

The S.A.P. Hypothesis: Restoring Prosocial Society

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Table of Contents

Defining the Problem: Contributing Factors	p. 2
The S.A.P. Hypothesis	p. 10
Remedies for the S.A.P. Effect	p. 13
Restoring an Authentic Sense of “We”	p. 13
Communing with Our Analog Self	p. 28
The Public Information Clearinghouse	p. 37
Ending Variations of Poverty	p. 42
Metrics and Adjustments	p. 50
Conclusion	p. 53

Defining the Problem: Contributing Factors

As we welcome 2019, the challenge of modern political polarization and alienation has become extraordinary – around the world, but particularly in the U.S.A. The divisions have reached a fever pitch, with enough intransigence, anger and ego-attachment on all sides to generate whispers of a “new civil war” on conspiracy websites and even mainstream news outlets.¹ The atmosphere of mistrust and accusation has reached daunting proportions, and it is easy to feel pessimistic about reconciliation or compromise among the current disarray of political ideologies. Particularly, what are categorized as “far-Left” and “far-Right” seem to display the greatest antagonisms toward each other, their divides in values hierarchies and prioritization appear insurmountable, a strong identification with and devotion to one’s political tribe has become profoundly central to maintaining social capital, and the polemics and rhetoric regarding anyone *outside* of that tribe have become harsh, coarse and hateful. And then, when one tribe gains power for a time, it ignores and thwarts the will of the other, amplifying tension and resentment. The future does not look bright.



So what can be done? First, let's entertain a simple way to illustrate the challenges involved. Consider placing yourself in the following situation....A family on a trip pulls off to the side of the road. Everyone inside is looking out into the adjacent field, where a horse stands lazily in the morning sun.

Mother Sara, inspired: "What a beautiful horse! And such a lovely pasture."

Son Tom, skeptical: "It has mange, ma. See where its coat is all mangy? And the grass out there is so dry it's almost burnt."

Sister Ariana, pragmatic and positive: "If that's an Appy it's an excellent breed of horse. Appaloosa are really intelligent and strong. And versatile. And there's some green scrub out there for it to eat."

Father Pharrel, unsettled on principle: "I hate that people keep horses as pets. It's despicable and cruel."

Cousin Betsy, confused: "That's not a horse, it's a moose. Moose are really dangerous and aggressive. I bet it's going to come over here and ram our car."

All of these family members are looking at the same horse in the same field, and they all of different perspectives on the view. Now...depending on the family dynamics, this could turn into a boisterous fight, with everyone feeling hurt and upset, and no consensus ever being reached. Or, with a little humor and benefit-of-the-doubt, they might poke fun at each other's differences – along with the underlying personalities and attitudes those differences reveal – accept each other's variety of opinion, and arrive at a loose consensus about some basic assessments. Or someone in the group with the most dominant personality – or with perceived authority – could silence everyone else and assert the primacy of their own judgments. Or they could all fume in silent fury for the rest of the road trip. So, using this as a metaphor for our current dysfunctions in political discourse, what essential characteristics will influence these disparate outcomes? What could we say are the key components to making any such collective discussions productive, reasonable, and inclusive...as opposed to

destructive, unreasonable and alienating? And how can we reach either consensus or a peaceful, accepting form of disagreement?

My view is that any positive outcomes in such group situations are *all about either the preexisting quality of relationship, or the skillfulness of facilitated relationship*. In this example, if the family dynamics are fundamentally healthy, trusting, compassionate and affable, then such diverse perspectives will not tend toward resentful divisions or angry polarization. On the other hand, if the established family relationships are unhealthy, mistrustful, unfriendly and reactive, then the outcome is much more likely to follow unproductive, non-inclusive, alienating, and resentment-inducing patterns. So we might further generalize that the quality of relationships *in any group* – whether that be a workplace team, a neighborhood committee, a city council, or a committee of legislators in Washington D.C. – will strongly influence the quality of consensus and cooperation that is achievable in that group. I think most people will recognize this generalization as intuitively valid, but this has also been my experience and observation over many years in roles as department manager, board member, political activist, church lay leader, teacher, couple’s coach, and community advocate. Without the emotional investment, trust, sensitivity and empathy that healthy established or carefully facilitated relationships inspire, a group of strangers is much less likely to find either common ground or tolerant and accepting sentiments.

But is cultivating relationship very practical in today’s complex, sprawling, highly transient and fast-paced world? Well, I think this begins to brush up against one of the central challenges of modernity (or postmodernity, as the case may be). Sure, decisions do get made by groups everywhere who do not have established, deep or positively facilitated interpersonal relationships. Instead, they tend to rely on one or more of the following decision-making patterns:

1. **Uniformly accepted ideologies or values hierarchies that induce reflexive groupthink.** This groupthink is then enforced by conscious or unconscious peer pressure, encouragement and reward of like-mindedness, and ostracization of nonconforming members. Differences in perspective and opinion are simply smoothed over by a consistently reinforced conformance.

2. **Institutional legalism.** By following strict bureaucratic procedures that are rigidly applied to every situation (and person, and viewpoint) in exactly the same way, everyone has little choice but to agree with a given outcome – or risk being disciplined, fired, ignored or excommunicated.

3. **Authoritative or charismatic leadership.** A strong, skillful leader or manager will know how to “get everyone in line” with a given agenda or objective – usually through an artful combination of carrots, sticks and salesmanship. Sometimes, by sheer strength of personality, a charismatic leader can dominate a group’s decision-making process without even intending to.

With what seem to be increasingly fewer exceptions, we can observe these to be three primary modes of “governance” that tend to manifest across a majority of modern businesses, NGOs, affinity groups, non-profits, elected government bodies and so on – and perhaps especially in online group exchanges where interpersonal relationships are one step further abstracted. A reliance on interpersonal relationship has, in a majority of hierarchical, rules-based systems, institutions and online media, been usurped by a different flavor of interdependence...something far removed from empathy and caring, something that in fact eventually antagonizes human connections, and actively disconnects everyone participating from their own humanity. In the course of increasing complexity and modernization, something that has elevated *transactional, essentially heartless interaction* above personal, felt connection; rewarded lockstep conformance above thoughtful dialogue; and amplified institutional bureaucracy into an essentially blind, deaf, and thoughtless machine.

If these observations are accurate, we can characterize what has happened in the U.S. and elsewhere as *a deep and abiding erosion of interpersonal reliance and trust across all of society*. This has then resulted in a propensity to over-identify with an influential tribe while villainizing other tribes; to automatically mistrust and rail against systems and civic institutions that treat us as automatons; to ostracize, dehumanize and bully in online environments; to seek redress through harsh and impersonal mechanisms such as lawsuits, gerrymandering, disenfranchisement, oppressing free speech, violent demonstrations, etc.; and to become ever more angry, fearful and hopeless in the face of a world that seems far beyond our ability to influence. Add some potent stressors to this mix – some poverty and

economic insecurity, lack of economic mobility, rapid cultural intersections and change, geopolitical instability, a perceived loss of personal agency, climate change, propaganda that heightens fears, etc. – and you end up with a fairly explosive situation. Is it any wonder that things like populism, identity politics, extreme ideologies, gated communities, online trolls, xenophobia, hate speech, strongman leaders, collective rage, violent demonstrations, fascism, fake news, conspiracy theories *and huge swaths of folks self-protectively circling their wagons* have come to pass...?

What happened, then? What is the “something” that got us to this point in our civilization, where the value of human connection and relationship has effectively been extinguished and usurped by *transactionalism, groupthink and legalism*? I think most folks can sense that this isn’t about some single factor or flaw. Sure, a symptom of the resulting disconnection has been to affix blame to various groups of people, institutions, ideologies and so forth, and then to affix labels to anyone perceived as “other:” racist, libtard, NPC, sexist, commie, etc. But most of these accusations are distractions that direct us away from actual causes. The real explanation will inevitably be more nuanced and complex – with many more subtly contributing factors – than can be summarized in a tweet, a Facebook meme, or a thirty-second news media segment. But is it worth taking a crack at an explanation anyway? Well sure. Why have we got to lose?

There is one intersection of changes in society that seems particularly relevant here. In previous writing,² I’ve attempted to formulate a convergence of inputs that have helped create pronounced antisocial deficits and political dysfunction in modern life. But it really seems as though additional factors keep popping up for consideration – and that some may have greater influence over certain segments of society (or population demographics) more than others. There also appears to be evidence that certain factors may have a more potently destructive impact when combined in particular ways. In other words, the picture is complex. In spite of that, I’ll offer a simple bullet list to get the conversation started.

Here are what I consider to be the *top influencers* in the breakdown of social cohesion and strong interpersonal relationships at the present time:

- **Population size, diversity and mobility.** People move around a lot from place to place, sometimes over long distances, as determined by work, school, family considerations and so forth. There are also a lot more people around, and from a lot more diverse – and sometimes incompatible – cultures, values, backgrounds and beliefs. As a consequence, even well-established friendships and family relationships can become diffused, distanced and disconnected...and new, close relationships much harder to form and keep.
- **Urbanization and choice.** Urban environments tend to anonymize individuals and offer plentiful escape routes from personal accountability and interpersonal effort. For example, if I feel uncomfortable in one environment (neighborhood, coffee shop, workplace, church, writer’s group, supermarket, restaurant, etc.), I can easily find another. I can also “keep moving” within a large city so that my interactions remain purely transactional, and no one really gets to know me as a person. By the same token, if I don’t like the school my children attend, I can just enroll them in another one.
- **Technology dependence and isolation effects.** Although the impact on our current youth seems to be amplified, this has been present for generations now. The phonograph and radio eliminated the need to create music with other family or community members, and reduced the desire to pay for live performances. The telephone created a watered-down version of interpersonal connection, and eventually offered a substitution for in-person visits, the need to support local businesses, or even cultivating romantic relationships for sex. The television reduced the culture of live performances, going “out on the town” for entertainment, experiencing more interactive communal engagement (at a play, for example, or when attending a live concert). And the Internet further isolated, disconnected and abstracted the individual from society and community: Why attend a lecture in-person when you can watch it on YouTube? Why date around if you can easily find hookups on Tinder or Grindr? Why go hang out with friends when you can check in with them on Facebook? And all of these technological innovations contributed to a spiraling sense of separateness, independent self-gratification, and reliance on purely transactional connections with others. And so it went with video games, smartphones, dating apps and so on, until **parasocial relationships** – relationships

that are one-sided or even with an imaginary person – became the norm, particularly for younger generations.

- **Commercialism, materialism and hyperindividualism.** At least in modern Western societies, and especially in the U.S., there is tremendous pressure to invest all of hopes and dreams, all of our time and energy, and our personal agency in things we buy. Consequently, there is increasing pressure to generate sufficient income to keep purchasing what we need or want. In essence, we have been conditioned to rely on external, mechanical and material objects to achieve what previously might have required strong interpersonal relationships – and social capital – to satisfy. Eventually, our entire culture became hard-wired to react only to external pressures, persuasions and calls-to-action, rather than developing our own internal compass to guide ourselves through life’s choices. In the worst cases, all personal relationships – in families, at work, in our neighborhood and our community – have now become laser-focused on successful transactions to increase buying power and perceived social status. Over years and successive generations of such behavior, all interpersonal connections are ultimately subjugated to serve materialistic ends, and we come to view each interaction – each friendship, romance, and act of generosity – mainly as a cost/benefit transaction.
- **Representative democracy.** In representative democracies, constituents tend to become consumers of political brands and followers of charismatic politicians, and end up far removed from the decision-making of governance. Outside of political campaign seasons, citizens not only don’t participate in shaping civil society, they completely disengage from considering issues that may in fact directly impact their well-being. Added to all of the other factors listed above, this has led to increasing apathy and disaffection for the electoral process, the politicians who seem so far removed from their constituents, and with civic institutions themselves.
- **Cycles of codependence.** One of the most insidious and difficult to disrupt patterns of antisocial behavior is the emotional conviction that our own happiness, equanimity and well-being is completely dependent on the happiness, equanimity and well-being *of someone else*.

