

The Colour of Character

(An introduction of Spiral Dynamics to Theatre)

July 2004 (updated December 2005)

By Richard Michelle~Pentelbury

The Spiral Dynamics theory itself was proposed by Dr. Clare Graves (1986) and then researched and subsequently published (1996) by his academic acolytes, Don Beck and Christopher Cowan, and made yet more commercially palatable by Ken Wilber, particularly in *Boomeritis*.(2000).

But none of the theory was directed at drama, or theatre, or the art of acting, per se. Yet following my involvement in the theory, given my recent thesis on multitalented people, I came to use it in one-on-one sessions for a series of actors in preparations for auditions, as well as in directing productions as seemingly diverse as “Jesus Christ Superstar”, “The Sound of Music”, “Fiddler on the Roof”, and “Evita”, as inexact as any theory about what makes up mankind is, if “exactness” is entirely what one wants.

Every single one of us is capable of all levels of thinking and action. Intuitively, we all grasp all levels and many practice varying degrees of all of them. At relevance is the predominant habituation into which we fall. “Predominance” in Spiral Dynamics is understood as the one level out of a presently perceivable nine from which we most likely operate, such that if my level four is thirty percent and my level five is twenty-eight percent, then my other seven levels will each have lesser percentages of applicability to me, all said and done, than that biggest thirty percent part of me. So too will percentage levels apply to a character in a play. And yes, a given scene may require more of a level three than a five, but what’s the predominant root motivator of the character when taken as a whole?

In Spiral Dynamics each of the nine predominant habituations is called a meme, or a stage of thinking, and correspondingly given a colour. Within these nine ranges of colour there are two tiers, the first six colours making up the first tier, and the last three colours making up the second tier.

Going top-down, in Second Tier thinking each of the three colours, or memes, or stages reached is essentially integrative, universal. It allows for all disharmonies within the harmony, and enhances the harmony at the fringe of all disharmonies. By contrast, in First Tier thinking each of the six colours, or memes, or stages reached is essentially non integrative, egocentric, ethnocentric, or at most, world-centric.

As such, First Tier characters provide much of the grist for the mill of story and life for all of us. First Tier thinkers are the colourful characters that challenge our patience, our sympathy, our ability to identify with them, and our compassion as audience, or as actor. It is the First Tier thinkers who see and subsequently emphasize or perpetuate the variance, disharmony, discord, and disparity amongst humankind.

Top of the first tier is the Green meme, or colour, or stage of thinking. At the most developed of the first six stages, it attempts an egalitarian equalization of all differences, allowing for all to coexist in a linked but separate harmony, yet feels annoyed and even punitive at those who do not subscribe to its broad-based view. Its problem is that it believes its fairness to be so essentially right that it cannot abide those who do not play by the expectations, let alone the rules.

Below Green is Orange habituation, the fifth stage, where the individual is essentially competitive, materialistic, well meaning, but at its extreme will use the others for its own means, although not cruelly intentional, or entirely egocentrically, as does the Red meme. The main problem of Orange is that it almost always wishes to be top dog.

Blue order and rule and concrete formalization is below Orange. Blue finds it necessary to exclude all those from the Kingdom who do not affirm its group-self, its beliefs, its sense of world-order, let alone its spiritual aspirations. Blue order even uses fear tactics to threaten those who do not subscribe to it completely, despite its essence of perpetuating itself through the agency of love, compassion, care, and conscription.

Below Blue is Red, a meme in which the individual, despite other's discomfort, finds it most necessary to dominate, overtake, castigate, control, and manipulate the possibilities of life. At its "best", Red is about the individual preservation of the self against the possibility of being assimilated into some other meme. And Red most ardently fights off anything that would dictate, control, or redirect its own egocentric needs. And yes, Red is different from Orange in that Red cares little for others.

Purple is more grounded in the relativity of the earth and heaven, as One, and at its most confined becomes entirely familial, or conscribed to the clan, or to its own ethnocentricity, whereas at its most expansive it is open to the magic and animism inherent to energy about us, yet perpetuates distinct dichotomies, absolutisms, and fights off all those who do not give it affirmation. Preventing it easily crossing the rainbow arch between it and Second Tier thinking is Purple's sense of esoteric isolation, or "group special-ness", as distinct and apart from the potentiality of all and everyone.

And then there is Beige, where we all dip to when most threatened, since it is about sheer survival, predominantly being caught up in the atavistic need to be the first seed to score, the only one to live if need be. It is distinct from Red in that Red needs others to dominate and to control, whereas Beige wishes only to live for its own sake. But within Beige still lies all potentiality, as indeed for each colour-collection of habituations, or purposefully paradigmatic practices, or preferred proclivity for perceptions.

Indeed, each meme arises from that which went before, as well as it innately incorporates degrees of all other memes. All memes are of that universal matter which imbues itself from its ineluctable integration within the universal whole, no matter the proclivity of its incumbent habituation. At stake is not only the degree of one's personal awareness, but also of one's personal habituation.

By contrast to the First Tier, Second Tier thinking oversees the spiral of potentiality, understands the spiral of development, incorporates the ranking and fractionalizing and endemic disparity of the whole, absorbs the negative, finds accords within the given, and, at its uttermost reaches, drives the essential entelechy (or innate energy) of the whole, as such invigorating the essence of the universe. Yet Second Tier thinking is in and of itself triple-layered, inasmuch as the very top rungs on a ladder each are yet another step up.

As such, the first step of second tier thinking, called the Yellow rung, is compassionate to a fault, integrating not only the whole, but caring so much for that whole that it is somewhat debilitated by the ailments and pains of those still on the other rungs by which it itself has progressed. Yellow does not easily differentiate between empathy and sympathy, and can, for instance, “fall apart” at the sound and or sight of a sparrow smacking into the window.

Turquoise as the eighth rung is a meme that allows for freedom of taking on the fear and pain inside the universe, inasmuch as it sympathetically allows for all the other rungs to continue experiencing that which embodies them. Turquoise retains its own sense of individuality, of strong preferment as opposed to needs, yet it imbues its sense of space and time and action with a loving grace for everything.

And Coral, by distinction, takes on the step of invigorating the universe with its responsibility not only to itself, but to the essential whole, to the essence of integrity within the limitations of its own structure of awareness, forever ready to absorb yet more, give yet more, grow yet more, comprehend yet more, in a perpetual spirit of intuitively interpreting infinity. Coral truly incorporates into itself the fact that everything is a part of the whole, that everything transforms, that the pace of transformation may be individualistic even though within a species or a group or a set or a paradigmatic habitations or a single entity, and as such is the very essence of the whole that is transforming too.

So do we all aspire.

But on stage it is the inner core of the character I’m now portraying that is at stake. The colour is in the character, and the character is in its colour. So, I’ll study that script yet again and again. Colourfully. Play on!