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Chapter 15

Post–Adult Education Alternatives in 45 Years of Learning/Teaching: An Integral–Informed Autoethnographic Reflection

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ABSTRACT

The author critically examines the directional trends that education has gone through in the last 45 years of his teaching and learning experiences, primarily in Alberta, Canada (1972-2017). He argues that, formerly, Alberta was at the leading edge of positive progressive change, before neoliberal ideology invaded Education. Through use of autoethnographic reflection and sociocultural and political contextualization of his educational experiences, the author elaborates the necessity of adopting a holistic-integral alternative path to research and teaching outside of institutionalized mainstream education systems. His emphasis on the affective domain, for example the importance of fear in education, is accompanied by his applications of developmental notions of “post-adult,” transdisciplinary, and integral theoretical work. The purpose of the chapter is to demonstrate, through his own life, a model of potential guidance for teachers, who are questioning how best to negotiate their own careers within the challenges of 21st century neoliberalism and cascading global crises.

INTRODUCTION

A Narrative-Based Integral Methodology

If I am going to promote an *integral education* beyond merely a holistic or integrative education of multiple perspectives, I feel obligated to apply integral methodology. Likewise, I ought to performatively write integrally as well—as much as I am capable. Although this chapter is not action research nor a

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best example of action research in my teaching history for 45 years, it is an acting upon my own life as a teacher/learner for the purpose of my own growth, healing and potential transformation. I want to be a better teacher and person, in a better world.

For the past 60 years in North America (at least), the field of Education has universally been greatly impacted in a positive way by two influences: *reflective practice* and *action research*. Teachers have become classroom researchers, and like this chapter for me, they are encouraged to put themselves under the lens of investigation and critique (both positive and negative). There is more to good education and development of a quality teacher than merely delivering content effectively and/or be a nice caring person.

I have set out an integral methodology guideline for myself for this chapter. The guideline begins by foregrounding self-reflectivity to the point of creating a “study” using autoethnographic principles, whereby I attempt to research *myself* as intimately interrelated with the *culture* in which I teach and learn. Context is important, to make this not an autobiography—all about me. Yet, the structuration is a narrative-based personal “story” about a specific learning/teaching journey. Ultimately, the chapter’s purpose is to better understand Education historically, especially in Alberta and beyond, and offer my journey as a model of potential guidance for other teachers, who are negotiating their careers in the context of a 21st century of global cascading crises.

What is not usual about my interest in Education is the emphasis on the affective domain. Leitch and Day (2000) make a critical point, that reflective practice and action research methodologies for teachers and educational researchers have been overly dominated by rational cognitive models and theories. These two researchers argue that there needs to be a better ‘balance’ and integration of the “role of emotion in understanding and developing the capacities for reflection which facilitate personal, professional and ultimately system change” (p. 179). In other words, their critique is that we have not been attentive enough on the impact that emotion has on determining the quality by which teachers, in particular, research themselves using reflective practice and action research approaches.

Since 1989 my special focus has been on the so-called emotion named “fear.” I mean to emphasize that my study is transdisciplinary, and thus I have concluded that ‘*fear*’ today is not what it used to be—that is, as it was (and still is) typically framed in a more traditional disciplinary methodological container—primarily, that of Philosophy, Psychology and Medicine. Education as a field has largely been dependent on psychology to tell it what it is supposed to think about human affect. My work challenges that assumption.

The most important role of transdisciplinary research and thinking has been its emphasis on “integrating epistemics (i.e., [diverse] ways of knowing)” and the deeper analysis of “world views” that shape the researcher (Scholz, 2017, p. 1). I have wanted to know what shaping worldviews lie deep below the surface of people and cultures and how they determine not only the behavior of fear as an emotion (e.g., fears, phobias)—but how they determine the very way we perceive and understand *fear itself*—and, concomitantly the way we perceive ourselves. All of which determines how we practice *fear management* and educate ourselves (e. g., our children) about fear itself. I will weave this affective thread of inquiry and findings (as a fearologist¹) throughout the narrative in this chapter.

The strong case about the cognitive rationalist bias in reflective practices and action research is likely due (in part) to being afraid of emotion—and, in particular, being afraid of fear itself. To keep things simple for the moment, I am suggesting that there’s a good reason why most narratives of teachers and educational researchers, using these popular reflective action-based methods of analysis, end up as rather low quality. According to Heikkinen et al. (2012), there needs to be systematic (integral) principles brought into narrative inquiry research overall—but especially in the field of Education. They

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suggest five principles to be applied when doing reflective practices like narrative inquiry: (a) *historical continuity*, (b) *reflexivity*, (c) *dialectics*, (d) *workability* and, (e) *evocativeness*. These five also ensure cognitive and rationally dominating modes do not overtake the interpretive investigation and quality of the actual narratives produced. How to get higher quality “*authentic narratives*” (Heikkinen et al., p. 5) out of teachers is an interest of mine too. I want them to reflect courageously into deeper than usual places—entering into territories they are often very uncomfortable to explore, reveal and share. Often this has to do directly with emotion, with unconscious cherished worldviews and a fear of change—a fear of exposure and vulnerability, an authentic confrontation with the world they live in and what is happening globally as in crises of ecological and social disorder. I know that teachers, like anyone else, carry ‘shadows’ of injury (and denial of such) that are part of the culture and their upbringing. These greatly influence the quality of their teaching and development and maturation as a teacher—myself included.