When a parent is totally dependent on their child's current physical or emotional state for their own sense of well-being, or a lover constantly orients their own happiness to their partner's, or one child does not feel safe or calm unless other members of their family feels that way, this projection of personal agency into someone else has devastating consequences. Often, such codependence becomes habitual, reflexive – even compulsive and obsessive – so that a person cannot determine their own sense of wellness at all without the constant input from others close to them – which can frequently be accompanied by a desire to control others in order to achieve that sense of wellness.

- **Stifling sociality through permeation of both irrational and legitimate fears.** Children are no longer free to play outside, range far and wide with other neighborhood kids, or make independent decisions about who to befriend...mainly because of irrational, greatly exaggerated fears about child abductions, molestation and the “bad influence” of other children whose values may be different. Impromptu social gatherings and community events are sometimes constrained by very real concerns about escalating drugs, theft, violence and hostility in many communities. Traveling to foreign countries – one of the greatest dissolvers of cross-cultural prejudices and ignorance – has been crippled by legitimate fears of increasing terrorism, tourist muggings and rape, kidnapping for ransom, and imprisonment by governments hostile to the U.S. All of these fears have then been amped up by sensational media coverage, widely held conspiracy theories, and fear-mongering anecdotes.

If we can entertain these as significant factors, we might attempt to mitigate each of them individually, offering alternatives to these modern dependencies and patterns. *But is there something they all share?* Some common denominator that helps define or characterize this disruption of mutual reliance between people? Something that embodies a root cause that could be more directly addressed? I have been casting around for such a generalizing principle, and I believe I may have stumbled across it. See what you think....

The S.A.P. Hypothesis

My current thinking has landed me on an intersection of descriptors that seems to encompass all of the factors described above:



Superagency: Actual ability to extend personal and collective agency far beyond pre-technological, pre-democratic, pre-capitalistic human reach. From citizens initiatives to online shopping to nuclear weapons, humanity has arrived at a point in history where much of humanity has the same level of superagency that was previously restricted to the wealthiest or mightiest members of society. Terrorism would not exist without superagency. Democracy does not function without superagency. TV evangelists would not get nearly as rich without superagency.

Abdication of Agency: This is about giving away our power, and letting someone or something else act on our behalf. One prevalent example is a patient giving up control and ownership of their own well-being to medical professionals. Another is any victim mentality that demands – more than a little ironically – that systems and institutions compensate for a personal loss of agency. These are “externalizing” impulses that look for solutions, answers and saviors outside of ourselves, so that we are no longer personally responsible or accountable. Sometimes, as in the case of disallowing young children to play unsupervised, this abdication of agency can be enforced by others.

Pseudoagency: This is the false belief that we have agency and choice, when in fact we do not (or not as much as we believe). Sometimes this is a minor illusion created by personal technology – a gadget that does some small task on our behalf that makes us feel as though we have accomplished something. Sometimes this is a perceived pseudoagency because of unanticipated societal change – such as when a worker invests in a career path only to have some new innovation, fad, or economic trend eliminate the value of their skillset. And sometimes this is more

immediate and addictive pseudoagency, such as in parasocial relationships, or magical thinking with respect to things such as gambling or dating, or the conviction that our pronouncements on social media have impact in the real world.

As expressed throughout all of the socially disruptive factors previously described, these patterns *SAP* the prosociality right out of human beings. An individual with superagency doesn't "need" other people to achieve personal goals or a self-referential level of satisfaction in life. An individual immersed in their abdication of agency can nurture a victim mentality that blames other groups, other individuals, or systemic oppression for their challenges – and thus they may never attempt to self-liberate from an abusive cycle. A person caught up in pseudoagency may feel they are developing all of the interpersonal human connections they require through social media, or with fictional characters in a video game, or with a celebrity on TV; they may actually believe Siri has all the answers to their most pressing questions. In so many instances, S.A.P. dynamics corrode a humanity that in fact *requires* deep, intimate, emotional connection with other living beings, in a shared physical space, to thrive and grow. **So the S.A.P. hypothesis is simply this: An S.A.P. effect is interfering with our individual agency and liberty, and crippling human relationships and prosociality – and if we can't curtail or end this S.A.P. effect, human beings will eventually lose their ability to authentically connect with each other, operate from empathy and compassion in their daily lives, or exercise free will at all.**

Another way to describe the S.A.P. principle is ***Severe Agency Projection*** – the gifting of our personal volition into externals, entrusting those externals to fulfill our every aim and whim – which destroys our individual will altogether, so that the very energy that animates all interpersonal relationships is annihilated. Have you ever attempted to befriend a rescued animal that has been tragically abused – that can no longer trust relationships with people, but sees every interaction in the survival mode of *take or attack, fight or flee*? That is what S.A.P. is perpetrating on humanity. Over time, we are forgetting how to care, how to be kind or generous, how to love, how to be loved, how to appreciate the thoughts and deeds of others, how to have empathy, and how to create harmony, joy and beauty in the real world. We are becoming functionally *SAPped* of the very essence of our humanness. This may seem like an extreme conclusion, but a global history of war, genocide and oppression has

demonstrated just how disconnected from humanity people can become under extreme stress. And today, as we are alienated from our own effective agency at the same time that we are alienated from each other, civil society has become a thin, fragile veneer that appears to be gradually failing to prevent regression into extraordinary depravity.

Unfortunately, many of our choices of late also seem to be making the situation worse, rather than better. Some examples: When Newt Gingrich ended what he saw as a backscratching, chummy culture in Washington D.C., shortening the legislative workweek and insisting that legislators return to their home states instead of cultivating relationships in the nation's capital, he effectively destroyed the human connection and cooperation of future Congresses. Legislators who have little or no relationship outside of working on Capitol Hill are much less able to find compromise, appreciate each other's positions, or approach a piece of legislation with a generous or compassionate spirit. So sure, it's not chummy anymore...but this has helped fuel Right/Left polarization. When consumers decided they liked the prices and variety at Big Box stores better than their local retailers, it decimated small business and destroyed personal relationships with those local business owners, their employees and local producers, while abstracting customer service to a purely transactional, faceless call center far overseas. When busy parents increasingly began to outsource aspects of parenting to TVs, iPads, smartphones and the Internet, they created children addicted to damaging screens³ and increasingly paralyzed by depression and social anxiety,⁴ who then had no clear idea of a path to individuation, healthy socialization or adulthood. When huge swaths of the populace gave up nourishing real-world social activity in favor of binging on social media consumption, we opened ourselves up to more tribal groupthink, political brainwashing, and the "active measures" of Vladimir Putin⁵...**all quite possibly contributing to the destruction of democracy and civil society itself.** So, in actuality, we have no one to blame but ourselves. We have actively, consciously and willingly participated in this rush to become transactional automatons.

How can we unSAP this mess and restore the quality and depth of human interconnection?

Remedies for the S.A.P. Effect

In [“The Goldilocks Zone of Integral Liberty,”](#) I discuss four vectors that – in combination – support restoration and freedom of individual agency. These are: *subjective felt experience, intersubjective social agreement, interobjective systems, and participatory mechanisms*. We will define these more fully in the **Metrics & Adjustments** section to follow, but for now consider that there must be a combined effort across all of these arenas – addressing only one or two of them simply will not work. Why that is the case will hopefully become clear as we discuss each vector in turn.

Restoring an Authentic Sense of “We”

(intersubjective social agreement)

Many of the top influencers listed above (*population, urbanization, technology, etc.*) have been identified for years, and well-intentioned folks have posited and championed solutions they felt would mitigate some of the worst impacts. The assumption has been that imposing top-down solutions will somehow remedy social problems that were created by what we’ve identified here as an S.A.P. effect. There has been innovative city planning that seeks to reinstate a sense of community through mixed zoning, mixed use and mixed income development that reconnect overly partitioned segments of society; restrictions on smartphone use (at school, work, performance venues, etc.), and family technology “sabbaths” in the home, to reduce screen-dependency and reinitiate social engagement; various proposed visions for Artificial Intelligence, automation and Universal Basic Income that could invite more leisure time and non-transactional social interaction; attempts to leverage social media for crowd-sourcing solutions to these complex problems; a steady stream of activist movements all across the spectrum – market fundamentalist, pro-environment, anti-capitalist, anti-government, government-centric, pro-regulation, etc. – that seek to correct abuses and distortions of crony capitalism, corporatocracy, monopolization and conspicuous consumerism; a push for increasing direct democracy, citizens councils and assemblies, subsidiarity of government and so on to restore citizen empowerment and responsibility in self-governance; and countless alternative, small-scale real-world models for transitioning away from the destructive spiral in which postmodernity finds itself. But

although some of these proposals and experiments do mitigate some of the SApping we've identified, *none of them address the underlying causal pressures head-on*; none of them restore personal agency completely across all of the areas that are currently in crisis. Whether markets, governments, populist movements, worker solidarity, community activism, NGOs, new ideologies or religious fervor, none of these grass roots, institutional or systemic approaches will heal the divisions created by **universally eroded interpersonal relationships**. In fact, some of these proposals make the situation much worse by projecting our individual or collective agency into a new model of dependency, rather than truly helping to restore or facilitate relationships.

I would therefore suggest that we need to elevate the centrality of our daily intimacy and prosociality as a foundation for a thriving and stable civil society.

What follows is an attempt to frame that foundation.

Early on in my Integral Lifework coaching, I began to observe a consistent theme in of many relationship impasses. It often seemed that one party (in a couple, a friendship, a family, even in work or community relationships) viewed the qualities and meaning of their relationship differently than the other party, and this was creating ongoing disconnection and tension. So I mused upon what I thought were common expressions of these qualities and meaning, and created the *Relationship Matrix* below.

