunate souls who've "evolved" to and operate mostly from the Green stage can believe we know what's best for everyone—love, kindness, compassion, equality, consensus, emotional vulnerability, spirituality, ecology, community—and, ironically, may feel superior to others because of it.

Let's say for the sake of discussion that most of a community's members seem to operate most of the time from sharing, caring, consensual Green. But some community members—usually not many in any group—seem to come (perhaps only sometimes) from the next stage—Yellow. And *that* can be a problem.

Yellow–Strange and New

People operating mostly from the Yellow Stage value experience, competence, understanding, open-mindedness, creativity, clear thinking, Big-Picture overviews, considering and synthesizing diverse ideas, wisdom, self-actualization. They are comfortable with paradox and ambiguity and are able to consider diverse and contradictory ideas fairly impartially. They have a deep sense of purpose, are open to new experiences, and love learning and integrating new ideas. They don't value feeling over thinking as in the Green stage, or thinking over feeling like the Orange stage; Yellow stage people value *both* feeling *and* thinking. This stage is characterized by quantum mechanics, systems thinking, flow states, Chaos Theory, Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, Permaculture Design, Nonviolent Communication, the Sociocracy and Holacracy self-governance methods, the Prosocial Movement, Ken Wilber's Integral Theory, and the Spiral Dynamics model. Phrases exemplifying Yellow include "Wisdom is knowing what we don't know" and "We can't solve our problems at the same level of thinking that created the problem."

Green and Yellow–the Widest Gulf

According to Spiral Dynamics scholars and advocates, the greatest, most Grand Canyon-like gulf is between the Green and Yellow stages. The first six stages on the spiral, including Green, are considered "First Tier" stages, and Yellow is the first of what they see as "Second Tier" stages. They estimate only one percent of humanity is in the Yellow stage (though philosopher Ken Wilber estimates it's five percent). Clare Graves called Yellow and its subsequent Second Tier stages "a quantum leap in one's awareness of reality." Thus people who operate mainly from Yellow are believed to no longer come from survival and scarcity. They can understand and appreciate other views of reality and the values and motives of people in other stages; they don't consider the attitudes or behaviors of other stages as bad, wrong, or inferior. People operating mostly from Yellow are thought to not only realize that different, necessary developmental stages exist—like parallel realities—they also *don't* feel a desperate need to convince others to perceive and think and believe as they do.

People operating mostly from the Yellow stage of course *also* desire harmony, community, egalitarian self-governance, and wanting the world to be a better place, just as people operating from Green do. However, Yellow *also* asks, "How do we manifest these ideals in ways that actually *work?*" The Yellow stage is *practical.*

As you can see, Yellow is immensely different from Green. And while Green is considered "tolerant" in comparison with other First Tier stages, and Yellow is believed to be innately tolerant and aware that all other stages are valid and appropriate for various people's life conditions, Green and Yellow inevitably disagree about strategies to

People operating mostly from Yellow share many Green values, but also value experience, competence, creativity, synthesizing diverse ideas, wisdom, and self-actualization.
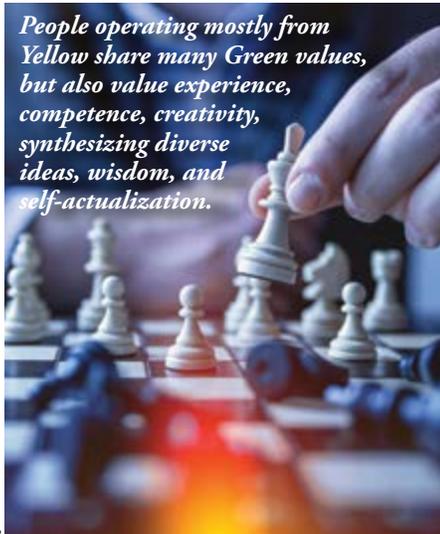
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Spiral Dynamics scholars believe the greatest difference between any two stages is between Green and Yellow.

Gabriel Garcia Marengo

achieve goals or solve problems. Thus they can become impatient and annoyed with each other. (When this happens perhaps those in Yellow are relatively new to and not yet firmly established in the Yellow stage, and so revert to Green when frustrated.)

