

Removing Blockages and Creating Clarity in Chaos Experiences in the Netherlands

An interview with Peter Merry¹

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Summary

“It’s really about unblocking the GREEN system in order for it to unblock the blockage around RED and BLUE. GREEN needs to accept that at some point authority and laying down the law, maybe even force at some point, are going to need to be used to prevent extremist expressions of the RED and BLUE systems from destabilising the society as a whole. That’s really the key. If you have a society that has evolved to the level it has in the Netherlands, Sweden and Denmark, in terms of the living conditions which people have, where there is the possibility for freedom of speech, and there is fairly high environmental sensitivity, a quite a lot of awareness around equality and gender issues. If you then have destabilising factors in a society coming and saying, “Actually we don’t believe in any of that,” then you begin to reach the limits of tolerance. Then the GREEN system says, “This is intolerant behaviour that I’m experiencing from these people and I’m meant to be tolerant of everybody. But how do I balance that? Am I to tolerate intolerance?” That’s where the GREEN system begins to really reach its limit and begins to fall apart. There’s a realisation that you can’t just tolerate behaviour that is going to prevent a society or a group from expressing higher levels of compassion in terms of freedom and opportunity and environmental justice or whatever.”

Peter Merry has a Masters Degree in Human Ecology and works as an Evolutionary Change Facilitator at Engage! InterAct (www.engage.nu), a Netherlands based consultancy company. Peter is also Co-Director at the Centre for Human Emergence (Netherlands) (www.humanemergence.org) where he is passionately championing evolutionary systems work in all levels of society and, together with Dr. Don Beck, regularly leads presentations and workshops in Spiral Dynamics Integral and its application in Dutch, European and global settings. Peter was born in the UK and currently lives in the Hague, the Netherlands, with his Dutch wife and two children.

In this interview Peter describes his experiences with removing blockages at key stages in the Spiral (particularly RED-BLUE and GREEN) that are preventing the natural flow of people through the different value systems. Peter sees an evolutionary leadership perspective as being essential to create clarity in the seeming chaos behind questions as global environmental issues, organisational change, why youth gangs terrorise neighbourhoods, and why terrorism and fundamentalism have appeared on the streets of Amsterdam, a country regarded by many as being the home of possibly the most liberal and tolerant culture on the planet.

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1. Evolutionary Leadership

ND: You have book coming out soon. What is it about?

PM: The book is called *Evolutionary Leadership*. I sat down and meditated every morning and wrote it over a period of ten days. Obviously it was all there, I was pregnant with it. The book basically pulls together Ken Wilber, Spiral Dynamics Integral, Andrew Cohen's teachings of Radical Impersonal Evolutionary Enlightenment, and then things like the U process from Otto Scharmer and Peter Senge, as well as Open Space technology, Chaordic design, World Café, and processes for co-creation. It looks at what are the essences of all of this and what are the tools which we can use to lead from this perspective. It also has poetry from my brother Tim woven into it. I wrote it in English originally, but it will be published in Dutch in the end March (2006). Herman Wijffels, a well known character in the Netherlands, has written the foreword. He heads the social economic council, which is a major advisory organ to the Dutch government, and was CEO for the RaboBank for thirteen years. He is very excited about the Spiral Dynamics integral perspective and feels that the future of the Netherlands is in that direction. I'm hoping the book will serve as an introduction and overview for people wanting to know more about this emerging perspective.

The book is written in the first person, i.e. me telling a story, which is my perspective on things. I don't proclaim to tell "the truth", but I tell about how I'm making sense of the world, and that the need for evolutionary leadership seems to be pretty relevant in this time. So if this makes sense to you, then do something with it.

The last section draws on our experience at Engage! InterAct (www.engage.nu/interact) with organisations, and is on how you trigger organisational or systemic transformation. It describes the different methods and processes that could be used. I think that is the edge at the moment. People are beginning to apply the theory in many different areas and out of that will come the next stage involving the documentation of case studies.

2. Engaging with kids in RED and youth workers in GREEN²

ND: You were invited to Sweden recently (9-10th of November) by The Swedish National Board for Youth Affairs to give a talk to youth workers about Spiral Dynamics, at their annual youth policy conference in Lund. Can you describe some of your experiences with youth work and Spiral Dynamics?

PM: One of our earliest experiences at Engage! InterAct was with seeing how Spiral Dynamics can really provide clarity, particularly in the field of youth work, to design interventions which could meet kids where they're at. In this example we were asked by parents of a small youth club to help with stopping the kids terrorising the neighbourhood.