The last thing to say about my integral methodology in this chapter is that I too am going to try to follow and ‘balance’ these five principles (*a la* Heikkinen) to ensure (or at least pursue) *high quality* (i.e., “*authentic narratives*”) in my autoethnographic “*story*.” It was exciting to map the five principles onto the Wilberian (Integral Theory) quadrant analysis (e.g., Wilber, 1995). And, it turns out the five map nicely across all four epistemic quadrants/perspectives and one principle is generic enough to cover all the quadrants: (a) *historical continuity* (lower right or “its” perspective), (b) *reflexivity* (upper left or “I” perspective), (c) *dialectics* (all quadrants), (d) *workability* (upper right or “it” perspective), (e) *evocativeness* (lower left or “we” perspective). Due to space limitations, I cannot go into greater detail on these for this chapter; but suffice it to say they have provided me with a new integral approach to writing about myself as a teacher/learner. At times I’ll make their use explicit but mostly they will be utilized implicitly.

What Is a Post-Adult?

Among other things, (critical) *integral theory* and thinking is decidedly evolutionary, historical, and developmental. The “critical” part is my own specialty addition to Wilber’s Integral Theory² and other integralists’ work. One reason for my emphasis is that I come from a poor working class background going back as far as we have histories in Russia/Germany and Belgium. All were peasants working for the owning classes and elites, I imagine. I’m a son of an immigrant family with grade eight schooling and the first of the generations to attend post-secondary education—which is remarkable because I really quite despised most all my K-12 schooling in Calgary. But that’s another story. Being from the oppressed and marginalized by classism, I have always been a fighter of the middle-class ‘norms.’ I didn’t fit in the way the ‘average’ person was supposed to be. I just wanted to be a long-haired rock star since the age of 14. I played drums and sang lead but mostly back-up harmony. We played The Beatles’ tunes and other songs of revolution.

I grew out of that fantasy soon enough and attended a technical training institute in Edmonton to try to make a career in what I loved—Nature. I’ll get to that below. What really happened in my very passionate life seems to have followed a developmental trajectory of “stages,” not that I knew it at the time, only upon reflection. Around 1989, I discovered an amazing psychology book by Keen (1983) called the *Passionate Life: Stages of Loving*. It mapped in a meaningfully accurate way my growth. Keen thought it was a universal path. The five stages are: (1) *child*, (2) *rebel*, (3) *adult*, (4) *outlaw* and, (5) *lover*. Wow. That model showed that “adult” was only the middle of a developmental spectrum in the potential human life-cycle. Keen argued most everyone stops at that stage of development—and, societies generally do

not encourage post-adult stages. My experience told me at the time that I was well into the *outlaw* stage with all its excitement and struggles—and thus, my attraction to critical theory in general. It is a theory that explains social conflict—that is, struggles that are at the core of the formation of social order and function. Over the decades I have noticed that what nearly everyone overlooks (or suppresses) when they read Wilber’s Integral Theory, especially these days, is that it is a (North American) late-branch of the European (Frankfurt) Critical Theory (very leftist) schools of thought (see Crittenden, 1997). I’ll return to this Keenian model at the end to explain culture and Alberta’s Education system and especially why I get into trouble so easily.

A STORY OF “CLASH” IN ALBERTA EDUCATION: MY LATE 20s

Although I track out my 45 years of learning/teaching in and out of the province of Alberta, Canada, between 1972–2017 in this chapter, it is educative to begin with a critical story of my first two years of school teaching in a rural district, grades 5–8 at Raymond School (pseudonym), in southern Alberta. After this story, I offer autoethnographic reflections and cultural contexts for why things clashed in my early school teaching career and why I had to retire early, while pursuing radical alternative forms of education.

I like to believe that by the time I secured my first public teaching position at Raymond school that I was already well on my way to becoming an integral and transdisciplinary thinker (‘out of the box’)—and, an activist searching to transform society and myself. Like most of the keenest of teachers that go into public school teaching careers, I was determined to offer rich in depth, memorable, relevant and respectful learning relationships with young people like I did *not* have in my K–12 public schooling experience. This rebellious corrective attitude can take a new teacher far. However, like all good things it has a shadow-side too, as I was to learn quickly where the fault lines lie by my choice to join the institutional public system in September of 1980.

Sure there were several unpleasant signs of clash during my Bachelor of Education (after) degree at The University of Calgary. I was registered as “a mature student” then (1978), another influential story I’ll return to later. Yet, I was totally ready at age 28 to shake the world, and if that was to be in the heart of rural ‘Bible-belt’ Alberta, so be it. My student teaching prior went great for the most part and I had received lots of kudos for my creative and alive teaching approach. So, after being assigned a grade 5-6 class with no elementary teacher training (I was a secondary science major), it was a lot of “fun” trying to adapt. The eight-grade, four-room school needed a “science” person and that was me. Then I realized I had to teach science across grades 5–8, which was challenging enough; but add on slew of other courses the situation was intense. By mid-second year I was teaching 11 different courses across four grades.

I thrived for the most part in that preposterous challenge. I was young. As well to my advantage the staff, principal and I got on well. Though, I thought things would go downhill fast (and they slowly started to) when the local fundamentalist Christian minister visited my classroom unannounced at the end of a school day. It was like the second week. He was super friendly at first. Then he questioned my teaching evolutionary theory in my life science courses. Wanted to know if I go to church. Uh ha. I knew where that would go. My dad’s side of the family were rural Christian evangelicals for the most part. But the Pastor wasn’t the only one questioning what I was doing to shape their young people’s minds. Some parents also talked to me with worry. One girl in grade five went home crying (apparently) because she

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thought I was telling her “humans came from apes.” She really liked me but natural selection theory went against everything her family and community of the religious believed.

Yet, these were not nearly as significant to my teaching career as was that day, about 7:45 am on a Tuesday morning before school started. The principal came to my room and said there is a call from head office. The Assistant Superintendent wanted to talk with me. So, I walked down the hall, closed the office door and that’s when it began. “I heard you on CBC radio yesterday morning. You are facilitating an Alternative Education Conference in Olds next month. Let me remind you that you are a public school teacher. It is a conflict of interest... “.