People operating mostly in Yellow can often see Green colleagues as intolerant of or even arrogant towards people who don't share their New Age, holistic views. They can see their mostly-Green colleagues as limited, narrow-minded, "More ecological than thou," or "More spiritual than thou." Yellow can see Green as frustrating and slow, especially in what seems to Yellow like Green's indulgence in long, fruitless meetings with emotionally rich sharing, and taking an inordinate amount of time (by Yellow's standards) to get to the point or to actually resolve an issue. People mostly in Yellow stage can perceive people operating mostly in Green as fuzzy thinkers who seem too compassionate and too emotional *to actually solve the problem*. Yellow can see Green as tending to have difficulty with money, often not managing their projects well, and frequently stymied by what is sometimes called "toxic egalitarianism."

In turn, people operating mostly from Green can experience those operating mostly from Yellow as cold and unfeeling, and focused more on results than on emotionally rich relating. Green can see Yellow as not being as devoted to emotional authenticity, to meetings focused on feelings, or showing enough empathy for people struggling with emotional distress and dysfunction as they should be. Their sentiments toward people in Yellow may be: "What's the *matter* with you? Why don't you have more compassion? Where's your *heart?*"

Some members of my community speculated that a Green-Yellow clash triggered our former "Agriculture Wars," in which two different groups of members saw the purpose and functioning of potential onsite agricultural projects in completely different ways. Some seemed to embody Green values and others Yellow values.

Green and Yellow and "Especially Challenging Behaviors"

Let's say a community has one or more members who appear to frequently exhibit what I call especially challenging behaviors.[2] These include behaviors like being overbearing; having an apparent attitude of self-centeredness, entitlement, and superiority; displaying little to no empathy for others; and seeing themselves as unfairly victimized by those who try to offer feedback and requests for changed behaviors and attitudes, or who don't agree with them. People who consistently and frequently exhibit these behaviors (which mental health professionals call "narcissism") don't respond

to the usual methods of dealing with interpersonal conflict in community; they don't respond to empathy and Nonviolent Communication, "heartshares" and "talking stick circles," or mediation and conflict resolution methods. They seem to respond only to limits and boundaries being placed on their behaviors, either at the individual level—of one community member to another—or at the whole-community level, with the community itself setting limits and boundaries, such as asking someone who often disrupts meetings with these behaviors to stop attending community business meetings for a period of time.

What do especially challenging behaviors have to do with people operating mostly from the Green and Yellow stages? In my experience, when one or more community members exhibit these behaviors in a way that disrupts group harmony and people's feelings of emotional safety, a few community members (who I think operate at least some of the time from Yellow) *want their group to identify, name, and directly address these behaviors* by setting clear limits and boundaries on the behaviors.

However, *most* community members (whom I suspect may be operating mostly from Green) may not want the group to set limits and boundaries on these behaviors, believing that doing this would hurt the community. That is, given the emphasis of Green on harmony, cooperation, and emotionally rich relating, and relative rather than absolute truth, they see identifying, naming, and directly addressing hurtful behaviors by setting limits and boundaries as *itself* creating conflict. Sometimes this is described as having "conflict-averse" attitudes and behaviors, or as people taking the "Rescuer" role in the Karpman Drama Triangle model.

If you've read the challenging behaviors article series,[2] consider the following examples cited in the series from real communities that attempted to deal (or not deal) with these behaviors:

• The probable Yellow strategy some communities use to set limits and boundaries on these behaviors, including using Connection Contracts, and defend and reiterate these boundaries when they're challenged.

• The probable Yellow policy at Heart-Culture Farm Community in its five-step process of dealing with especially challenging behaviors.

• The seemingly Yellow idea in my community—stopped by apparently Green members—to create a Consensus Mentor for better meeting behavior or organize petitions and alliances to ask the community to take action on these behaviors.

• The likely Green responses of communities that did not deal with disruptive, hurtful behaviors like those of Eldred when he targeted Joseph (third article), Hugo when he drove away desirable new members (fourth article), and Stacey when she stopped the Consensus Mentor idea (eighth article).

• The likely Green response of those in Umberto's community (fourth article) who created a mutual support group to support each other with Nonviolent Communication and empathy, and to create silent, nonviolent responses to disruptive behaviors in meetings.

• The apparently Yellow response of community members who wanted to create more emotional safety in their community by organizing a future community meeting to give feedback to and request change from one of their members, Mavis, with especially challenging behaviors.

• And the apparently Green response of another member of that community, Ian, who tried to prevent the group from doing this, fearing that giving Mavis feedback and asking for change would hurt her feelings.