<p>Level of Commitment:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> A. Profound (there has never been a question about this being a lifelong and mutually committed relationship) B. Pronounced (one of our closest and most important relationships) C. Moderate (social bonds like work relationships, those between doctors and patients, family members who aren't emotionally close to us, etc.) D. Mild (general commitment to social expectations, such as conforming to laws or traditions) E. Dysfunctional (obsessive, addictive, or compulsive) 	<p>Type of Affinity or Attraction:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Spirit (a inexpressible but deep attraction that shares a common understanding of events in the context of spiritual priorities) 2. Heart (sharing mutually important values, goals and attitudes – including spiritual ones) 3. Mind (intellectual affinity – thinking alike or understanding each other's thought process with surprising ease) 4. Physical (enjoying how someone looks or moves, the sound of their voice, their smell, etc.) 5. Sexual (sexual attraction)
<p>Circle of Intimacy:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> I. Devotional (wide open passionate worship that knows no bounds) II. Soul Friends (deep spiritual trust, openness, sharing, mutual support and inspiration) III. Companionship (a comfortable closeness, frankness and mutual trust) IV. Compassionate (an unconditional acceptance and desire to relieve suffering – often initially one-sided) V. Convenience (sharing common, cooperative goals for a limited duration) 	<p>Level of Social Acknowledgement:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Public (everyone knows) b. Immediate Community (only our closest friends know) c. Private (i.e. "just us" – we only acknowledge it between ourselves) d. Self (we know, but we haven't shared with anyone else – even the other person with whom we feel a connection) e. Unknown (a relationship already exists, but we haven't consciously acknowledged it to ourselves)

In my Integral Lifework practice, this matrix became a useful tool in helping all parties within any relationship gain insight into how they viewed and experienced their relationship – which sometimes was very differently from how other members of that relationships viewed it. Each party was asked to self-assess how they viewed the relationship, and then ask others to assess how they viewed that same relationship as well – including people outside of it who had observed everyone involved. (That freely downloadable multiperspective assessment is available here:

<https://www.integrallifework.com/resources/RelMatrix.pdf>.) In the context of the S.A.P. hypothesis, my strong suspicion has been that, if folks in modern organizations, neighborhoods, workplaces, educational environments, nonprofits, government organizations, legislative bodies, on social media and so forth were all to use this assessment to evaluate interactions in those environments, the

outcomes would be fairly predictable. The “level of commitment” would seldom exceed “moderate” levels, and might even reliably dip to “mild” or “dysfunctional.” The “type of affinity or attraction” will generally be all over the place and on multiple levels (at least when folks are being honest with themselves). The “level of social acknowledgment” can likewise be highly variable. The “circle of intimacy,” however, would seldom rise above “convenience.” And, once again, when two people have differing assumptions or expectations in any of these areas, this creates persistent anxiety and conflict.

And it is these last two issues that are really at the crux of the S.A.P. problem: S.A.P. restricts the intimacy we experience with other people to “sharing common, cooperative goals for a limited duration,” and *encourages* rather than moderates any differences in expectations. Thus, in an understandable self-protective reflex, we will descend into an almost entirely transactional orientation that, in turn, invites us to invest in our own superagency, abdication of agency, or pseudoagency as a consequence of our fleeting connections and shallow relationships. It’s a self-reinforcing downward spiral that amplifies a *severe agency projection* and annihilation of personal will. By limiting ourselves to a superficial interdependence of convenience, we disallow any deeper, more nourishing and enriching connections. And we undermine our own capacity for the felt affection, empathy and compassion that naturally reinforce social cohesion. Without realizing it, with most if not all of our daily interactions inhabiting a self-limiting space, our deprivation of intimacy is sabotaging or numbing all of our prosocial reflexes – all of the mental and emotional habits that support civil society itself.

Despite Hobbesian claims to the contrary,⁶ this antisocial spiral really isn’t our natural disposition. We are intrinsically social beings that want to belong, that want to experience community and fellowship, that want to be generous and kind, that want to love and be loved. There is evidence across multiple academic disciplines that confirms this,⁷ but it is also easy to observe in our day-to-day lives. The young employee who invests completely in team-building exercises at their workplace, embracing the vision and culture that upper management has created for the business, and fiercely defending all that business’s decisions and practices with the fervor of a loyal team player. The new lovers who are hopelessly and romantically lost in each other’s affection, sure they will be together forever, confident of the uniqueness and strength of their relationship. The recent convert to an established belief system (religious, ideological, etc.) that desperately wants to share their new beliefs and persuade

others to embrace them – not because they feel they are “right,” per se, but because they are so confident that the belief system will help anyone and everyone...*if only they would believe*. The consumer who is delighted (or disappointed) with their latest purchase or service experience, and wants other customers to know in order to be helpful to both those customers and perhaps the business itself. The impulse to give money to a homeless person, or help an elderly person cross the street, or open a door for someone who is disabled, or smile at the joyful silliness of a stranger’s child. In all such cases, the motivations may be multifaceted, but we can be fairly certain the overriding impulses arise *out of caring and empathy for others*, a desire for connection and intimacy, the remembrance of a deep understanding of sameness, and a yearning for social harmony. These impulses come easily to us...until we learn to suppress, evade, or ignore them.

Clearly, the level of societal divisions, antagonisms and distress we are experiencing today could be ameliorated with a deepening of our interpersonal relationship dynamics in analog environments. Returning to the *Relationship Matrix*, if we all shared an expectation of a *pronounced* or *profound* level of commitment; if we all regularly experienced a circle of intimacy that achieved *compassionate*, *companionship* or even *soul friend* levels; and if the level of social acknowledgement for these conditions was consistently *public* (everyone knows)...can you imagine the healing impact this would have on civil society? The level of shared purpose and sense of unity? Of course there are other considerations, such as “Dunbar’s number,” where the proposed upward limit of meaningful and stable social relationship ranges from 100 to 250 people. So sure, perhaps we won’t experience higher levels of intimacy and commitment with every stranger. But my suggestion is that when we do cultivate a healthier balance of deeper, more committed and intimate connection with the people in our daily lives, we will begin to restore our agency to more realistic and self-sufficient levels. We will stop projecting our will into external agents, return to a more prosocial level of trust and active interdependence, and we will begin to unSAP the world.

However, there is a significant caveat involved. If we confine our closest, most honored and valued relationships only to those who share the same flavors of affinity and attraction as our own (the same values hierarchies, etc.), we are really just insulated ourselves in a bubble of comfort – in an amplification chamber for our preexisting values, beliefs, sensitivities and proclivities. And this might

be fine if society were completely homogenous. But of course it is not. In fact, its increasing diversity is the root of many fears, antagonisms, divisions and conflicts. To truly aspire to a greater affability, mutual acceptance, and creative synthesis within such diversity requires us to break out of the comforts of familiarity. Over the past three decades, I've been involved in numerous attempts to "bridge the divide" between groups of people to achieve a unified – as both a participant and as a facilitator. Cultural sensitivity training, team building exercises, wholeness and inclusivity workshops, integral communication approaches, mediations, organizational coaching, aligning workplace roles with personality types or individual strengths, cognitive behavioral approaches, and countless other techniques. And you know what the primary takeaway from that thirty years of bridge-building experience is...? It's a variation of Theodore Roosevelt's insight years ago: people won't care very much about what you think, expect, believe, feel or propose...**until they know how much you care.** Healing political, socioeconomic, ideological, racial and gender divides simply won't happen without increased intimacy and commitment, *and that intimacy and commitment has to occur across those divides.*

Want to break down walls and antagonisms between you and someone of another race, belief, background or class? Invite them into your home for a relaxing meal, share some humorous and light-hearted experiences from your life, ask if they would like to share, and listen carefully to their stories. Make an effort to find a connection, a space of common experience, shared interest, or similar values. Be open, and humble, and curious, and kind. That common ground is there...I guarantee it. But only if we meet in person, in the same physical space, so that all of the signals and nuances evolution has granted our species can validate the connection being formed – *and this cannot happen online or by investing more of ourselves in technology.* And if we do this regularly, with a sincere spirit of generosity that has no agenda or expectation of reciprocation, we will begin to bridge even the most daunting divide. This is how we mend fences with an alienated neighbor, how we heal rifts in family relationships, how we synthesize cooperative solutions from disparate methodologies, how we compromise on political and ideological ideals.

Once such high-quality relationships are restored, and we have recovered a mutually supportive sense of personal and collective agency, only then can any of the proposals, models and experiments aimed

at healing modern society be effectively implemented. Until abused, fearful and alienated people can learn to trust in each other once more, all new systems and structures – and all existing components of civil society – will fail to provide enough glue to keep populations cooperative, friendly and hopeful. Further, we will all tend to regress (or cease to mature) in our moral orientation and development – **our prosocial impulses will fail because we are understandably egoistic, self-protective, transactionally oriented and essentially childish in how we engage the world around us.** “What’s in it for me, and how can I guarantee that benefit?” becomes the primary operating assumption for everyone. Becoming more acquisitive, more selfish, more controlling, more callous...these are the natural consequences of high-stress survival mode: like the animal rescued from abuse, we are increasingly compelled to *take or attack, fight or flee*...and increasingly convinced that we cannot trust.

Of course, to heal a fractured society, we probably can’t all be having folks over to our house for a meal to heal. That isn’t realistic – certainly not for restoring the quality and depth of all of our daily interactions. Instead, there are established models for creating a similarly welcoming, neutral, caring space for thoughtful, heartfelt exchanges. In many ways, there is already broad acknowledgement of this relational approach to remedying societal challenges. Most successful outreach programs (for at-risk youth, homeless populations, drug misuse, etc.) rely on relationship-building to both identify issues that are most critical, and effectively serve the target demographic.⁸ Community policing is another, well-documented example of building relationships in order to heal.⁹ Therapists who follow Carl Rogers’ person-centered psychotherapy model, and educators inspired by Martin Buber’s relationship-focused approach to education, experience firsthand the importance of relationship in their efficacy of praxis. And of course the most successful recruitment and community-building methods for any organization, ideology, religion or movement have always been grounded in offering a sense of belonging, family, acceptance and friendship – they are centered around restorative interpersonal relationships. However, all of these tend to be highly targeted approaches for specific types of interaction...often with a specific agenda or outcome in mind, and with a preexisting power dynamic in play...and do not really address the underlying disconnections in society as a whole.

So we need to create a reliable mechanism that encourages a broadly inclusive, non-threatening, non-hierarchical analog fellowship to rebuild authentic, open, honest, intimate relationship between all

members of society. We need to reawaken a sense of comradery, kinship and love that heals all wounds and bridges all divides. And to that end the concept of *Community Coregroups* just might be the ticket.

Community Coregroups 101

The concept is simple: initiate small groups that meet in person as regularly as possible, where the process of interaction is carefully defined to maximize trust, openness and create a safe and accepting environment for sharing. This is not a new idea – in fact some version of these groups has been around for decades in many of the organizations in which I have participated. What follows is an abbreviated overview of the concept, modified from my book [*Being Well:*](#)

The basic idea of how these groups work has come from many years of teaching classes, leading discussions, and being involved with support groups of many different types. And although the idea is simple, it won't always come naturally, and may take some practice. What makes this approach so different is that it asks participants to follow a specific format, and provides guidelines of how to interact with each other in a group. The format and guidelines call upon us to be humble, compassionate and self-controlled in ways that may seem uncomfortable at first, but which really pay off in the long run in extraordinary ways.