I don’t remember much after those cutting words, and I was immediately on defense and interrupted her berating with “I disagree. This is not a conflict of interest. The alternative and public approaches to education are complementary.” She disagreed and hung up on me because she got a clear message that I would not relent on my values and views. I listened to her economic arguments and that’s about all. She had no reasonable or educational argument to make against alternative education and its value. She merely didn’t want to lose \$\$/student to an alternative system. That worldview and value system totally disgusted me.

I pretty much knew her slamming the phone down on my ear was a sign that I wouldn’t be around long in that county school district. A few nightmarish dreams of working at the school in months following the phone call, and after putting in an exhausting teaching year more, it was late 1981 and I’d chose to give my retirement notice. People were shocked. I taught two years. I realized that I loved teaching but couldn’t stand schools. I was voted runner up for “Best First Year Teacher” in the entire county and I was handing in my resignation. Now, there’s a tension that was never resolved. The Assistant Superintendent and I really liked each other before that phone call. Regardless, my first wife and I went ahead and held the first Alberta Conference on Alternative Education in 1981, in Olds, AB.

Dr. John Friesen, an educational philosopher at The University of Calgary and a Mennonite attended and gave one of the presentations. I really liked his open-mindedness about learning/teaching when I was in my last year of the Bachelor program. He graciously accepted my bold invitation. The only problem coming onto my doorstep was not having another job to go to. But 1982 (i.e., after June) was my year of freedom—and some major life crises of transformation—for fully exploring alternatives in (mostly) adult education. I was beginning to ask: “What does the term “adult” mean, anyways?” Intuitively, at age 30, I sure didn’t want to be one, if they behaved in the ways I had experienced in this society and at the school district administration level.

About three years after retiring, I researched, wrote and self-published a small book on Waldorf (or Rudolf Steiner) Education as an alternative to complement the dominant public education philosophies (Fisher, 1985). I sent a few copies to the assistant superintendent hoping maybe we could also warm-up to each other again and even do some collaboration. I was naive. She responded with a nasty letter after reading it. She basically said, “Why do you have to criticize the public school system in this book? Why don’t you just focus on the positive that a Waldorf approach has to offer?” I wrote back answers to her question, more than once. I said I wanted to balance good critique with good offerings of other ways—the negative and positive. She never returned a reply to any of my letters. I found it so hypocritical how she was discouraging my critical thinking, when the very curriculum she and I worked on in science education, while I was a teacher in the district, was all about how to improve critical thinking and inquiry in our young people facing a challenging future world of complexity and ecological crises.

THE WILD 1970s: MY ECO-INTEGRAL GROWING UP

The 1960s had accumulated plenty of collective trauma that I vaguely remember, like President J. F. Kennedy's publicized assassination in Dallas, TX. There were the civil rights protests and sometimes violent riots in the US and the Cuban Missile Crisis, but I think mostly I was too young to take it in. The best early 1970s summer jobs I had were working for Alberta Provincial Parks as a Park Interpreter in Cypress Hills Provincial Park. What fun. I learned how to teach in front of large audiences and guide people on nature tours. There were ups and downs too, and I learned about myself as a teacher and human being. I ended up not going back another summer because I was too critical of tourists asking the same 'dumb' questions on nature trails and taking pictures rather than really paying attention with all their senses to what Nature had to teach them. It was a great experience teaching young kids, seniors, and those disable-bodied and several groups of mentally challenged adults. I learned how to keep a four-year old child, stung by several wasps on the trail hike, in a state of calm by being calm, while his parents were totally freaking out.

My first encounter, as far as I can recall, with transdisciplinarity and integral thinking came after I quit my job in Edmonton with an environmental consulting company. It was a great job right after my diploma at Northern Alberta Institute of Technology in Ecological Sciences (1972-74). The problem was that my boss was very corporate. It was paradoxical, I thought at the time, he was being paid high bucks by the coal strip mining company we were studying and supposed to deliver a scientific (non-biased) environmental impact assessment to the Alberta government. Of course, all staff were also being paid from the same corporate purse, including me the wildlife technician.

I soon learned of the corruption that plagued the industry of environmental consulting. It was insulting to work for them. So off I went to do a BSc. in Environmental Biology (1977-78) at The University of Calgary. Although, I had no form of training in the field of Education, the innate activist-educator in me was already writing and publishing critical educative articles in the Calgary newspaper on pollution and urban planning (Fisher, 1976, 1977, 1979). I was ready to advance my post-secondary schooling and pursue more power/knowledge in order to critique and positively influence society's growth and sustainable ethics.

Luckily, I received two years of credit for my diploma and quickly moved on to take senior classes in advanced evolutionary topics. I'll never forget the mind-blowing experience of taking a 500-level "Mammology" class with Dr. Valerius Geist, an internationally recognized big game (wild sheep) expert, and a professor in the Environmental Design department. His breadth of eclectic knowledge opened my eyes and mind in terms of how to think in transdisciplinary and integral ways. The reading package for the course was primarily his latest unpublished manuscript. I remember the day vividly of finally getting down to the library and signing out the typed paper copy of his book to become. Three huge binders labeled "*Life Strategies*," some 1000 pages or more, that drew me into an intriguing adventure of how someone could collect research from so many different areas and synthesize them, taking many perspectives, and creating a universal "biological theory of health." I knew this was what I wanted to do, and eventually I purchased the expensive published version (Geist, 1978). I bought five copies and sold them or gave them to people. I thought I found the evolutionary bible and 'the way' to design an entirely different and healthy society of sustainability.