Community members operating mostly from Yellow can learn to communicate more effectively with friends and colleagues who seem to operate mostly from Green by appealing to their core Green values, which of course *these Yellow members also share.* People operating in Yellow can try to help those mostly coming from Green see that sometimes step-by-step, practical methods to reduce conflict and create clear agreements—including setting limits and boundaries when necessary—can help the group ultimately generate *more* harmony, trust, and connection. This is what I do in my classes on conflict in community—emphasizing the real-life practical steps various communities have actually done that have

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Recommended Spiral Dynamics Resources

Books:
• *Spiral Dynamics: Mastering Values, Leadership, and Change* by Don Edward Beck and Christopher C. Cowan, Blackwell Publishing,1996.

Videos, Video Series:
• Leo Gura's video (actualized.org): *The Grand Model Of Psychological Evolution–Clare Graves & Spiral Dynamics*
• Max Saris' video: *Spiral Dynamics Simplified–What is Spiral Dynamics?*
• 23-minute video: *Spiral Dynamics: The Ultimate Theory of Human Development*

Websites:
• *Spiral Dynamics Integral Nederland*: spiraldynamicsintegral.nl/en
• *David Smart–Thinking with David*: thinkingwithdavid.com (See post: *Spiral Dynamics: Memes, Worldviews & the Information Age*: thinkingwithdavid.com/spiral-dynamics)
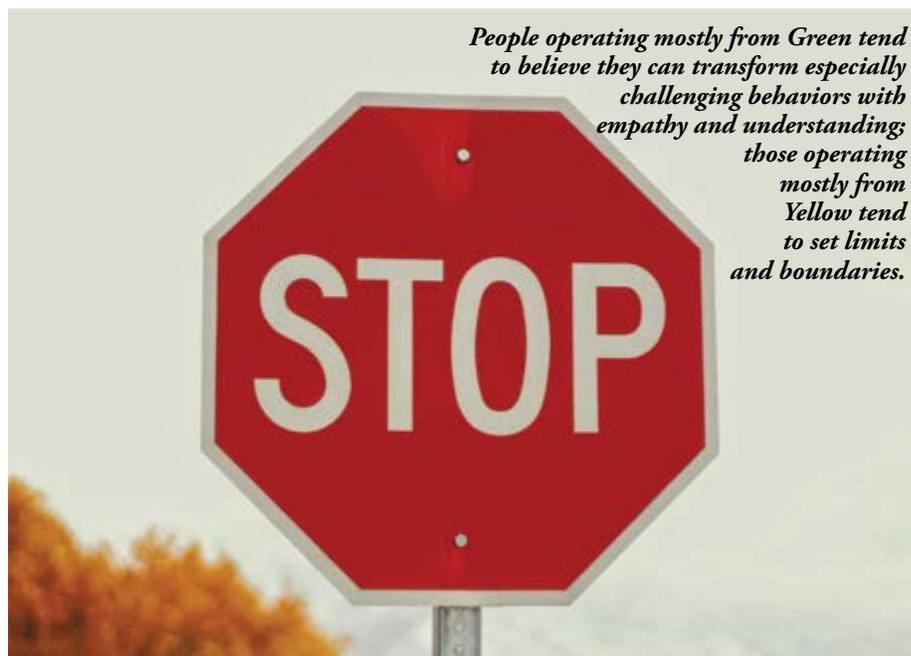
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curbed and contained especially challenging behaviors.

I believe those of us who want to deal more effectively with conflict and challenging behaviors in our communities can benefit by learning about the Spiral Dynamics model and considering how it may or may not apply in our own community. (See "Recommended Spiral Dynamics Resources," above.) ❧

Diana Leafe Christian, author of Creating a Life Together *and* Finding Community, *speaks at conferences, offers consultations, and leads workshops and online trainings on creating successful new communities, on resolving conflict in communities, and on Sociocracy, an especially effective self-governance and decision-making method. Contact her at diana@ ic.org and see www.earthaven.org/classes-and-events for upcoming workshops.*

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1. Spiral Dynamics was developed by developmental psychologist Clare Graves and promoted and developed further by social psychologist Don Beck and neuroscientist Christopher Cowan. Its concepts were later included in spiritual/New Age philosopher Ken Wilber's Integral Theory model.
2. See article series, "Working Effectively with Especially Challenging Behaviors," in COMMUNITIES, Winter 2021 through Summer 2024 issues (#193, #194, #196, #197, #198, #200, #201, #203).

People operating mostly from Green tend to believe they can transform especially challenging behaviors with empathy and understanding; those operating mostly from Yellow tend to set limits and boundaries.

Joshua Hoehne

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—**Shen Pauley**, reader and author, Barre, Massachusetts

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