Essentially what we had was a group of kids centred and stuck in the RED "express self without shame or guilt" system. You could characterise them as being street gang style; running around doing whatever they wanted to do with nobody laying down the law. The youth workers hadn't given them any clarity about what they were and not allowed to do. Using Spiral Dynamics we appreciated that the kids needed [BLUE] rules and structures, and

² 1. Beige: SurvivalSense/instinct driven, 2. Purple: KinSpirits/safety driven, 3. Red: PowerGods/power driven, 4. Blue: TruthForce/order driven, 5. Orange: StriveDrive/success driven, 6. Green: HumanBond/people driven, 7. Yellow: FlexFlow/process orientated, 8. Turquoise: WholeView/synthesis orientated. See www.nordicintegral.com for more information about Spiral Dynamics.

they needed to experience that if they took an action then it had implications, and that they needed to take responsibility for that.

In a lot of the classic youth work circles you might ask the kids to sit down, be calm and quiet, and talk about their experience. The youth worker has inherent trust that basically the kids are good people, you just need to let them do what they want to do, and you shouldn't be hierarchical or authoritarian about it [characteristic of GREEN]. But this approach doesn't really work, as the kids just continue to push the boundaries until somebody does put a boundary down, which gives them some sense of what they are allowed and not allowed to do [while unhealthy GREEN doesn't like boundaries RED does].

So when they came into the centre, we created a set of rules. It was made quite clear that these were the rules when they entered the centre, and if they broke any there was a direct consequence, which was ultimately that they would have to leave the centre. It wasn't done in an angry or vengeful way; it was just made clearly understood. "Here are the rules, if you break them then you leave". First of all it created clarity, so that they knew where they were, and where they stood. It created safety for the kids, who were feeling unsafe, and it meant that when they came they were interested in doing some creative stuff. They rebuilt and redecorated their centre, and developed a sense of pride for the space that was theirs. It wasn't all roses or easy the whole time, because when you do lay down the boundaries then those are things that people bounce off and push against. And the kids did that. The youth workers had to hold that clarity and it meant that some of kids who didn't like that left and didn't come to the centre anymore. But basically the centre became a place where kids wanted to come, and were able to get on and do useful things.

And after a while we saw some of them ready to move on and look for more opportunities. "I don't really want to come to the youth club anymore; I want to get a job." So we put them in contact with local institutions that were able to help them find jobs and opportunities. Here we were seeing a move from the BLUE order system into an opening up of the ORANGE sense of opportunity system, "I'm going to go out there and make it on my own". For a lot of these kids who have a strong leaning towards the express side of the spiral, i.e. the warmer colours of RED and ORANGE, they just need to get enough of the structure and responsibility in the BLUE system to be able to step into the more responsible express self system in ORANGE.

When there is a blockage in the GREEN system, people who are arrested or centred in that system find it very difficult to see that healthy hierarchy, or healthy authority [BLUE], would actually help these kids in their development [from RED]. They become blind to the path that they themselves have walked in order to reach GREEN's sensitive-self level of consciousness.

3. Using the right language with GREEN

PM: Where you have to submit proposals for youth work, then criteria for evaluation of whether you are going to get the money or not might well include "Is it a project which is participative, where the kids all have to take decisions, where they all have equal responsibility for the projects?" This judgment of what is good youth work is made through the GREEN lens. Whereas these kids don't want to be asked, they don't want to be forced to all come to agreement on what they should be doing. They want somebody to tell them what needs to happen and what they have to do; somebody who can set up a number of activities and put them through them.

It's quite interesting. At an institutional level you may have procedures for getting money to do youth work and if your proposal doesn't have in it this kind of more GREEN pluralist approach then you might not get the money, even though it may not be what the kids actually need because of where they are in their development.

ND: But, you have been successful in convincing GREEN?

PM: Yes, because once you sit and talk to the people who are making the decisions, they're actually very aware that a lot of the projects aren't working very well. A lot of it is also about using the language. Diversity is obviously a key theme, so we would often say, "Well if you are really interested in diversity then we really need to understand where kids are at in their development and not demand that they take on a way of working which we think is right, but which is not right for them." It's hard for the pluralistic GREEN system to reject that, because of the strong diversity and respect element which is in that kind of approach. What we do is take the concepts that are dear to the GREEN system and build on them. Basically giving them this extra twist of depth and developmental vertically. It's an art that one needs to learn how to do over time.

ND: Yes that's for sure. But it sounds like you have had success in facilitating movement from RED to BLUE to ORANGE and in particular from GREEN to YELLOW.