Great as that time was in biological sciences, I explored the softer sciences, taking an advanced course in cultural anthropology. Was that ever a mind-shattering ecstatic experience. Because for the first time I

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read the pioneering work of Erich Jantsch (1976), an eminent evolutionary systems theorist. His complex holistic models were amazing. I had through Jantsch been exposed to the more invisible interiority of life-systems beyond straight-up empirical biology—through autopoiesis and emanating from something Jantsch called “consciousness.” It opened the world of possible perspectives on reality and myself, and my careers to come. The short of that encounter with Jantsch is that it led me on to read Gregory Bateson (1972, 1979), an incredibly insightful evolutionary systems anthropologist/epistemologist—and, that led to other thinkers of post-adult stages of consciousness (e.g., Ken Wilber), and on and on. It’s remarkable that during my initial research for this chapter, I was searching on the topic “transdisciplinary university,” thinking about how my chapter might influence and potentially help turn-around (if that’s possible for a massive dinosaur) the contemporary neoliberal university. The first author to come up in my research was Erich Jantsch. He’d written a few papers on interdisciplinarity and going beyond that to transdisciplinarity in higher education (e.g., Jantsch, 1972). He was way ahead of his time, and because of that an *outlaw*—not without its costs. Listen to a biographer’s description of Jantsch’s end of life:

*Jantsch was without a job for the last few years of his life, living in an “apartment in Berkeley: dark and depressing room, with massage parlors above and below; a typewriter, a plant, and scattered copies of his favorite newspaper, Neue Zürcher Zeitung. It was here that he finished his last book, The Self-Organizing Universe. He made a living and supported his mother “by giving lectures all over the world, through writing, and by relying on a few friends....Jantsch died on December 12, 1980 in Berkeley, California, “alone and lonely, abandoned by friends, misunderstood by colleagues.” His ashes were scattered over the Pacific Ocean.*³

I’m indebted to his path alone with integrity and pursuit of understanding the self-organizing creative universe from a systems perspective. By the late 1970s, I was understanding what systems theory and the evolution of consciousness was really about and how radical it was (still is), and how it ought to be foundationally informing the nature of education in the shaping of healthy, sane and sustainable societies. That was the end of the radical 1970s, and I had switched to do a Bachelor of Education (after) degree (1979-80) so that I could influence children, their worldviews and their values appropriate for the next generations and the challenging if not fearful future coming.

I specialized in Secondary Science but mostly loved the radical Environmental Education literature, Futures Studies, and Paulo Freire’s Critical Pedagogy notions. I wish I had space to talk about professor Tad Guzzie, who taught Religious Education at The University of Calgary, and how he introduced me to William James, Carl J. Jung and other thinkers who extended my interior consciousness into exploring dreams and trance-states as possible realities that exist. There’s all too many threads to link in this short chapter, but you likely get the sense of how I was influenced at the time by deep cultural and spiritual infusions and changes in the Eco-Movement.

So, I arrived with a lot of critique to my first public school teaching job in 1980 (the above “Clash” story). I was still evolving from *rebel* to *adult* but much of what I loved learning about was stretching me beyond adult to post-adult, what Keen called the *outlaw*. The entire field of ecology with its activists and philosophers (e.g., Bateson) really were mature outlaws. They were my heroes and implicit mentors, not the schoolteachers and education professors at university. I found the latter very boring for the most part. This led me to become an ‘outsider’ amongst my peers. These days, when I reflect back, I think I was more of a ‘geek’ than I would ever admit then.⁴ No one seemed to understand me; I couldn’t find my

‘tribe.’ Not that I thought I was all that brilliant. I wasn’t very tolerant of them either. Yet, they were all understandable but I didn’t want to understand things anymore the way they did. They were behind the times, too far. I was pretty judgmental and they must have known. So, “clash” was the theme of those years during the bachelor’s degree and after into the funky “new age” 1980’s.

AQUARIAN CONSPIRACY: NEW PARADIGM OF THE 1980s

While finishing off my brief teaching career in public schools, my wife at the time and I had a child. We also joined a conscious learning community called Common Ground. It was led by a charismatic older woman⁵ who had reading groups at her humble rented home in the country. I in awe around her worldly knowledge and wisdom and found out she had been on a long healing journey, traveling to many places around the globe. I realized how local my own life-experiences had been. She was greatly influenced by the “new age” and “ecological” and organic farming resistance movements in California and elsewhere. She bought us copies of a catalytic book by Marilyn Ferguson (1980) called *Aquarian Conspiracy* and I learned about what old and new paradigms of politics, of gender, of health, of spirituality and education might be. It was a ‘heady’ and ideal time of growth and development for the whole community and we were sure that we could change the world for the better. It was the first time I had joined a consciousness and social movement *per se*. Our vision in that community was based on ‘think globally, act locally.’ The number of courses and workshops in new physics, altered realities, bodywork, authentic relationships, energy healing, and learning to learn were phenomenal. We did it all ourselves. ‘We took the future in our own hands.’⁶ It was so important that we not fear the future, if we wanted to be well prepared for it (Fisher, 1984). We taught and learned, critiqued ourselves and changed. And, of course, like all such conscious communities they have inner conflicts and after nine years of thriving the project fell apart and a lot of people were disgruntled.