The format of the group is a combination of guided discussion and reflection. The "Guide" can be anyone, and in fact I would encourage the role be rotated among all members of the group, with a new Guide for each session. If it's a newly established group, anyone can be a Guide. With an established group, participants should attend at least four sessions before volunteering for the role of Guide. The Guide's responsibility is to offer up the discussion questions, allow everyone in the group to participate, to remind people of guidelines if they forget them, and to follow the format below as closely as possible. The Guide doesn't answer the questions or comment on them, but encourages everyone else to do so and keeps the discussion going. The ideal Coregroup size is between six and twelve people, and the format of each session goes like this:

- Everyone is given time to find a seat, take some refreshment if that is offered, and visit a little with each other. This might be for ten minutes or so.
- The Guide then invites people to “check in.” This gives everyone an opportunity to share their name (just their first name or however they would like to be addressed), what is going on in their lives right now, any brief announcements they would like to make about upcoming events or resources they think the group would be interested in, and why they have come to this particular session. The check-in should take another fifteen minutes or so. Anyone who wishes to remain silent – or only introduce themselves as a first-time visitor – can of course do so.
- The Guide then introduces the topic for the session – which all of the discussion questions will relate to in some way – and then briefly covers the guidelines for participation (outlined in the next section below), including the 90-minute time limit.
- The Guide then starts the session by inviting everyone to take a moment of silence together to set their intention for the following hour. That intention can be any unifying goal that has been advertised as this particular group’s focus. For example: to get to know each other better, to heal perceived divides, to understand and appreciate different beliefs and perspectives, to learn about new topics together, to understand and discuss different solutions to pressing problems, and so forth. The topics can be wide-ranging, but the process of how to discuss those topics (i.e. “guidelines for participation”) will always be the same.
- After a minute or two, the Guide indicates that the discussion is beginning. The Guide then asks the first question and leads the group in a minute or two of silent introspection in response to the question. The Guide then invites people to share whatever answers (or additional questions) they have. Every person who acts as a Guide will have a different style of encouraging this sharing. Sometimes asking follow-up questions – or offering examples from their own experience – will be helpful. But whatever they do, they must walk a fine line between inviting and encouraging discussion, and pressuring people who aren’t ready to participate. In a well-established group of people who already know each other, discussion will likely unfold naturally and easily. In a new group, some people may understandably be hesitant or shy.

- Whenever someone responds to a question, the Guide will thank them for their thoughts – without passing judgement or evaluating what they have said – and then ask other people to add their own contributions. If someone is taking much more time than others in the group, or interrupting others, or for some reason isn't able to follow the participation guidelines below, then it is the Guide's responsibility to gently and compassionately help them understand this misstep. Hopefully, though, the Guide's main focus can be to create an inviting space for everyone to contribute. The Guide does not contribute any answers to the questions while they are guiding.
- If participants do have questions about the topic or the questions being asked, the Guide will redirect them to the rest of the group for answers. The Guide is not an authority here – in fact there are no authorities. There are only hearts and minds seeking within themselves for answers. If someone has need of specific resources (introductory materials on the concepts being discussed, etc.) the more established or well-versed members of the group may encourage them to seek out some well-known resources outside of the group, but Coregroups are not intended to be a marketing or networking opportunity for professional services.
- When the session reaches the 90-minute mark, the Guide then reminds people of the time limit, thanks everyone for their participation, and then wraps up the topical discussion for that session. At this point, anyone who wants to stay to discuss business items can stay, and anyone who wants to leave can leave. This is a good time to have a ten-minute break, before beginning the business portion of the session.
- After the break, when everyone has settled back down, the Guide reminds people of any old business that needs to be addressed, of new business that needs to be decided upon, and invites people to bring up any new business items. This part of the session is often about logistics – who will Guide the next session, where to meet, what time the session will occur, who might need help with transportation, etc. It also might include discussion about social get-togethers, like potlucks, walks or hikes, or other group activities. This part of the session should take no more than a half hour, so that the total Coregroup session does not exceed two-and-a-half hours. Some simplified version of "Robert's Rules of Order" can also be helpful for the business portion of the meeting, but groups can come up with their own way of doing business – whatever works!

You can see how the Guide has a lot of responsibility for helping the Coregroup session be supportive and enriching. People with different personalities and strengths will have different approaches to guiding, but the intent is always the same: to empower the participants. Of course, the Guide isn't alone in this. Each participant should also commit to helping each session be as successful as possible by following the participation guidelines below. Because everyone will have the opportunity to become a Guide themselves, this commitment will help the group members build skills to support each other.

So here are the guidelines for participation, which are the foundation of the Community Coregroup itself, and in many ways more important than the Guide's role:

- **Avoiding crosstalk.** Participants may be inspired to share something in response to something another member says. However, there are no right or wrong answers to many questions. There is also no need to correct someone else's misunderstanding...unless they themselves ask for clarification. Thus all answers and questions should be directed to the group as a whole, not specific people, and participants should refrain from reacting to what someone else shares – other than perhaps echoing the Guide's appreciation and thanks for that sharing. For example, I might say "I appreciate what s/he just said, because it resonates strongly with something I also feel..." Participants should be very careful not to speak directly to other members of the group during the session, but speak to everyone as a group. Each person should feel safe and supported in sharing whatever they like, as long as that sharing follows the other guidelines below.
- **Appreciating diversity.** Participants are to be as accepting as possible of all types of people, and all points of view, within the Coregroup session. If everyone thought and felt exactly the same way about everything, these groups would not be very enriching...or very interesting! Even when someone says something we think is appalling or offensive, we must train ourselves to be compassionate and understanding, rather than judgmental or hostile. We might offer an alternate point of view to the group, but we must recognize that whenever this starts a back-and-forth between two or more participants, things can quickly turn into a debate. And that is not what Coregroups are about. They are about sharing from our heart, then letting go. About listening from the heart, and letting that go, too. If we are in doubt about how to process what someone has shared, we should take a moment to close our eyes, breathe deeply and see past their words into the emotional content of the words being spoken. After all, their heart is just like ours, with all its pain, grief and joy.

- **Nonviolent speech.** The idea that things we say can hurt each other is not a revolutionary idea. But to create a safe and inviting place for people to share of themselves openly, we must be especially careful with the words we use. Speech that expresses prejudice, hatred or disdain is not helpful. Speech that makes us right and someone else wrong is not helpful – especially because the real truth usually lies somewhere in the middle anyway. Words that belittle or embarrass others do not encourage openness. We may have feelings of anger over something being discussed, but in this group, such feelings should never translate into yelling at someone, or calling them nasty names, or putting someone down because they believe or think a certain way. Whenever we feel a strong reaction rising up that we can't control, and that we suspect will disrupt the harmony of the group, we should excuse ourselves from the group for a few minutes to be alone and regain our composure, then return when we are ready.
- **Compassionate silence.** Sometimes a certain topic or question may uncover a well of painful memories and emotions in one or more members of the group. But participants should commit to letting that pain be expressed without trying to comfort or rescue the person in pain. And when I am the person feeling pain – even if I am crying my heart out – I should also not expect other participants to comfort me or change my emotional state. I should not expect anyone to reach out to me, or try to make me feel better. Practicing “compassionate silence” means that the group accepts the pain of one person and allows it to just be. No actions need to be taken. No one needs to respond at all, other than the Guide who will express gratitude for the sharing, and perhaps create some extra time between questions to allow someone who is upset to recover their composure. If someone is so upset they must excuse themselves, the discussion should move forward without them.
- **Guiding the Guide.** Sometimes an inexperienced Guide may flounder a bit in their new role. But that's okay. Other participants with more experience can always offer the Guide the benefit of that experience, and raise a hand in the meeting to clarify a point about guiding (something about discussion format or protocol, reminding the Guide of something they may have forgotten, helping them manage a participant who is challenging the guidelines, etc.). Since everyone will have a chance to take on this role, being a Guide is really a shared responsibility for everyone in the group. However, it is important that each person find their own way into a style of Guiding

that works best for them, so participants should only consider “guiding the Guide” when things are getting really off-track.

- **Speaking from the depths.** Participants should take the opportunity provided after each question to look deeply into themselves for answers, trusting that there is wisdom within. Then, when they speak, they should offer that insight as honestly and simply as possible, without feeling a need to explain or excuse it along the way. Sharing might be a story, an experience, an insight, or a raw emotional confession. Whatever arises in response to a question can be a powerful support to others in the group, so there is no reason to hide it away, and every reason to share it.
- **Equal time.** Everyone should be allowed equal time to share. Sometimes, especially with newly formed groups or when someone new joins an established group, one or two people can end up dominating the discussion without meaning to. Some people may find it easier to speak in a group, or hold stronger opinions about a certain topic, or feel a stronger need to make themselves heard. At these times, it is the responsibility of the Guide to remind everyone of the equal time guideline, and, if necessary, ask particularly vocal participants to allow others more of an opportunity to share. When offered in a nonjudgmental spirit of kindness, gentleness and warmth, this reminder is usually enough to help even the most talkative person become more generous.
- **Privacy.** All participants commit to keeping what they learn about each other within the group. As tempting as it might be to blog about something, or share it with a friend, or even bring it up with the person who shared after the group is over, it is very important that all participants refrain from doing this. For sharing to be honest and safe, no one should feel like they will be gossiped about or confronted after the session has concluded. Of course, there would be exceptions if someone has threatened to harm themselves or someone else, or to engage in dangerous criminal activity, in which case it may become necessary to involve professional resources that can intervene or encourage participants to seek professional help. While Coregroups are intended to be healing and transformative, they are not meant to become a primary resource for someone in crisis, someone on the verge of committing a crime, or someone in need of intensive personal therapy.

What about people who just don't want to follow these guidelines? At one extreme, there may be people who may want to remain silent and not participate at all. At the other extreme, perhaps there are folks who can't help being disruptive or hostile during their participation. And then there are those who just keep forgetting about one guideline or other. Since this whole process may be very new and different to people, it is important to be patient. It may take a lot of time and many gentle reminders to create a Coregroup that operates smoothly. Then again, there may come a point where one person's inability to follow Coregroup guidelines becomes increasingly destructive to the group as a whole. At this point, if it is the consensus of the group, it may become necessary to ask the disruptive person to leave the group if they are unable to change their behavior. A conversation with the uncooperative person should be conducted privately, quietly and compassionately, with clear expectations about what needs to change and why. Whatever the outcome, it should be for the good of everyone involved.

There are many other issues that will arise over the course of Community Coregroups that are not addressed here, but these guidelines and definitions can get you started. I would encourage everyone interested in restoring their community relationships to participate in a Coregroup – or start one – and to really stick to it for several months. The longer you are involved, the more deeply you can explore mutual nourishment and compassionate action in a safe and supportive community. At the same time, I would also encourage groups that have been established for a year or more to consider branching out and creating new groups with their most seasoned members – or at least to rotate new members into the group to inspire more diversity and depth.

Once again, the topics for a Coregroup can be as diverse as the participants themselves. However, in the context of the S.A.P. hypothesis, I feel some topics should be carefully and frequently revisited. I've touched on many of those topics in the following list of discussion questions....

Key Topics for Coregroups:

1. What is the best meal you have ever eaten, and what made it so enjoyable?
2. What are some of the biggest stressors in your life? And how do you manage that stress?
3. When do you feel the most confident... and why?
4. What is the wisest piece of advice anyone has ever shared with you?
5. Are all people basically the same – the same needs, the same desires and hopes, the same worries and challenges – or are they fundamentally different?
6. What do you believe is the greatest barrier to happiness and contentment?
7. Why do people need other people? And is money or possessions a replacement for what other people can provide us?
8. Can you think of a situation in your past where different people had different perspectives on the same event or topic? Were you able to see things from multiple people's points of view? What are some of the challenges to doing that?
9. What does it mean to "give away our personal agency and power?" And what are some examples of when that has happened in your life?
10. Do you frequently exercise your right to vote? Why or why not?
11. Is it possible for two or more people to disagree, but both have pieces of the truth?
12. What is "critical thinking?" And what are some flawed argument styles – or "logical fallacies" – that people will rely on without realizing they are doing so?
13. What are "evidence-based" decisions, strategies and policies? When are they effective? When aren't they effective?
14. What single societal problem do you wish could be solved? How would you solve it?
15. How would you define "The greatest good, for the greatest number, for the greatest duration?"
What can we do that contributes the most to such objectives?