PM: Yes, in this particular group of youth and youth workers and it's something which you see as being a real challenge more broadly in the Netherlands, particularly in areas like racism in the workplace and people getting a job, that's where you begin to see how important that movement is. A lot of first and second generation immigrant kids coming through the system will very rapidly shift through RED and BLUE in the educational system and be drawn into the ORANGE, which is a kind of centre of gravity for the society. But if they can't get a job or a place where they can contribute in the society, which will feed that need for the ORANGE system, then they will get very frustrated, and tend to fall back into more of the RED and BLUE systems.

It's really essential that we question how we educate employers about the importance of not discriminating in the workplace, and beginning to see this issue from a developmental context.

4. Ethnocentric based discrimination in the workplace

ND: This is an important point. People with ethnic backgrounds are discriminated against even though they may be more highly qualified. Would you say that ethnocentric based discrimination is blocking movement up into ORANGE?

PB: Yes, even here in the Netherlands, as in Sweden, they are talking now about job applications being anonymous because people discriminate by name.

Green has been very much about the need for non-discrimination for the sake of including everybody. However when you add this depth perspective then you see that, if we don't give opportunities, and there is this discrimination, then people and cultures get arrested in their development, which then generates lots of frustration and anger and basically spills out into the streets and destabilizes the society. This puts the issue of integration in a whole different perspective. It's not so much about ethnicity [a PURPLE perspective]; it's about development and developmental stages which people are at [a YELLOW perspective]. That reframes the

whole debate and takes it out of the very political and tricky area of ethnicity where you brand people by their ethnicity. Whereas this perspective looks down at the developmental levels which people across all ethnicities [all groups] are moving through, and sees the huge diversity within ethnic groups. First of all, it makes it easier to talk about, because you are no longer working with these very difficult ethnic grouping terminologies. You're talking about developmental levels which regardless of your ethnic background are relevant. And then when you see that it is harder for certain ethnic groups to shift into ORANGE, then the whole discrimination issue begins to come in and you can see it from this developmental context.

5. Creating opportunities for people to flow through ORANGE

ND: With fewer jobs being available in the west, how can opportunities for ORANGE be stimulated?

PM: It's an interesting question, because you are really looking at providing people with access to that deep code. As a lot of the manual work shifts east [and as the European Union expands and becomes more complex in the composition of the value systems] this presents a real challenge for the western economies to think about, "How do we give people access to the opportunity possibilities in ORANGE?" I think it will have to be done in a different way than previously, maybe a different form of economy, more of a knowledge economy or "variance" economy. If you begin to look at the value systems then it doesn't have to be about just jobs and economy. The core question is: How do you provide the container of the ORANGE level for people to flow through? Whatever form that is, be it a job or be it other ways that allow people to connect to express that code healthily: Express self for self gain but calculatedly so as not to raise the ire of others; strategic opportunism, innovation, creative competition. Maybe we need to think more broadly and more systemically about it than the classic job creation mantras normally put forward by politicians from the Left and the Right.

6. Blockages in RED and BLUE causing terrorism and fundamentalism

PM: In a sense what we are trying to do is create the containers for the different value systems in a society and allowing people to be able to flow through them, and doing this across all sectors, not just the economy, but other sectors in society as well. This is definitely related to the issue of terrorism and fundamentalism which have come out of an arrested RED and BLUE system. Mohammed B., who shot Theo Van Gogh in the Netherlands, was very clear in the court trial. He said, "I'm not a victim. I wasn't made a victim in this society. It was just that Theo Van Gogh broke the rules of my holy book, and my holy book says that when you break these rules then I have to kill you." And that's just it, "I was just following the rules of the book." In fact they say that he quite appreciated the way that Van Gogh expressed his own opinion. The GREEN system wanted to make him a victim, an oppressed immigrant in the Dutch society, which wasn't at all how he was experiencing it or expressing it. He was well educated, had been looking to get a job, and then not been able to find one came into the whole fundamentalist circuit. So again there was that blockage in terms of the potential of his development, his frustration in looking for other ways to make sense of things, and his ending up in the fundamentalist circuit. These issues are all very much interlinked and they're global.

ND: Can you say more?