After I retired from school teaching I imagined a living could be made doing full-time wildlife art, and to my surprise it actually could. With that third career now blooming, we had a second child and pressures were growing to find more lucrative work. Yet, I was endlessly curious to keep learning everything I could about consciousness and human potential. One day in The University of Calgary bookstore I picked up a book entitled *Up From Eden* by Ken Wilber (1981). I’d not heard of this dude. The book’s table of contents was absolutely fascinating to me, as it was fresh because I had not read a lot about transpersonal philosophy or psychology that he advocated at the time. In this book, his darkest one of all his career as a philosopher, Wilber told the universal ‘big story’ of human cultural evolution in a way that made sense and was not taught by any other author I had read, and I had read a lot of books by then. I studied his “spectrum of consciousness” model in another book he’d written earlier (when he was 23 years old) (Wilber, 1977). Then I read more. I couldn’t get enough of this thinker/teacher. Many years later he began to call himself no longer a transpersonalist but an integralist—eventually he developed Integral Theory and by then had an enormous following of fans around the world. Wilber’s work was post-adult education, delving into and informed by the postformal stages of cognition/thinking (e.g., see Gidley, 2017). My notion of what a human being was and could be totally got rewired, in a good way. I can’t thank Wilber enough for being my ‘teacher’ from afar.

My wife and I began a group in Olds to start a Waldorf School, of which I wanted to bring in ideas of Ken Wilber. I sent off an application to enter the masters program in transformative education and leadership to the California Institute of Integral Studies. I had heard it was the place to study for people

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like me that wanted an alternative higher education experience. And Ken Wilber apparently taught there now and then as well. I received a go from CIIS and a \$500 scholarship. Unfortunately, the fates of being a father with family and not enough income made it impossible to follow that dream.

I was really getting into Wilber's early work but noticed that even the Green-sensitive⁷ and open-minded Common Ground community showed little interest. A few had severe postmodern critiques of Wilber's philosophy. I was on my own with it and didn't know enough to argue back. While changing baby's diapers and staying up most of the night walking a crying baby girl and doing fine art work, I found time to punch away on my old manual typewriter a unique and passionate application of the foundations of a book, using the framing of Wilber's spectrum theory of consciousness applied to mainstream education curriculum (Fisher, 1983). That manuscript lies covered with dust in a dark drawer of my file cabinet to this day. I keep wondering if I could resurrect it.

Our progressive learning community invited in famous Canadian futurists like Ruben Nelson to talk about how paradigm shifts take place in organizations and society. He was the co-founder of The Canadian Transformation Network out of Ottawa and predicted Alberta would be a leader of this shift. Nelson introduced us to the Assistant Deputy Minister of Education at the time, Des Berghoffer, and we found his writings and educational philosophy advanced beyond anything in higher education we had seen before. The man really cared about a sustainable future, and had a vision, of which I typically find missing in all bureaucrats and most educational leaders today. It really seemed like a transformative (r)evolution in education was happening right in our area and province and we all wanted to be co-participants if not leaders. Of course, reality hit. Berghoffer left his job or maybe he was pushed out *via* an increasing conservative government and voting public? We lost touch with him. Nelson went on to business consulting and disappeared too, until he ran for politics in Alberta but then he became harder and harder to connect with. In reflecting on all this, I must say that I have never known for Alberta to be so progressive as it was in those days. What happened?

THE 1990s: A TIME TO LEAD THINGS MY WAY

What I've learned about change and transformation theories is that they are grand, but they are also resisted like mad by the *status quo*. Nothing moves forward without many steps backwards and a lot of pain and disappointment, especially when one is trying to change progressively within the context of basically conservative and fear-based societies. I have never lived and worked in California, so my experience is that most places are pretty conservative in North America—at least, in Alberta and even W. Canada where I mostly have been. To my mind, progressive educators and activists are too often unrealistically over-expectant of the positive possibilities of progression—and, often end-up very depressed with what actually happens in institutional systems.

Unfortunately, the State-controlled systems of Education are characteristically very conservative and fear-based (e.g., Fisher, 1998, 2003a, 2003b, 2007a). I know that because of comparisons with my investment into other careers in Environmental Management, Health, Rehabilitation, and Adult Education—the latter, which is outside of strict government regulations and tends to be freer of social norms. Although, adult education *via* Continuing Education had lost its radical political strength and legitimation for transformation. This was mainly because of the new climate of neoliberalism since the mid-1990s (e.g., see Giroux, 2014).

To counter all the conservative apolitical and ahistorical trending and emphasis on economics and credentialism, I started my own institute and learning community to try to do things different that were really liberating (Fisher, 1996).⁸ It all began when I moved from Olds back to Calgary (my hometown) in 1988. I finished a successful year of grad school in Educational Psychology (Rehabilitation Studies) and accumulated great field experience from several years working with troubled youth and their families at Quest Ranch, just west of Cremona, AB. I had gained therapeutic skills there and knew how to work with people of all kinds, especially care staff, who were mostly fearful and resistant to change the traditional program from behavioral (i.e., punishment) control to a therapeutic community approach. I brought in transpersonal psychology, and Sam Keen's developmental map, and Joseph Campbell's mythological work to create a hero's identity map for these youth, whereby they could see their "rebel" in a new frame of both challenging the "adult" and potentially healing and growing beyond the adult stage to "outlaw." They really liked that concept and their motivation to improve their lives was enhanced.

I taught an adult continuing education course called "Basics to the Path of Fearlessness" as a personal growth and liberation initiative for post-adult development at the University of Calgary between 1992–95. We did some 'wild' things in that class, as it truly helped several people get beyond a life-style they were living based on fear, the *status quo*, and just boring. And, there were some people who hated it and me and dropped out after the first or second class. They complained to officials but never talked to me. The Continuing Education administration didn't like that I was upsetting a few people and they cancelled the course. I can pretty much guarantee there are no such risky courses offered in Continuing Education like that anymore, anywhere, at least not in Canada in mainstream universities.