It must be noted that the Coregroup concept could be abused by both organizers and participants who want to expand their social network to further a personal agenda, ideological agenda, or for material gain. And, given the broken condition of many communities, and the survival reflexes of isolated and hurting individuals, we should exercise vigilance around those concerns. Yet, even with such risks in mind, it seems imperative that we begin to proactively and urgently address the disintegration of civil society, and Coregroups may be a constructive place to begin.

An additional consideration is that, although Coregroups were originally conceived for adults, there is no reason that teen Coregroups could not follow a similar format. And what about young children? Well perhaps, when adults and older siblings are engaged in Coregroups, those younger children could play together at the same location. This entire endeavor could encourage a revitalization of community centers that offer a safe space for both meetings and activities for kids.

(Eventually I hope to provide more materials for Coregroups – as well as some facility for organizing them – via www.integrallifework.com and www.level-7.com.)

However, in the same sense that structural, systemic solutions are inadequate without genuine and enduring interpersonal relationships to support and maintain them, there is actually someone else we also need to encounter more authentically in the analog realm, **and that is our own self**. The S.A.P. effect also seems to disrupt connection with our own interiority, making all other prosocial interactions that much more challenging, and undermining the ability to focus our volition and agency. How can we shape, energize or direct our own will into any sort of interpersonal relationship if that agency is constantly projected into the world around us? If it is constantly replaced with digital substitutions? If it is forever degraded by our own inner turmoil, disconnection and confusion...? Without recovering that healthy, whole and healing sense of self, our participation in interpersonal relationships will be stunted, awkward and incomplete. *In fact, a Coregroup will be that much more productive in concert with strengthening a connection with our own interiority.*

Communing with Our Analog Self

(subjective felt experience)

Much of my earliest writing around mysticism and spirituality targets this area of development, so I'll simply draw upon those earlier efforts for examples of recommended techniques. The key consideration here is that different approaches are more effective for one person than another – and even for the same person at different times in their lives. The central consideration or aim of such disciplines is to reconnect with our interiority – to encounter felt experience of that reality and

substance. We can achieve this by getting out of our own heads, and back into our hearts and bodies. It's not a new idea, but one that has been usurped by constant external stimulation, titillation and distraction.

Why "communing with our analog self" important? Well, that has to be experienced to be fully understood, but the nourishment we derive from doing so is much like the nourishment we derive from relationships with others: to know ourselves, befriend ourselves, and love ourselves is all about paying attention to different dimensions of our own being, and then responding to those dimensions with kindness and care. If we are unaware of different aspects of our interiority, how can we care for ourselves as a whole person? Indeed how can we hope to care for anyone else, or have meaningful relationships with them, if we don't yet know ourselves?

Here, then, are a few exercises to help reignite this interior relationship.

I – Listening to Now

- A. If you live near trees, find a comfortable place to sit among them and listen to the wind whisper through the branches. Close your eyes and let the wind-song fill your mind, letting all other sounds fade away. Now imagine the wind itself coursing through your body. As the breeze moves through you, does it have a texture or pattern? Do its patterns change? If you listen very carefully, is there perhaps a message there in the changing melody, in the breathing of the sky? If you live near a beach, try the same exercise with the surging rhythms of ocean waves. If near a river or stream, try it with the sound of flowing water. It is ideal if there are few people or distractions around you, but even if there is distraction, see if you can listen so intently that Nature speaks to you more loudly than anything else.
- B. There are countless ways to pay attention to the subtle sensations of our bodies. One approach is to simply ask ourselves where we physically experience wants or emotions. What parts of your body react to different thoughts and intentions? Where do you feel hunger, anger, sleepiness, excitement, disappointment, happiness or fatigue? What are the characteristics of these sensations? As we become attuned to our somatic self, we can more readily notice messages expressed as a tightening of muscles, a sharp intake of breath, a rush of heat through the chest, or a tingling at the back of the neck. Listening to the language of our bodies is yet another avenue of intuitive sensitivity.

II – Self-Inquiry

Objective: Between 15 and 45 minutes of continuous meditation each day. If you can, insulate this with a buffer of five minutes before and after so it never feels rushed, and so you have time to reflect on your experiences.

1. Find a quiet place to sit and relax, and begin your meditation with an inner commitment to the golden intention, i.e. “May this be for the good of All.”
2. Relax every part of your body. Start with your hands and feet – perhaps moving them or shaking them a little to release tension – then your arms and legs, then your torso, head and neck.
3. Breathe deeply and evenly into your stomach, preferably in through the nose and out through the mouth, so that your shoulders remain still but your stomach “inflates.” Practice this until you are comfortable with it.
4. With your mind’s eye centered in the middle of your chest, just above and behind your sternum, silently ask yourself “Who *am* I right now?” As words, images, feelings or experiences arise within you, create space for them in your mind and heart without judgment or analysis, and just rest in them for a moment. What arises may reflect the past, the present, or a desired future. If nothing happens at first, simply keep breathing and ask again, perhaps changing the emphasis on each word, as in: “Who *am I* right now?”
5. After you have rested in each event a while, let it go. That is, release any attachment or certainty you might have about these private thoughts, and gently set them aside. Avoid forcibly rejecting or denying what you find, but allow it to be deliberately tenuous, questionable, optional. You might resist wanting to let go of what you find. Nevertheless, it is important to release all that you encounter – try breathing it out with your exhale. Comfortable in your uncertainty, enlarge the question by emphasizing other words, such as: “Who *am I right now?*”
6. Repeat the cycle of questioning, acknowledging without judgment, and letting go. If anything resurfaces repeatedly, try confronting it by asking “Why?” Rest in the response you receive to this question just as you rested in your previous inquiry, and then let that go as well. Continue questioning with new emphasis: “Who *am I* right now?”
7. If you become disquieted, uncomfortable, jittery, or severely disoriented, try to relax through it. If uncomfortable sensations persist or become extreme, cease all meditation for the day.
8. Give yourself space after your meditation to process what you have experienced. Just *be* with what has happened without judgment or a sense of conclusion.

III – Wandering

Go for a walk in a place unfamiliar to you, without a clear destination or time limit. Begin by deciding which way to go – left, right or straight – without a logical or a deliberate objective. Instead, try to feel your way through each change in direction, noting the sensations in your solar plexus or middle diaphragm as you consider which way to go. Do you feel a lifting, freeing sensation for one option? Try going in that direction. Do you feel a clenching sensation? Try avoiding that direction. See what happens. At some point you may lose your sense of place and time altogether – that’s great! If this happens, can you follow your internal promptings back to where you began...?

IV – Gratitude Meditation

Objective: Between 15 and 45 minutes of continuous meditation each day. If you can, insulate this with a buffer of five minutes before and after so it never feels rushed, and so you have time to reflect on your experiences.

1. Find a quiet place to sit and relax, and begin your meditation with an inner commitment to a broader goal than just personal edification, i.e. “May this be for the good of All.”
2. Relax every part of your body. Start with your hands and feet – perhaps moving them or shaking them a little to release tension – then your arms and legs, then your torso, head and neck.
3. Breathe deeply and evenly into your stomach, preferably in through the nose and out through the mouth, so that your shoulders remain still but your stomach “inflates.” Practice this until you are comfortable with it.
4. In the middle of your chest, just above and behind your sternum, gradually fill your heart with gratitude. It need not be directed at anything or anyone, but you could shape this as an offering to the Source of Life, or Nature, or deity, or simply to the present moment.
5. Begin with a small point of feeling, and allow it to slowly spread with each breath until it fills your whole being. For some, it may be helpful to visualize this spreading gratitude as light emanating from a point in the center of the chest. Maintain this state for as long as you can.
6. As other images, sensations, feelings, or thoughts arise, let them go and return to your offering of gratitude.
7. If you become disquieted, uncomfortable, jittery, or severely disoriented, try to relax through it. If the sensations persist or become extreme, cease all meditation for the day.
8. Give yourself space after your meditation to process what you have experienced. Just *be* with what has happened without judgment or a sense of conclusion.

V – Mirror Meditation *(Not included in Essential Mysticism)*

Objective: Between 15 and 45 minutes of continuous meditation each day. If you can, insulate this with a buffer of five minutes before and after so it never feels rushed, and so you have time to reflect on your experiences.

1. Find a quiet place to sit and relax, and begin your meditation with an inner commitment to a broader goal than just personal edification, i.e. “May this be for the good of All.”
2. Relax every part of your body. Start with your hands and feet – perhaps moving them or shaking them a little to release tension – then your arms and legs, then your torso, head and neck.
3. Breathe deeply and evenly into your stomach, preferably in through the nose and out through the mouth, so that your shoulders remain still but your stomach “inflates.” Practice this until you are comfortable with it.
4. With eyes closed, visualize a person that you love, respect and admire. Sometimes it helps to visualize them against a dark, empty background. Hold that person’s image in your mind’s eye for as long as possible, allowing all of the feelings you have about them to freely arise on their own, without judging those emotions.
5. If you lose focus, slowly re-invoke the image, and continue your deep and even breathing.
6. After a few minutes, let go of the image of that person and the feelings you have for them – just allow it all to fade into the background. After the image is gone, wait a moment, and then replace the first visualization with a second image, also against a neutral dark background. This time invoke the image of someone that you do not respect or admire, or who has caused you discomfort or antagonized you in some way.
7. Attempt to maintain your focus on this new image for at least a minute or two, and notice the reactions and feelings you are experiencing – again without judgement. Then allow the image and emotions to fade into the background, just as you did with the first. Then return to the first person you visualized. Keep repeating this switching-out of the person, letting each person – and the emotions you feel about them – arise and fade.
8. At some point, add one more visage to the mix, in between each of the others: your own face. Again, allow the image and all emotions associated with it to rise and fade on their own, over the course of a few minutes.
9. As other images, sensations, feelings, or thoughts arise, let them go and return to your visualization and admiration. Try to maintain your deep, even breathing throughout.
10. If you become disquieted, uncomfortable, jittery, or severely disoriented, try to relax through it. If the sensations persist or become extreme, cease all meditation for the day.
11. Give yourself space after your meditation to process what you have experienced. Just *be* with what has happened without judgment or a sense of conclusion.

These are just a start, and there are many more exercises intended to deepen this felt experience. To that end, the full, searchable text of *Essential Mysticism* is available here:

<https://www.integrallifework.com/styled/page3/page20/index.html>

What About Trolls, Bullies...and Betsy?

There is a significant caveat to the Coregroup approach – this was evidenced during my own facilitation and participation in such groups over the years. There will be some folks who are fundamentally afraid and mistrustful; there will be others who will try to advance self-serving or ideological agendas; there are some who lack the emotional intelligence – or the felt experience of compassionate affection – to model caring and encouraging facilitation and participation; there will be some individuals so mired in ignorance and prejudice that they cannot participate in a constructive manner; there will be some with mental illness, or severe social anxiety, or profound moral immaturity, or poor social skills that will undermine the quality and depth of the entire Coregroup experience. And I suspect that – as a consequence of S.A.P. – the quantity of such disruptive individuals and deficits will continue to increase across society as time goes on. Furthermore, if the ongoing Trump phenomenon is any indication, some 25% of adults in the U.S. exhibit one or more characteristics that could severely dilute or even sabotage a Coregroup approach to relationship restoration and integration of diversity. What does this mean, then? Are Coregroups destined to fail...?