PM: It's really about unblocking the GREEN system in order for it to unblock the blockage around RED and BLUE. GREEN needs to accept that at some point authority and laying down the law, maybe even force at some point, are going to need to be used to prevent

extremist expressions of the RED and BLUE systems from destabilising the society as a whole. That's really the key. If you have a society that has evolved to the level it has in the Netherlands, Sweden and Denmark, in terms of the living conditions which people have, where there is the possibility for freedom of speech, and there is fairly high environmental sensitivity, a quite a lot of awareness around equality and gender issues. If you then have destabilising factors in a society coming and saying, "Actually we don't believe in any of that," then you begin to reach the limits of tolerance. Then the GREEN system says, "This is intolerant behaviour that I'm experiencing from these people and I'm meant to be tolerant of everybody. But how do I balance that? Am I to tolerate intolerance?" That's where the GREEN system begins to really reach its limit and begins to fall apart. There's a realisation that you can't just tolerate behaviour that is going to prevent a society or a group from expressing higher levels of compassion in terms of freedom and opportunity and environmental justice or whatever.

7. A new moral position – pushing the edge of GREEN

PM: So that's the real edge, and then GREEN begins to realise that maybe we do have to protect the collective space in some way from sabotage and value systems which can't see the importance of the whole and see the world from their own ethnocentric position. If you just roll over then you basically allow one ethnocentric group to define the whole society through its own rulebook, for its own one truth ideology. But if you are not going to let that happen, then you have to take a stand and stop people from actually doing that and that reaches an edge for the GREEN system because that involves drawing a line, standing up, and some form of expression of authority, the enforcement of law and order and things that are quite difficult for the GREEN system to accept. It's a very interesting edge, and can clearly be seen in the Netherlands and Sweden but more broadly across the planet as terrorism pops its head up all over the place. A lot of the debates are about what kind of intervention is appropriate. Are you allowed to use force? What if force is the only language that they will understand? Is that true? We are seeing deep memetic debates but with few of the people who are debating actually realising that it is about memetics.

8. Bringing in complexity to unblock GREEN

ND: A crucial issue is the unblocking of GREEN.

PM: Yes, as you begin to engage GREEN with the complexity of the RED-BLUE issues and transition, it's that very complexity that is going to trigger the search from the GREEN system for more complex understandings. As we begin to see GREEN grapple with this complexity then we will see YELLOW emerge, and as it does it begins to work more effectively with the earlier systems. So in effect unblocking of the RED-BLUE and GREEN systems go hand in hand.

9. Youth Workers

ND: What has been your experience in helping youth workers make this leap from GREEN?

PM: A lot of my background is with international youth work. I remember that I had been talking to youth workers for several years without it completely connecting and resonating with them, that is until about two years ago when I felt a real shift occur. Suddenly people were saying, "That's so obvious, why didn't I hear about that before?" Now I see it really beginning to help people make sense of things. The phase that it is at now is this map that people are discovering. Youth workers come across it and say, "Wow, now I understand what's going on." The edge that it's on now is that there are implications to this in terms of

how we work. There is awareness that the old way of doing things is not working, there is some insight into new ways of seeing things, and now “Well, how do we start applying this?” That’s the experimental edge where people are prototyping and working out what it is that we need to do. How do we translate this understanding into new models of practice?

10. Creating space for new models of practice to emerge

ND: How far have you come?

PM: As part of the new Centre for Human Emergence in the Netherlands we have a number of different constellations or communities of practice. We’ve only just started in May (2005) so nothing specific has come out as yet.

One of the groups is Integral Social Work, where we have two people who work with social work and are taking this integral perspective into their own contexts and to their colleagues as well and looking at how they can start applying it. They’re trying to bring it into their practice and then coming back and writing things up and making sense of it. It’s early days, but it’s beginning to be applied. People being attracted to the centre are people who felt very alone for a long time, “I’ve been the only one who’s been thinking like this about these things”, thinking that the way we have been working until now is really not adequate and now beginning to find each other in these groupings. We hope to soon be able to write up and publish some of their case studies.

Another group is working with Integral Sustainability and trying to take it beyond the present debate. The integral perspective covers both environmental and social issues, such as poverty, as well as individual and cultural development. We have a couple of people looking into the question of what integral sustainability means in organisations by applying Ken Wilber’s four quadrants. An interesting aspect is the upper quadrants; particularly the Upper Right which is your own individual behaviour. So a company may have a very good sustainability report, but how is the behaviour of the individuals in the organisation, is that rooted in sustainable practice or not?

11. Integral Education

ND: Integral Education?

PM: Yes, we have another group working on Integral Education, where one of the people leading the project is working with the Dutch Ministry of Education and has begun to start talking to people there. Again, nothing specific has happened as yet but we have had a four page article on Spiral Dynamics published in a Dutch teacher education magazine called *Educare*.