During this time, emotions and deep motivations (especially, unconscious fear) became my main focus of research and influenced my teaching/learning from the mid-1980s to late 1990s. I co-founded the In Search of Fearlessness Project (1989-) as a global (not-for-profit) liberation movement. Fear seemed the greatest limiting factor in all of society as far as I was concerned, and I wasn't the only one I knew of expressing those concerns as such in the field. Critics in education (e.g., Wieder, 1978; Palmer, 1998) and sociologists (e.g., Furedi, 1997; Glassner, 1999) were some of the people I read at the time but they never took fear studies to the level of depth and seriousness I did. They pointed to an ever-growing "culture of fear" as context for much of Western cultures in the modern world. I kept asking how are teachers in schools and higher education going to prepare themselves for this new world so fearful? The Cold War ended in 1989–90 but the decade of the 1990s was conflicted as ever with new smaller wars and terrorism on the rise. This was all symptomatic of what would lead up to the tragedy of 9/11, 2001.

I pursued a rigorous study of Ken Wilber's Integral Theory, even attended the very first conference in San Francisco, CA in 1995 on Wilber's work. Wilber had sent me his unpublished manuscript for *Sex, Ecology and Spirituality* in 1994 and asked me for written feedback. This book (Wilber, 1995) was incredibly influential to my thinking about many things. I was pretty high at that point. I was also teaching a few "Introduction to Ken Wilber" courses at the In Search of Fearlessness Center in downtown Calgary. Few attended and no one really got it then, virtually no one had heard of this guy and didn't much care. Calgary was not San Francisco or Boulder, CO.

Pursuing my writing and critique on fear and its (mis-)uses (beginning with Fisher, 1984), I began my most systematic articulation with a series of technical papers devoted to clarification of a critical integral "spectrum" theory of 'fear' that was transdisciplinary (e.g., Fisher, 1995a, 1995b). I have published over 70 technical papers in this series. Most people back then couldn't understand these works and were even annoyed that I was making the topic of "fear" more serious and complex than they thought it ought to be. One person from the "new age" movement of the time saw one of my technical papers and said "the

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print is too small and reading it makes my head hurt.” End of story—that was enough to make them not read it further. I thought that was impatient, if not intolerant. Those times were incredibly stimulating intellectually—I was on a roll. I was able to create a ‘fear’ vaccine curriculum process of praxis⁹ that really worked for many people.

However, like all good things that are liberating there are forces that work to oppress it. The Fearlessness Project (Calgary) ended abruptly in 1998 due to lack of funds and internal conflict. I couldn’t stand the hypocrisy of the Board of Directors of the non-profit society that tried to control how I wanted to lead the organization as unpaid Director of the Center itself. Vested interests and personalities clashed. I own my own share of anger that I probably didn’t manage all that well at times. So more than a little exhausted and broke, my wife then (Barbara Bickel) and I left to attend The University of British Columbia to pursue graduate school. I started with an Master of Arts in Adult Education and loved studying transformative learning theories (e.g., Mezirow, 1990) and also critical pedagogy/andragogy. It was a great time also to introduce Wilber’s integral approach into my study of conflict for my thesis. But my peers, faculty and supervisors didn’t get it either—or didn’t choose to get it—as they were mostly postmodernists and leftists very critical of Wilber’s grand theory narrative of evolution. There was little respect from them. They didn’t much like developmental hierarchy theories period. I had to figure out how to negotiate all that and so I stayed low to the margins—didn’t talk about my radical integral ideas about fear (‘fear’) and fearlessness, that is, not until my doctorate degree.

TURN OF THE 21ST CENTURY: MY 50s ONWARD

Things really came together for me during the heat of the turn of the century, despite the fact of so much excessive fear that was created because of the Y2K scare and the general apocalyptic terror of the turn of the millenium, when many people carried a sense that the world was going to end. I predicted all the fear breeding before 2000 was just a symptom of greater fears below—ones left over and post-traumatic from the growing ecological disasters, wars, AIDS epidemic, etc. Despite the young people starting to create “NO FEAR! logo-wear and ‘fighting back,’ I felt society overall was quickly unravelling. For my part, I believed it had to before it would ever transform itself into something less fear-based. Years later, Barber’s (2003) book on the collapse of “Fear’s Empire” in America was pretty much saying the same thing as I was thinking much earlier. However, what positively came together for me was the theoretical puzzle linking my study of fear, of Ken Wilber’s integral work and my sharp focus as a curriculum designer for the 21st century, in a world challenged by cascading global crises. I’ll get to that connection in a moment.

As graduate school proceeded my question was basically: How are we going to equip our future school teachers (and professors) with adequate knowledge and meta-skills to be able to manage fear/terror and how to create high quality education for students of all ages? I graduated with an MA in 2000 and began my dissertation in Curriculum and Instruction completed in 2003. I had a graduate assistantship to create a Ken Wilber Study Group and had a couple progressive co-supervisors, who thank goodness, let me do pretty much what I wanted to in my doctoral program as long as it was academically original and rigorous. It was great for the most part and receiving a prestigious fully-funded Social Sciences and Humanities Research award for three years made it a lot sweeter. I started the first Ken Wilber and Integral Education Newsletter in Canada on my website (2001-03), I turned my office into an art studio and I began studying the “culture of fear” in every possible angle I could think of. I created art installations¹⁰

in the student union art gallery a few times, did art performances and was giving talks at conferences on the nature and role of fear in education and leadership.

Wilber's (2000) book *A Theory of Everything* was the practical book on his work that I had been waiting for. He integrated Clare Graves's work in developmental (futurist) psychology and cultural evolution, while working with some of Graves's students, who began Spiral Dynamics¹¹ integral theory and technology (SDi). I took the Level 1 and 2 Training in SDi. In a nutshell, SDi and Wilber made sense of culture value-memes and how they carry, with great power, a particular (and developmental) worldview consciousness structure with beliefs and values that can be identified, measured and passed on analogous to gene-coding but more easily. Green values-meme was the structure and worldview of the Ecological/Environmental Movement and Feminism, and Civil Rights—all of which were background contexts that I grew up and into, including what hippies all loved. My views on Education were completely coloured by this values-meme, and equally by my transdisciplinary study of fear (and 'fear')—see my design for a new field of 'Fear' Studies (Fisher, 2006, 2018).