Whenever aggressively polarized perspectives lock horns, I suspect more intensive one-on-one relationships may be necessary to heal the dysfunction. This may be an instance where inviting someone into our home to break bread – or otherwise initiate a closer relationship and openness – will help immensely. Or, in the most extreme cases, it may be that professional psychotherapy such as CBT or DBT will be necessary to heal a divide that has been amplified by tribalism and cognitive dissonance. Certainly the exercises described in the previous ***Communing With Our Analog Self*** section will help immensely as well. The Coregroup can only offer a loose structure that invites people with the pre-existing capacity for authentic relating to feel safe and open to those exchanges and relationships – but it isn't a replacement for deep friendship or personal psychotherapy, or an avenue to undo habitual

dependencies, or a remedy for antisocial proclivities. Coregroups can open the door for someone to recognize that they may need help...but it will be the responsibility of the most mature, willing and compassionate members of the Coregroup to steer needy members toward helpful supportive relationships and professional resources. But imagine the impact such an environment would have on those who otherwise feel isolated, ostracized, judged and rejected. And imagine how aspects of personal agency will be restored and nourished by supportive community. Perhaps this is even the first step to reintegrating outcasts and outliers who might otherwise lash out – destructively or self-destructively – back into a *welcoming and caring* community.

In the case of less severe behaviors and impulses, perhaps we can return to our example of the family in the car on this side of the road. How can a diverse group of opinions be skillfully navigated? Anyone who has led a discussion or support group, managed a large departmental meeting, participated in organizational brainstorming exercises, or been party to a contentious debate with friends and family will recognize the dynamics in play: ego, self-righteousness, bad blood, mistrust, past mistakes, reflexive tribalism, reflexive skepticism of outlier perspectives (or humiliation of the class clown, as the case may be), arrogance, deference to hierarchy, big personalities and so on. Even a highly skilled moderator can find themselves challenged by a particularly raucous, mistrustful or conformist group. Sometimes, even when there are solid, trusting relationships, folks will still take sides, assert their primacy, or relinquish their agency...and someone can still feel offended, shut down, or wounded. To offer an example of one relatively skillful way to handle such situations, here is Brother John, the gentle inclusivist's strategy, while keeping "the Betsy challenge" in mind....

Brother John, gentle inclusivist: "Sara I also think that horse has really lovely form and color. Tom, we would need to confirm your suspicions with a vet, but it would be terrible if the horse has mange. Ariana, I know a lot of folks with Appies who would agree with your observation...though I don't know myself if that horse is actually an Appy – I think we'd have to take a closer look. Pharrel, I appreciate your objections regarding domesticated animals – I wonder if there is any way for us to determine how this particular horse feels about its life in captivity? And Betsy, I've heard the same thing about moose being aggressive, and I agree with

you that we would need to be concerned if that was a moose. But...well...I think we can be quite certain *that is not a moose.*”

It is possible to validate and affirm multiple perspectives without contradicting them...with the exception of someone who is factually incorrect. Still, John was nevertheless able to find something in Betsy’s statement that he could agree with – and that can be a very helpful segue into what may of necessity be a correction or contradiction. I say ‘of necessity’ because that is sometimes a piece that is missing from inclusive discourse: *sometimes it is extremely important, on principle and as a matter of clarity, to correct a misperception that is counterproductive.* I recall when John McCain corrected a woman in a 2008 town hall meeting who said she couldn’t trust Obama because he was “an Arab.” “No ma’am,” said McCain, “he’s a decent family man – citizen – that I just happen to have disagreements with on fundamental issues...” In response to another man stating, “we’re scared of an Obama Presidency,” McCain continued to contradict the dominant right-wing media narrative of the time, saying, “He is a decent person, and a person you do not have to be scared [of] as President of the United States.” Certainly, speaking truth does not win elections in our current political landscape, but it certainly helps people make more informed decisions over the longer term.

However, there are plenty of instances when the Betsies of the world *will not back down* – where they keep confidently asserting falsehoods, and can even persuade others with the intensity of their conviction. In a classic example of the Dunning-Kruger effect, a person’s level of confidence may in fact reflect the depth of their ignorance on a given issue. The “Keep your government hands off my Medicare!” response to Obamacare in 2009 was a memorable example of this. Then, as this overconfident but mistaken opinion was repeated over and over again – on the news, on social media, by friends, etc. – another observed phenomenon took over: [*an illusory truth effect*](#) through which a falsehood is adopted as truth simply because it has been mindlessly parroted enough times for people to believe it. In its most extreme manifestations, this resulted in a *market-based* strategy to expand healthcare coverage to all Americans being characterized as “socialism,” which it clearly was not. And later, when the 2016 Trump campaign was in full swing, this same pattern of overconfident but incorrect assertions becoming “gospel” to millions of Trump supporters amplified *the illusory truth effect* on a stunning scale. “Alternative facts” became the mainstream norm, rather than an exception

found only on conspiracy websites. Decades after Ronald Reagan revoked the FCC Fairness Doctrine, the consequences of that revocation were writ large across all U.S. media: competing political candidates did not receive equal time, and controversial topics were not covered in an honest, equitable or balanced way. Propaganda was woven into every platform – on network news, in talk shows, and across social media – so that bizarre fictions achieved the same footing, credibility and media saturation as more careful, evidence-based reporting.

Perhaps you have been on the other side of this issue as well, where you are the only person in the room who is stating the truth, but no one else agrees with you, or even believes what you are saying. I have been in this position on countless occasions when presenting Information Technology solutions that contradicted the general assumptions of both technical and non-technical decision-makers, or coaching Integral Lifework clients through a major blind spot in their self-perception, or describing the literal meaning of a Greek passage in the New Testament to someone who believes the New Testament was written in Latin, or even – and I think this was one of the more humorous instances – describing a 500-pound tuna hanging on a dock in Massachusetts to a group of people who all, to a person, had confused tuna with sardines, and thus laughed me into silence. And, as our world becomes more complex, data becomes more difficult to interpret, ideologies become more extreme and reactive, concentrations of wealth have a stronger and stronger influence over mass media, and information becomes democratized and without trusted authorities...it is all that more challenging to help the Betsies of the world appreciate the error of their ways, and help everyone regain confidence that they have the valid, reliable information they need to make sound decisions.

In the U.S., I do not believe Right vs. Left conflicts are mainly a matter of radically divergent ideologies or opposing values – these are smoke screens that distract from the real issues in play. In my one-on-one conversations with my more conservative friends, we are frequently able to affirm the values we both share, and are often surprised and delighted by the extent we can agree upon approaches that meet each other's positions half-way. We don't only disagree or antagonize each other, and are motivated to find common ground *because we care about our friendship*. At the same time, it is also true that certain areas – often those with strongest ideological bias – are more difficult to bridge. But this is rarely a consequence of different conclusions based on the same evidence. **Those disagreements stem mainly from operating on completely different knowledgebases** – from not

being able to arrive at similar conclusions because the evidence and narratives that inform our positions are diametrically opposed. What were the causes and remedies of the Great Depression? Does Planned Parenthood help prevent abortions, or increase their frequency? Do monopolies occur in unfettered markets, or do governments create them? Was the vision of America derived from Judeo-Christian orthodoxy, or were the Founding Fathers more influenced by Aristotle? Are Nordic countries socialist, or aren't they? Does trickle-down economics work, or doesn't it? And so on. Add to this that different philosophical leanings tend to seek out evidence that confirms a given position, and certain divides will understandably deepen over time.

So, in addition to rekindling close friendships across the political spectrum, one avenue that is likely to aid in healing polarization and afford common ground is *a commonly shared knowledgebase* – and a commonly agreed-upon method for evaluating and organizing information. To that end I have proposed a **Public Information Clearinghouse**.

The Public Information Clearinghouse

(a participatory mechanism)

Reputable news media – the informal “Fourth Estate” of government – has been a traditional source of much valid and reliable information for many decades. But both the authority and the reliability of the Fourth Estate has been steadily degraded by a number of persisting variables of late. The rise of social media memes echoes the previous mass consumption of sound bites in traditional media, both reducing necessary nuance to black-and-white, overly hasty conclusions and judgments. The information consumption habits and preferred technology platforms of younger generations has increasingly prioritized flashy, humorous, concentrated entertainment as the vehicle for critical decision-making information.¹⁰ The previously mentioned relaxation of FCC oversight has allowed extraordinary fictions to be propagated as legitimate “news,” and commercialization of media in search of greater profits routinely favors titillating fabrications over fact.¹¹ The constant manipulation of Internet search engines likewise pushes sensational “click bait” to the top of information searches, and buries “balanced, truthful and equitable” resources beyond the web user’s interest or persistence.

And, of course, the injection of enormous amounts of money into opinion-shaping media platforms of all types has elevated commercial, ideological and foreign State-sponsored propaganda to new heights.

What our current cultural landscape requires is a new, trusted resource that combines democratized, crowd-sourced knowledge with evidence-based, scientifically grounded expertise, and an ongoing system of checks-and-balances to maintain integrity and accuracy. That is the foundation of the Public Information Clearinghouse proposition. The Clearinghouse would not house all the information – that could become exceedingly cumbersome – but would provide a portal for searching, sorting, filtering, rating, discussing and mining information according to a wide range of criteria, as well as contribute relevant content as both links, uploads and related information trees. The objective would be to combine the best features and information integrity of many existing platforms and sources into one space. For example:

- The open, commons-centric, crowdsourced knowledgebase power of [Wikipedia](#), [Creative Commons](#), [Open Source Education](#), and other similar endeavors.
- The unfettered access to current research of a [Sci-Hub](#) or [Google Scholar](#).
- The fact-checking facilities of [Factcheck.org](#), [Snopes](#), [Hoax-Slayer](#) and [Politifact](#).
- The multifaceted mining, filtering, analytical tools and reporting facilities of [LexisNexis](#).
- Comprehensive navigation of voting issues such as [VoteSmart.org](#) and [VotersEdge.org](#).
- The broad statistical representations of [Gallup](#) and [Pew Research](#).
- Bubble-up overviews of established expert opinions – like [WebMd](#) – across all areas of interest.
- Hard-edged investigative journalism and analysis from the most reliable, least biased news organizations.
- A moderated discussion forum – like [Quora](#) – with rules of conduct that enhance constructive exchanges, and that preserves all posts and edits (no destructive editing).
- The dual expert vs. crowdsource rating approach of [RottenTomatoes.com](#), combined with the veracity and bias rating approach of [MediaBiasFactCheck.com](#).
- The entertainment value and multimedia richness of YouTube.
- The searchability of Google.
- The preservation of historical knowledge of the [Internet Archive](#) and [Wayback Machine](#).

- A quick-sorting facility as part of the search engine – in the style of check boxes and preferences familiar to anyone, say, shopping for clothing online – where the sorting criteria include things like ideology, political preference, compatibility with religious beliefs, strength of evidence, level of speculation, real-world validation, track record of sources, “proven efficacy rating” of approaches and solutions, and so on.
- The self-assessment facilities of [Strengthsfinder](#), online IQ and EQ testing, political and religion belief mapping, and so on.
- A diffused, highly distributed information storage and search engine architecture.