We are starting to see some quite innovative thinking coming out of the Integral Education group. It completely revises the traditional education system and takes the whole life long learning concept very literally, from learning at the youngest age all the way through to learning when you are “retired.” It looks at the whole concept of education from that kind of perspective, so schools become centres for life-long learning. People can come in, learn about different things and get different knowledge, skills and qualifications based on their specific learning needs as they grow. There may be different kinds of schools to fit the different value systems. I think we will see schools specifically designed to help people in the RED-BLUE space, where they need to develop a sense of responsibility, and need clear order and structure. We will also see schools designed to support more the ORANGE-GREEN space,

where the kids are able to take more responsibility for their own learning, they want to be involved in the decision making, and where the teacher shifts from being “a sage on the stage” to being more “a guide by the side.” So Integral Education requires different kinds of teachers, different kinds of teaching and teaching approaches. Integral Education is still early days, very much a live debate, very much in an experimental and exploratory phase. But there is a lot in the pipeline and as it begins to get more form hopefully we will be able to make the ideas and new models of practice more widely available.

12. For the sake of the whole

ND: What are your own areas of interest at the moment?

PM: I’m still working very much in organisational transformation, applying this thinking to organisations and also looking at social transformation, in the sense of human emergence in the Netherlands, specifically looking at how we can achieve breakthrough in key areas in Dutch society. I’m also looking at the best emerging practises around global transformation, i.e. what are all the different initiatives that are out there trying to get breakthrough on global issues? How do they relate to each other? What are the patterns in terms of the best practices? And, how could you enhance transformation capacities for all of them? So not to set up another initiative but to look at: How do we serve the emerging initiative? How is the species innovating at the moment to try and deal with these pressing global issues?

For example, the Centre for Human Emergence (Netherlands) has an event planned next year (2006) in the Netherlands, sponsored by the Dutch National Commission for Sustainable Development, to bring together the best practitioners that we can identify across the planet who are trying to get breakthrough on global issues. Our objective is to help these different parts become aware of the whole, which they are a part of. We have a core team of individuals, including people who have been involved in Spirit in Business. In November we invited in an additional fifteen people, all of whom have a lot of experience in transformation work.

Another of our initiatives is the “planetary transformation change lab.” We have begun mapping the best transformation practices being used into an integral framework, such as the “U” process from Otto Charmer and Peter Senge. And then asking: how do we apply those transformative practices to complex global issues and to these emerging initiatives?

So my three main areas of work are organisational transformation, global social transformation, and teaching and training around these issues and themes, primarily the integral perspective, Spiral Dynamics, as well as change using chaordic design and principles based on Dee Hock’s work. How do we create dynamic living systems in our organisations? How do we create evolutionary systems which have a clear purpose and identity and at the same time are able to respond rapidly to the changing world around them? And, how do we get people together to have conversations which matter? Creating spaces where people are able to go beyond their egos and really talk about the important things and co-create together. It involves a combination of the Spiral Dynamics integral maps, learning how to turn that into practice, and then working with groups to get the breakthrough that is needed.

13. A second tier shift in the Netherlands

ND: How many people in the Netherlands are working with Integral thinking or in contact with the Centre for Human Emergence?

PM: Well there isn't a Ken Wilber Integral Institute as yet in Europe. So I think there are more people in the Netherlands interested in working with Spiral Dynamics than with Ken Wilber's Integral approach. But it's very hard to know how many there are because there isn't a connection space available for them. However the Centre for Human Emergence is providing a home, as it were, for "lost" integral people.

The Centre for Human Emergence hasn't as yet been given any publicity though we have about one hundred and fifty people circulating around who want to contribute in one way or another. There is a strong emergence of second tier thinking in the Netherlands, of course not all of them have heard about Integral thinking or Spiral Dynamics, or need to have heard of them. At the end of March next year (2006) we are going to have a major public event with some of the top people in the Netherlands and we will be ready to receive a large wave of interest as this becomes more visible. Spiral Dynamics is really taking off here and all sorts of people are setting up businesses to try and work with it. The recent translation of the book Spiral Dynamics into Dutch has helped, though we are seeing a lot of ORANGE versions of Spiral Dynamics. We see a lot of consultants who just do the value systems and strip out all the dynamics, and don't really understand evolutionary systems. It still works when they use it for communication rather than transformation work, but it's just a flat translation of the spiral, without any depth perspective.

We also see people who understand the transformation side of it, and that's what I'm really very excited about. If you understand the fundamental dynamics then you can drop whatever levels you want to onto it. Understanding how levels shift, how people evolve, how societies and collectives evolve. Understanding what those dynamics are is really important for the work we are doing.

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