The inspiring 'story' that SDi theory tells is how Green¹² value-meme is only one in a spectrum of about nine equally important v-memes available to human consciousness—ranging from the most primal Beige value-meme to nondual Coral value-meme. Wilber has modified this spectral schema over the years to fit more his own theory; nonetheless, there was something that Graves, Beck and Cowan and Wilber all agreed on, and that was that there were six value-memes (and/or worldviews) that were "first-tier" and then there was a developmental jump (potential) in consciousness required (like over an abyss, or "quantum leap")—and, this was to "second-tier."¹³ The latter tier was very similar to the educational psychology work coming out on postformal thinking (e.g., Robert Kegan et al.). I found this all met the same criteria, more or less, as Keen's "outlaw" stage or my own work on fear management systems (FMS) theory, in which I identified there are nine FMS in the evolution of humanity since the beginning of recorded history (see Fisher, 2010). I was attempting then (and still am) to create an entirely new second-tier curriculum of *fear education* (analogous to sex education, moral education, spiritual education).

The back-up for my integral approach, which I argued was no longer fear-based because it was second-tier (FMS-7, Yellow v-meme), came from the writings of Graves, Beck and Cowan and Wilber. They all agreed that there was in the quantum leap from first-tier systems (v-memes) to second-tier systems (v-memes) an identifiable distinction in the driving meta-motivational forces in individuals, groups and institutions. The leap was from a fear-based structure (which Maslow, 1968 called "deficit" motivation based on fear) to one that is no longer driven by fear as the primary motivator (Maslow called "growth" motivation based on love).¹⁴ I now had the answer and basis for what I called a *fearlessness* curriculum and pedagogy where the very notion of "critical thinking" and "critical theory" needed to be deconstructed and reconstructed (e.g., Fisher, 2011). Implications of my theory for integral, holistic and integrative approaches to education have been hinted at but as yet I have not written those full critiques.

It was a huge project then (still is), and one that Wilber and the Integral Circles have largely ignored. I learned the hard way that there is a power/knowledge (political and ideological) structure everywhere, even in the Integral Movement and it prevents some 'voices' from being heard, while it foregrounds and promotes others. You may have watched the futurist sci-fi movie trilogy "The Matrix" by the Wachowski Bros. (1999-2003). It is an incredible story and tells of how this 'Fear' Matrix of our world works.¹⁵ If you don't conform to the Program (The Matrix) you will be deleted (marginalized). Being naive about these things is not going to help anyone. From this experience I learned that all movements, even second-tier ones need to be continually critiqued from inside and outside. I attempted to do that when I systemati-

cally analyzed Ken Wilber's critics and how Wilber responded to them in Fisher (1997)—and, it turned out Wilber and others around him did not want to hear what I had to say.¹⁶ Integral educators that came along in the last 20 years also were not at all interested in my critical integral theory and ideas about fear management /education.

EPILOGUE

This brings this version of my 45-year teaching/learning story to a close. I wish to critique my contribution in the space that remains, rather than try to summarize it neatly. I notice that the five criteria for a high-quality narrative (Heikkinen et al, 2007) that I mentioned at the beginning of the methodology section are very applicable to my writing. My interest is that this writing (story) is itself integrally-informed and integrated with what it is I am promoting—that is, transdisciplinarity as action research and an integral approach. How much action research is in this chapter is debateable, it is more an invisible phenomenon. I simply never did serious action research all these years with all the rigor required. It was implicit that people (myself included) were changing and transforming because of what I facilitated.

By contrast, the fear and fearlessness research within this story is very rigorous and transdisciplinary in that I utilized critical educators,' artists,' sociologists,' political scientists,' anthropologists' perspectives among others. It is obvious that I refuse to delimit the meaning of “fear” within Psychology/Psychiatry for example. I go beyond the clinical perspective and make the topic relevant across all aspects of society, although I probably could have done a better job talking about the spiritual perspective—and, especially in regard to my own spirituality. I rate myself four out of five points for using the principle of *reflexivity* in the analysis, as it seems I am always talking about myself reflectively and what I have learned over these 45 years, although I left out the spiritual dimension explicitly. I rate the *historical continuity* principle as very high because of the constant historical and cultural context I bring into my own history, views, value systems and my aims in educational research and teaching/learning.

As for the principle of *workability* I would rate myself lowest (2.5 out of five) in that I never covered much of the very specific ways or methods to apply my fear management systems theory and the integral approach to education overall. It turns out, within the confines of space provided, I preferred theoretical and intellectual speculation with history. Although, I have presented a few cases studies (in communities).¹⁷ In some sense, that focus is somewhat contradictory to my interest in bringing in the affective and emotional dimension to narrative inquiry—a point, I made early on in the paper as I critiqued narratives generally and educational research. On this same grounds, I would give myself only a 3.5 out of five for the principle of *evocativeness*—well, maybe I'd go as high as a 4.5 actually, or maybe five, because I think this whole narrative of my 45 years is radical and challenging to the readers. Whether you know it or not, I am evoking a spirit of fearlessness and an imperative to become “unplugged” from the ‘Fear’ Matrix (e.g., Fisher, 2009). I only briefly mentioned 9/11 and post-9/11 as contexts directly. Fact is, this context continues to be very important in my work but that deserves more attention than I could give it here. But as to how evocative or not this chapter and my life is, that I will only know when readers give me direct feedback, which I welcome.¹⁸

Regarding the last principle *dialectics* I am not so sure. I like to think I am a true blue dialectical thinker when it comes to integral development and evolution. The story I wanted to write about was just too complex and demanding to wrestle with for one chapter. If I wrote a book on my 45 years I'd think a lot more about this. I will say however, that the section on “fear-based” vs. “love-based” implied and

stated (e.g., Maslow's theory of motivation) is the core foundation of my dialectics—with “fearlessness” as the operating motivational force running between fear and love (see Fisher, 2017). Yet, that's all another long conversation I wish educators of every stripe would undertake.