Open Access, Secure, High Availability

- Open Source technology platform (and ongoing feature expansion).
- Available to everyone with Internet access. No payment firewalls, no advertising, and no data collection (persistent cookies, etc.) or login prerequisites for users browsing the Clearinghouse.
- Publicly owned – no profit-incentive.
- Built from the ground up to provide uninterrupted, rapid, secure, reliable access to searchable and sortable information.

Diverse Input Aggregation

- Peer-reviewed scientific papers (complete papers and supportive data).
- Professional journalism.
- Surveys and survey statistics.
- Crowd-sourced journalism.
- Legal cases and opinions.
- Summary opinions and analysis of important topics.
- Ongoing metrics and raw data that can contribute to current decision-making.
- High quality expert opinions, overviews and summaries across all fields of interest.
- A broad sampling of artistic, entertaining and educational representations of knowledge and information – tailored to different ages, cultures and educational backgrounds.

Dual Rating System

- Expert ratings on veracity, quality and soundness of research or reporting methods, recommended level of education and expertise for comprehension, interdisciplinary relevance to research topics, importance for an ongoing field of study, and unanswered questions that need to be resolved.
- Crowd-sourced ratings on readability and clarity, relevance to a given topic, appropriateness for age ranges, depth and adequacy of analysis for a given topic, and overall reliability of information.

Logic Training

- As Coregroups encourage relationship, empathy and restoration of agency, the Information Clearinghouse could similarly encourage increased logic skills as part of its mission. This could be in the form of online logic skills tests, as well as identification and discussion of logical fallacies in existing literature, Op-Eds, journalism, multimedia and so on.

Integration of Multiple Perspectives

- More advanced analytical tools could aid in reconciling and integrating multiple datasets.
- Methodologies such as [Sector Theory](#) or other forms of [multidialectical processing](#) could be used to help hold contrasting ideas in a neutral decision-space.

Age-Appropriate Content Management (parental controls)

- Folks who want to manage and monitor access for their kids, based on content types or maturity ratings, should be provided a reasonable feature set to accomplish this.

Forum Participation & Content Contribution with Accountability

- Rules of constructive forum debate and nonviolent discourse, with clear consequences for abuse.
- Identity authentication as a prerequisite to content contribution, providing ratings, and forum participation should discourage the troll behavior, bot distortions, and system gaming that appears inevitable in the context of anonymity.

- With login, ability to search and track discussions, contributions and content; create a library of personally relevant research, media and information; and follow favorite commenters and contributors.

Public and Technocratic Oversight

- In order for the integrity of the Clearinghouse to be maintained, there would need to be a combination of public oversight – citizens commissions to design and expand features, user flagging of fake or misleading information, etc. – and professional oversight. The professional oversight that would likely be highly skilled and technocratic in nature – to prevent hacking, maintain systems, networks and coding, ensure reliability, fix problems, etc.

This is just a sketch of what a **Public Information Clearinghouse** could be – a smart navigation tool for the noosphere and to create rich information exchange. Really the starting point for such a venture is a detailed set of design criteria that inform the desired outcomes, technologies, approaches to knowledge and information, metrics and evidence-based methodologies, and other priorities of such a project. But the primary objectives are clear: to provide searchable, sortable, easily interpretable and **actionable information** that can keep voters, workers, consumers and leaders informed about the wisest course – from the most personal decisions to the broadest societal challenges. The democratization of knowledge must be undergirded with some ability to verify and test what is presumed to be known. All opinions are not equivalent – especially ones that cannot be supported with evidence, or which do not have the requisite experience or expertise to interpret complex conditions and variables. And, in order to restore any version of a democratic society that cares for all of its citizens, we must begin with reliable information and some capacity for logical reasoning. Disagreements over approaches are to be expected – that’s what trials and pilot projects are for – but we cannot, in the context of a complex, vast, rapidly growing and intensely interdependent civilization, operate on different versions of reality in our strategic planning or tactical decision-making. We must agree on basic fundamentals of reliable and factual information and the pitfalls of logical fallacies, fundamentals which cannot be polluted by magical thinking, urban myths, misleading propaganda,

“active measures” or other disinformation, armchair experts with no real skin in the game, or the unicorn wish-fulfillment of our most cherished beliefs.

Of course, like Coregroups, such a Clearinghouse will become an empty intellectual exercise if there is no real affection or connection present between participants. This relational rekindling is the real awakening that is necessary for society to heal. In my own life, this awakening was facilitated by the acceptance and compassion of a handful of adults early in my life, by organizations and environments that encouraged emotional honesty and openness, by mentors who demonstrated they cared more about me than their own personal agendas, and through years of meditation, prayer and spiritual discipline that focused many facets of my being on larger, more inclusive arenas of *agape*. I do really believe that, without authentic and affectionate compassion for everyone as an essential ingredient – and without the accompanying desire for the greatest good, for the greatest number, for the greatest duration – there is no hope for any system or approach to succeed and endure over time.

Ending Variations of Poverty

(interobjective systems and additional participatory mechanisms)

Once we have restored authentic relationship with other people, our own interiority, and a modicum of evidence-based truth, we can revisit systemic, societal changes that support thriving individual and collective agency...because we now have the energy, focus, independence, directedness, and mutually supported, fully restored agency to do so. Once again, we cannot hope to begin with top-down solutions – a desire to impose societal fixes, layering them on top of a fundamental brokenness. Such civic systems, processes, institutions and economies can only succeed in enduring and sustainable ways after individual and collective agency are already restored.

The “[The Goldilocks Zone of Integral Liberty](#)” describes *variations of poverty* that substantively interfere with individual and collective freedom, and – in the context of the S.A.P. effect – must be systemically and institutionally addressed in order for the S.A.P. effect to be averted. Here is a representative list of *variations of poverty* from that essay:

- **Poverty of existential security** – lack of food, shelter, clothing, safety from harm.
- **Poverty of access or opportunity for advancement** – being “in the right place at the right time” never seems to happen, no viable pathways out of one’s current situation seem available, no amount of effort seems to change these conditions, and barriers to access and opportunity persist.
- **Poverty of spaciousness** – lack of discretionary time, quiet, solitude.
- **Poverty of justice and equality** – experience of social prejudice, disruption of ability to obtain competent legal representation, inferior treatment under the rule of law, unequal treatment in the workplace, etc.
- **Poverty of economic freedom** – disrupted ability to generate disposable income or access desired goods, lack of opportunity to trade, disruption to development of desired skills and abilities, lack of employment opportunity.
- **Poverty of trust and social capital** – experience of alienation or disenfranchisement, lack of access to supportive social networks, consistently encountering closed doors rather than open ones.
- **Poverty of self-reliance** – disrupted capacity for confidence, and lack of access to tools or experience that support a belief in own self-efficacy.
- **Poverty of education** – disrupted ability to think critically (i.e. carefully evaluate new information, challenge internalized assumptions, relax cognitive bias, escape conditioned habits), learn valuable skills, or gain a well-rounded understanding and appreciation of the world through diverse, interdisciplinary learning.

- **Poverty of common property** – lack of resources held in common, or lack of access to those resources.
- **Poverty of physical or mental health** – poor nutrition, excessive stress, unhealthy family dynamics, genetic predispositions for illness or substance abuse, subjection to psychologically incompatible or physically harmful environments.
- **Poverty of perception and awareness** – disrupted ability to see past the spectacle, perceive or process things multidimensionally, or maintain a neutral holding field while assessing complex information.
- **Poverty of emotional intelligence** – disrupted ability to interpret social cues, facial expressions, emotional content of interpersonal exchanges, or to empathize with the experiences of others.
- **Poverty of knowledge & information** – lack of access to established knowledge, or to accurate and independently verified new information.
- **Poverty of spirit** – disruption of connection with higher Self, spiritual insights and *gnosis*, and/or relationship with divine mystery.
- **Poverty of holistic perspective and vision** – disrupted ability to comprehend the bigger picture, cultivate a guiding purpose and intentionality, or to keep these in mind throughout the trials of daily life.
- **Poverty of moral development** – disrupted ability to mature past an egoic, tribal, or individualistic orientation (I/Me/Mine or Us vs. Them).
- **Poverty of love** – disrupted ability to develop compassionate affection for self and others, or experiencing a consistent lack of compassion from others.

- **Poverty of self-expression** – lack of opportunity and support for creative, athletic, intellectual or other form of self-expression.

Addressing these interferences with liberty has been a primary focus of my own thinking and research over the last few years, with most of my latest books and essays – and certainly the website www.level-7.org – devoted to the topic. Defining the philosophical underpinnings of how we can best vanquish these and other *variations of poverty* seems to be the central debate-of-the-moment in academia, politics, economics, philosophy and countless other disciplines – and of course is a critical concern underlying much scientific research. Perhaps it has always been the case that *variations of poverty* were intuitively understood, and that most human systems and knowledge have sought to address them in some way. However, once again, it is easy to allow these external concerns around systems and institutions to become emphasized above interpersonal relationships and our felt experiences of interiority – so we must invoke balance between these efforts, no matter how passionate our convictions around vanquishing poverty may be.

That said, there are countless ways to approach these challenges. And, not unlike personal “communing with self” practice, what works best for a given society or community at one time will differ from what is most efficacious for others – or at other times in that society’s development. More than specific methods, the philosophical underpinnings of what constitutes a suitable remedy, and the metrics we use to assess that remedy’s effectiveness, demand the most consideration and clarity. From these we can develop “design criteria” that fulfill our highest priorities – our guiding principles and primary techniques. Ideally, these should be evidence-based rather than purely ideological, though this assertion is itself predicated on certain philosophical convictions that are not universally held. Further, **flexibility within universality** has to be the aim of any adaptive and sustainable system that interfaces across diverse platforms of culture, technology and economic interdependence. Around the globe, we are all more interconnected than ever before – but we are also still culturally, societally, communally, and individually unique and different.

With all of this in mind, here are the proposed design principles and supporting philosophies of a Level 7 political economy (from www.level-7.org) that aim to eradicate as many variations of poverty as

possible. This is included as a starting point for exploration of these ideas...again, there are almost certainly many different ways to approach these challenges, but hopefully the following overview can provide resources for weighing alternatives to our current system, as system that disrupts and restricts most of our freedoms by imposing *variations of poverty* on us all.

What are the core design principles of a Level 7 political economy?

The following list of core design principles provides links to a more in-depth discussion of each idea. The essential aim of Level 7 is to transition to more ***distributed and diffused*** systems of governance and economic opportunity — that is, to move away from institutions and traditions that concentrate wealth and power in order to remedy the economic inequality and corruption of democracy so prevalent in the world today.

- [Self-Nourishment and Moral Evolution](#)
- [Civic Engagement at the Community Level](#)
- [Expanded Direct Democracy in All Levels of Government](#)
- [Commons-Centric Production and Worker-Ownership](#)
- Minarchy, [Subsidiarity](#) and [Polycentric Governance](#)
- Collective, Egalitarian Orientation to Freedom & Civic Responsibility ([Integral Liberty](#))
- [Egalitarian Efficiency](#) & Diffusion
- [Sustainable Design](#)
- [Precautionary Principle](#) & [Pilot Principle](#)
- [Critically Reflective Participatory Action](#)
- [Revolutionary Integrity](#)
- Ending the Tyrannies of [Monopoly](#) and [Private Ownership](#)
- [Change in Property Orientation and Valuation](#)

Where did the philosophy behind a Level 7 political economy originate?

