

# UNIQUE SELF AS IT UNFOLDS OVER THE ARC OF DEVELOPMENT

*A Dialogue with Susanne Cook-Greuter and Marc Gafni*

How Unique Self shows up in the developmental spectrum is, from an integral perspective, a critical dimension of the Unique Self inquiry. In addition to addressing this issue in depth in “The Evolutionary Emergent of Unique Self” (pp. 1-36 in this issue), Marc Gafni engaged in four dialogues with two prominent developmental theorists involved in integral discourse. In two dialogues with Don Beck and two dialogues with Susanne Cook-Greuter, an initial exploration of Unique Self as seen through their respective developmental models was explored. Below is a transcript of the second dialogue with Cook-Greuter, in which Susanne and Marc explore the references to uniqueness in Susanne’s writings. What emerges is that Susanne’s empirical research confirms uniqueness as a central emergent property of awareness at higher levels of consciousness.

*Marc:* I’m delighted to be here with Susanne Cook-Greuter to speak about the evolution and unfolding of Unique Self across the developmental spectrum. The basic idea behind Unique Self is that each of us has an individual expression of the divine that manifests through our own unique perspective. This isn’t a merely egoic expression of uniqueness; it is actually an expression of uniqueness that arises post the disillusionment of ego. Basically, after the death of identification with the ego and the realization of the underlying emptiness of all things, our stunning, crystalline, gorgeous Unique Self emerges.

One framing that can help us better understand Unique Self is to view it within the doctrine of the Four Selves. The Four Selves include: separate self, false self, True Self, and Unique Self. The first stage of separate self is the basic experience of being a skin-encapsulated ego. There are different versions of the separate self: what we could call a healthy separate self and a not healthy separate self, the latter also being referred to as false self. The false self is a distorted version of our separate self experience and is in need of clarification in some form.

The next stage brings the emergence of True Self. True Self is what is classically termed enlightenment and occurs when one moves beyond exclusive identification with our separate self. The separate self is still present but we have expanded our identity and stepped into our unity with the larger cosmos. After realizing our True Self, what then begins to emerge is what we call Unique Self. Our Unique Self is the precise and individualized configuration of our True Self. There is always a precise configuration to every True Self because every True Self has its own unique perspective. So, True Self plus Perspective equals Unique Self. If we talk in divine terms, we can say that God particularizes his essence in and through each of us. There is a unique expression of our Buddha nature, our boddichitta, in its highest expression that manifests as our Unique Self.

What I thought would be particularly interesting for our dialogue is to actually trace where the term uniqueness begins to appear in your own writings on human development so as to better see where Unique Self really begins to come online in the evolution of the self.

*Susanne:* Yes, I’m delighted to have the conversation. I just wanted to mention that I have some problems with the use of the term “false self,” as you have outlined it. The separate self makes complete sense to me, but it seems to me that as long as we are not enlightened there will always be an element of falseness to our experience. There are always delusions and things we don’t see, but to call that “false” rankles me in some

deep way. One of the things I'm hoping to do in my book is to better articulate the meaning of ego because I feel ego gets so much abuse in the spiritual discourse. I would think that when we are at an integral stage of development, we would have a broader perspective on the ego and a more careful way of wording these things in less dichotomous categories of true and false. I have that problem with the use of the Authentic Self term as well because every self is authentic in the sense that it is what it is. Deluded or not, it is still the best a person can be at that moment.

*Marc:* It seems what you are saying is that from a nondual perspective, everything emerges as it emerges in exactly the way it is supposed to emerge and therefore everything is simply what it is. Since there is an enormous amount of literature out there that talks about killing the ego and ego death and evolution beyond the ego, you are really trying to point out that the notion of ego death is actually inaccurate. Even from a simply empirical research perspective, the ego actually exists up and down all the levels of consciousness and what actually shifts is our relationship to the ego. That is a powerful and important insight, which I can only applaud because in both my own practice and work with people I have found that this is consistently true. This is why I always teach my students not to evolve beyond ego but beyond exclusive identification with ego.

*Susanne:* Yes. I'm not arguing that there isn't blindness and delusion and contortions that happen, I just find that using the term "false" is not compassionate enough when we truly understand what development is.

*Marc:* I think that is a really important perspective and needs to be expressed. There is definitely too much ego bashing and ego killing. Having said that, I want to offer another perspective. If we are talking about the ultimate nondual realization, we have to realize that the nondual both incorporates all levels of consciousness and it also incorporates duality; therefore, creating hierarchies and making judgments becomes necessary. The possibilities of valuation, discernment, and distinction are necessary. In human emergence there are preferences. We generally prefer to be with someone who is in his or her Authentic Self because they are more profoundly compassionate and ethical. And indeed, even your personal dislike of the term "false self" arises in you because you are looking for a more compassionate term. So the compassionate self, the self that is most authentic, actually does have preferences. If we begin to refuse hierarchies and avoid distinctions, then we are not embracing a nondual perspective. When we talk about the false self, we're actually driving a stake in the ground by saying that there are hierarchies and that hierarchies don't disappear from a nondual perspective, they exist as part of the nondual matrix.