Overall, this is a fairly good example of an integral story. If anything, perhaps my teaching/learning life will serve as a model for what you as a teacher/researcher and life-long learner will strive for and/or be cautious of beyond naiveté. Perhaps, it will act as an authentic mirror and remind you of all that you are already doing that is part of the Fearlessness Movement,¹⁹ even if you've not heard of it.

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KEY TERMS AND DEFINITIONS

Fearlessness: A paradigm, a fear management system, an integral-level second-tier consciousness structure that no longer is motivated by fear as primary; is a historical movement to contradict and “managed” excess fear accumulation in living systems and is a behavioral attitude and set of virtues and practices that are aligned with courageous but transcend it because there is a deep desire to know everything (integrally) about the nature and role of fear as a troubling, complex and contextual cultural and sociopolitical phenomenon.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ A fearologist participates in the study of fearology.
- ² Somewhere around early 2000, Wilber decided to label his own approach Integral Theory—both with caps to distinguish it from other forms of integral theory. I mostly utilize Wilber’s work but also do not conform my own work necessarily within his strict Integral Theory and rules.
- ³ Retrieved from <http://leahmacvie.com/blog/erichjantsch/>
- ⁴ As I reflect back, I had two impressive and consistent practices which served me well to grow in my thinking and be a better teacher. The first was that I read beyond the field of Education. In fact, I had a disciplined reading practice where I would go to the U of C library “Recent Journals” stacks and scan virtually every journal across every discipline. I was looking for any title of an article, or particular author that stood out. I would often read it and/or photocopy it and keep it in files. I collected thousands of these articles and they really expanded my vocabulary and connected webs of ideas and intelligence. The second was to write and publish articles that had little or nothing to do with what I was studying in Education or as demanded by my assignments. I basically did this to keep my mind alive and to practice being a writer, meaning to be a good communicator. I still do these practices at times, although much less so than back then.
- ⁵ I acknowledge gratefully Jean Robertson especially for her leadership and the assistant support of the late Prosper Williams.
- ⁶ I quote these words as there were a number of large gatherings our Common Ground community attended all around W. Canada and in the USA, which more or less were part of a generic movement at the time called “Taking the Future in Our Own Hands.” Upon reflection today, that slogan is exactly what the best of the emancipatory W. adult education movements were about in the late 19th and early 20th century of workers/unions adult education movements, and the civil rights adult education movements.
- ⁷ “Green” refers to the Eco-movement worldview and values in general, but it will also be refined below by the theory of Spiral Dynamics (see Beck and Cowan, 1990) and Wilber’s interpretation of value-meme theory and cultural evolution.
- ⁸ This took the form of the In Search of Fearlessness Research Institute (1991-), which offers a platform for inter- and transdisciplinary research, teaching and publishing on fear and fearlessness. Archives of some of this Project can be found at <https://fearlessnessmovement.ning.com/forum/in-search-of-fearlessness-isof-project-archives>.
- ⁹ The six ‘fear’ vaccines are: (1) Good Information on fear and fearlessness, (2) Liberation Peer Counseling as learning how we are hurt and heal, (3) Community-building, (4) Sacred Warriorship, (5) Spontaneous Creation-making and, (6) Vision Quest.
- ¹⁰ The largest one was called “Platinum ‘Fear’—*plat du jour*” which consisted of 71 collage art pieces (9 X 9 in.), which looked at how society produces and consumes fear (‘fear’) and makes it a habit to do so.
- ¹¹ E.g., see Beck and Cowan (1990).
- ¹² According to SDi theory these colors are arbitrarily assigned to the value-memes, other than cooler and warmer colors,,which represent the communal and individual v-memes respectively. It just happens that “green” value-meme fits nicely with the Eco-Green Movement overall.

- ¹³ I am horribly simplifying this all but it is worth noting that there is also a “third-tier” consciousness and worldview (with its own v-memes).
- ¹⁴ See Fisher (2010), pp. 70, 75.
- ¹⁵ See Fisher (2003), as The Matrix film narrative and characters became the foundational part of my dissertation, as I was attempting to create a performative piece of curriculum that demonstrated how the ‘Fear’ Matrix (my term) actually works—and, to create a new meta-myth for our times, of which this sci-fi trilogy offers in great emancipatory (albeit, postmodern) ways.
- ¹⁶ I have several personal correspondence letters with Wilber at the early stages and into the editing of this article (1994-1996). Wilber basically thought my paper was excellent in scholarship and accurate, except he thought I gave all his critics too much ink again. Oh, and he did *not* acknowledge (or likely appreciate) at the same time that I labeled his pattern of responses to most critics of his work as “unnecessarily arrogant” (Fisher, 1997, p. 30).
- ¹⁷ One project that deserves a chapter on its own is my founding of the Center for Spiritual Inquiry and Integral Education (2009-16) in southern Illinois, as an alternative higher education online program.
- ¹⁸ I’d be glad to discuss this material. Contact: r.michaelfisher52@gmail.com.
- ¹⁹ For more information on this see <https://fearlessnessmovement.ning.com/>.