These ideas coalesced over a number of years as an outgrowth of studying how moral development, economics, traditional philosophy, cultural values, history, politics and democracy have generated and intersected within political economies over time. The influences have been broad, but include these contributions and considerations:

Influential Concepts

- Elinor Ostrom's research on [common pool resource management](#) that arose organically around the globe, and which helped inform the shape of polycentric governance.
- Aristotle's elaborations on [virtue ethics](#), especially as they intersect with democracy, commerce and political obligation.
- As a response to pervasive corporate oligarchy and its destructiveness to both democratic civil society and planet Earth - as extensively exposed by Noam Chomsky, Naomi Klein, Chris Hedges, Yanis Varoufakis, Greg Palast, George Monbiot, and others.
- Integrating lessons learned by Alec Nove about the failures of State socialism and potential remedies.
- Consideration for the varied insights and vision of many other economists, such as Thorstein Veblen, E.F. Schumacher, Thomas Picketty, Karl Marx and Amartya Sen.
- Howard Odum's concept of Earth as a closed or isolated ecological system, subject to the laws of thermodynamics and cycles of energy transformation, and the consequent development of approaches by David Holmgren, Peter Pogany and others to operate sustainably within such a system.
- Paulo Freire's emphasis on an inclusive, participatory, dialogical educational process to bring about social change through individual self-empowerment and [critically reflective participatory action](#) (critical pedagogy and praxis).
- A [convergence of ideas and evidence](#) encountered in moral philosophy, theories of human development, spiritual disciplines, enduring works of art, neuroscience and evolutionary

biology around the [centrality of prosocial behaviors](#) as the basis for human society and collective survival.

- Paul Piff's research on the deleterious effects of wealth, greed and social status on social relations.
- Adam Smith's warnings about the [dangers of monopolies](#).
- The selective merits of various [libertarian socialist](#) and [social anarchist](#) proposals (see also [An Anarchist FAQ](#) for additional elaboration on social anarchy).
- Employing [Ken Wilber's AQAL schema](#) to help define what [integral liberty](#) should look like.
- Proven advantages of member-owned and [worker-owned cooperatives](#) over shareholder-centric institutions and management.
- The importance of the [pilot principle](#) — along with its [precautionary principle](#) corollary — in considering all activism or when implementing any solution.
- The demonstrated advantages and historical precedents of *subsidiarity*, *horizontal collectivism* and *egalitarianism*, and the observation that *all concentrations of wealth and power are destructive to democracy and economic freedom*.
- [Implementations of direct democracy in Switzerland](#), installed in parallel with representative democracy (and holding those elected officials accountable).
- A re-engagement of *civic responsibility*, first and foremost *at the community level*, via both governmental and non-governmental institutions.
- Relying on *evidence-based* solutions that are customized to regional and local differences (rather than trying to impose homogenized conformance).
- The exhortations and warnings of philosophers and activists throughout history that the methodologies, values, prejudices and attitudes embodied in any movements or activism will persist into the institutions and cultural norms that emerge out of that revolution; I call this [revolutionary integrity](#).

Original Ideas & Supportive Insights

(To appreciate how many of these elements interrelate, I recommend reading [Integral Lifework Concepts, Tools & Assessments](#) as an in-depth overview, and [Integral Lifework Developmental Correlations](#) and [Integral Lifework Moral Development Map](#) for summary snapshots)

- That [multidimensional nourishment](#) (both individually and collectively, in widening circles of intention and action) creates critical support structures for moral development, and that moral development, in turn, *is a critical support structure* for an advanced political economy.
- The acknowledgement of a [unitive principle](#), evident in nearly all philosophical and spiritual traditions — and supported by research into group selection and the evolution of prosocial traits — that identifies loving kindness as the fundamentally binding force in social cohesion, organization and development.
- The criticality of developing and reinforcing personal and collective [functional intelligence](#) — especially in terms of values alignment between our personal life, social mores, cultural traditions, and our economic, legal and political systems.
- An emphasis on consciously engaging our [moral creativity](#) to shape civic institutions that support our values.
- That [capitalism is profoundly antagonistic](#) to social cohesion and moral development, and that *individualism* and *materialism* — especially as championed by [neoliberalism](#), Right-Libertarianism, and Randian objectivism — aggressively counteract the unitive principle.
- Redefining [property position](#) in terms of the *type of ownership*, *functional abstraction layer*, and an *holistic valuation* (that includes use value, externalities and effective nourishment capacity), as a central building block of a Level 7 economy.
- Evaluating [the evolution of capital](#) from original, simple forms to secondary, complex forms in order to differentiate commons-centric orientations and solutions from capitalistic ones.
- The importance of [multidialectical synthesis](#) in addressing complex systems as both an individual, interior discipline and as a collaborative, participatory process.
- Other unique features of a Level 7 political economy, such as [daily direct democracy](#) and the Public Priorities Database, a [social credits](#) with accountability system, a [Public Information Clearinghouse](#), diffused currency issuance backed by [common property shares](#), etc.

Metrics & Adjustments

No architecture, system or institution is perfect. In fact, an inability to adapt to new contexts, technologies, and cultural developments would be the death knell of any large-scale proposal. In the essay [“The Underlying Causes of Left vs. Right Dysfunction in U.S. Politics,”](#) I offer the following metrics for evaluating the *quality of agency* a particular proposition provides:

Agency Matrix

	Willing Agreement	Sacrificial-Beneficial Compromise	Non-Voluntary Imposition
1. Self-Referential (impact on me)	0-100%	0-100%	0-100%
2. Collectively Negotiated (impact on my tribe/group/identity)	0-100%	0-100%	0-100%
3. Cultural/Systemic (impact on social norms & presumed status quo)	0-100%	0-100%	0-100%
4. Codified/Institutional/Structural (impact on formalized structures of civil society)	0-100%	0-100%	0-100%

The idea would be to use this matrix to measure the restoration of agency across all of society – for any system, problem, institution, methodology, etc. How this data is accumulated and assessed would of course be critical: Would subjective self-reporting be sufficient? Would it require a broad survey sample with carefully ordered and worded questions? Would a professional therapist’s interview be helpful? Are there reliable objective methods of assessing these conditions – in collective behaviors and choices, etc.? I suspect the concept of “agency” as a psychometric variable may not yet have fully matured among the social sciences – although the empowered condition of agency is always presumed

to be important, only a handful of assessments appear to include scales that measure personal agency – but that is something we need to achieve in order to refine the restoration process.

Within the Integral Lifework paradigm, one starting point for such assessments would be a framework for integral liberty, which relates back to the four vectors described in the previous S.A.P. remedies section. From “[The Goldilocks Zone of Integral Liberty](#),” verifiable free will is defined this way:

“Free will is a synthesis of the subjective felt experience of free will, the intersubjective social agreements that ensure it, the interobjective systems and conditions that facilitate self-determinant choices and activities, participatory mechanisms that support and moderate these factors in the most diffused and egalitarian ways, and objective metrics for all of these factors that continually assess their efficacy and contribute to an ongoing synthesis.”

To better define the key factors of a synthesis of integral liberty:

1. *Subjective felt experience of free will* as individual sovereignty over choices from moment-to-moment, as well as regarding future plans, as observed in the energization and active expression of four primary drives (*to exist, to express, to affect, and to adapt*).
2. Ongoing, constantly renewed and reinforced *intersubjective social agreement* that individual sovereignty should be collectively supported and maximized, acknowledging that without such agreement and intent, individual sovereignty will inevitably be either compromised, interfered with, or entirely inaccessible. Further, there should be ongoing communal engagement and dialectic around this agreement and its characteristics; this is a dynamic rather than static process, and would need to be customized to unique variables at cultural and community levels.
3. *Interobjective systems, conditions and artifacts* that foster the felt experience of individual sovereignty and ongoing *intersubjective social agreement*. Although still malleable and customizable, there would likely be little debate about these universal

processes, and they would have cross-cultural value and representation as relatively static features and functions of society. Thus these become social objects, systems, artifacts and conditions that relate to each other and society in fixed ways, rather than via dialogical dynamics between individuals and groups.

4. *Participatory mechanisms with built-in accountability* for supporting, enriching, moderating and promoting all other factors in the most egalitarian, diffused and distributed fashion. These could include distributed, daily direct democracy; Open Source initiatives and petitions; regular community meetings and online forums; participatory economics; worker-owned cooperatives; community management of banks and land; as well as civic lotteries for citizen commissions and all levels of polycentric governance networks.
5. *Objective metrics* employed at frequent and regular intervals for all of these factors to assess their ongoing efficacy in generating the greatest authentic liberty, for the greatest number, for the greatest duration.

Clearly this is a complex area to explore, describe and develop, but that shouldn't deter us from making such efforts a priority. "The Goldilocks Zone of Integral Liberty" is only a start, but does begin to define free will and effective agency in very specific ways – along with social conditions and agreements supportive of personal liberty and agency – which in turn can be used to capture the nuanced dynamics of this topic.

Conclusion

In conclusion, what we are really attempting to do is mitigate the existing and potential damage resulting from the S.A.P. effect, and do so with an approach that can be summarized in a simple multi-phase formula:

1. Restore relationship with others and ourselves to restore agency.
2. Restore knowledge and logical reasoning to restore efficacy.
3. Harmonize relationship, agency, knowledge and efficacy to restore society.
4. Support reversal of the S.A.P. effect by eliminating *variations of poverty* across all of society.
5. Measure our success, and tailor all mechanisms as necessary.

Simple, right?

Circling back to our family road trip, the hope would be that the fundamental *quality of relationship* between everyone in society would be sufficient to navigate both diverse opinions and ideologies – and potentially volatile conflicts – while remaining grounded in a shared knowledgebase that is continually refined and vetted to aim for the truth. At the same time, the systems and institutions that comprise civil society must of necessity create more egalitarian conditions – that is, conditions supportive of integral liberty – so that authentic freedom of agency persists for everyone. In such a society, it will still matter what kind of horse stands in the field, whether it has contracted mange, whether there is sufficient food available for them in that field, whether keeping horses as pets or work animals is moral, and so on. All of that will still be important. But such deliberations will no longer be so divisive, polarizing, alienating or hateful – because everyone involved will have their personal agency restored in the context of interdependent, genuinely intimate relationships.

Hopefully, it will then be much less likely that large, cult-like tribes of unhappy, disconnected folks will need to reinforce each other's delusion that...say...a horse is really a moose.

TCL – 2/2019

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- ¹ <https://www.marketwatch.com/story/what-are-the-chances-that-americas-disunion-turns-into-civil-war-2018-11-07>
 - ² http://www.tcollinslogan.com/resources/LeftvsRight_Dysfunction.pdf, <http://www.tcollinslogan.com/code-3/images/EscapingCapitalism.pdf>, http://www.tcollinslogan.com/resources/LeftvsRight_Dysfunction.pdf, <http://www.tcollinslogan.com/code-3/images/StupefactionOfHumanExperience.pdf>
 - ³ <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/mental-wealth/201402/gray-matters-too-much-screen-time-damages-the-brain>
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 - ¹⁰ <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2014/12/12/for-some-the-satiric-colbert-report-is-a-trusted-source-of-political-news/>
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