*Susanne:* I can certainly agree with that.

*Marc:* Great. Well, let's dive in to look at Unique Self as it unfolds through these different levels of consciousness in your system. For those who are unfamiliar with the ego development theory that Susanne has developed, which emerges in part out of Jane Loevinger's work, it offers three interrelated components that describe emergent levels of consciousness. The first component of the model is an operative component, which looks at what adults see as the purpose of their lives and what ends they are moving towards. The second component of the model is the affective component, which deals with emotions and the experience of being in the world. The third component is the cognitive component, which addresses the question of how a person thinks about himself or herself in the world. Susanne labels these three levels: Doing, Being, and Thinking. Each stage of consciousness that Susanne describes then emerges from an interaction or synthesis between doing, being, and thinking. So even though Susanne's system is a psychological system, she isn't just measuring logic in its limited sense with an emphasis on cognition; rather, she is interested in the organic synthesis between doing, being, and thinking.

*Susanne:* Yes, lovely. Well said.

*Marc:* Fantastic. Now we can really focus in on how Unique Self plays out across the arc of development.

*Susanne:* You introduced the concept of Unique Self to me a while ago and I've been really grappling with it because, to me, in order to be able to even have a sense of Unique Self, you would need, at minimum, an understanding of your separate psychological self. That doesn't really emerge until after what we call the Diplomat stage in our scheme, or what Loevinger calls the Conformist stage, because there's still no psychological separate self up until this point. Then I started to wonder if there was some way that Unique Self could be experienced or known before the Diplomat stage. That has become a deep inquiry for me.

*Marc:* Let's think about that for a second because you just introduced a very interesting and fascinating suggestion, which is: can someone experience Unique Self pre-Diplomat/pre-Conformist stage, before they have really been birthed psychologically? Before this point we really are just on complete automation, and we have no sense of an observing ego. The subject hasn't been made object in any way at all. So how might someone at these earlier stages experience their sense of Unique Self? Susanne, I've heard you once offer the suggestion that perhaps a person's sense of Unique Self might show up as their unique sense of purpose in the world. They may in fact be completely unaware of it, but they are serving a unique function in the world. So even if they are not self reflective, their unique contribution can still be a very beautiful part of their existence. Even if the individual is not self aware in the formal sense of the higher stages of development, they have a basic experience—even if unreflective—of what I call “living their life and not someone else's.” This is a proto-awareness of Unique Self. Does that make sense?

*Susanne:* It does. Your introduction has engendered an interesting reflection on how Unique Self might show up before that self-reflective capacity has come into place. I recall you defining Unique Self as a capacity to serve something bigger than ourselves and that is the only thing that might fit at the Diplomat level.

*Marc:* Yes, I've never quite thought about it in this particular way but it is very interesting to ponder. There is an idea that exists in all the great systems of thought and perennial philosophies—I'll cite it from the Kabbalah, but you could cite it from anyplace—and that is that the process of enlightenment moves us from what is called *mitzedenu* to *mitzidoh*, meaning the interior movement from our human perspective to the divine perspective. We shift perspectives, if you will. When we become a lover, a lover not merely in the beautiful but limited romantic sense, but a lover in the deeper sense, we are able to see with God's eyes. To love in the intersubjective context is to hold love as a perception; to be a lover is to see with God's eyes. What I think you just did in your description is shift our perspective so that we might actually see a person with God's eyes and see their Unique Self in a way that they themselves may not even be aware of. It is no less true that even those of us who are post-Diplomat/post-Conformist in our development and have a capacity for self-reflective awareness aren't always able to see our Unique Self. The gift of what we have termed the “Unique Self Encounter” is that when we are able to meet someone at the level of their Unique Self and share a piece of our story with them, is that it allows us to see our own Unique Self in a way that we wouldn't have been able to access by ourselves.

*Susanne:* That is a beautiful way to express it.

*Marc:* Unique Self is really an expression of God in the first-person. When we talk about Unique Self, Ken Wilber likes to say that it is the highest expression of a first-person experience post the self-reflective stage of

awareness of the Diplomat/Conformist self. Although Unique Self appears up and down the spiral in different ways, in its pristine and ultimate expression, Unique Self is an expression of some level of enlightened consciousness in the first-person. I'm very interested in how Unique Self shows up at the mature Individualist and Autonomous stages, as well as the Construct-aware and Unitive stages in your developmental scheme because, having spoken to people for a couple of decades now about Unique Self, both in counseling settings and as a spiritual teacher, it's been my experience that Unique Self does disclose itself more and more as we evolve along the developmental spectrum. As we become more self-aware, the Unique Self increasingly shows up and allows for higher levels of joy to be disclosed. In the ancient Third Century Aramaic Talmudic writings, they say in a kind of Talmudic koan that joy is "simcha shel mitzvah"—it is the joy of mitzvah, which is generally translated as commandment, but the actual translation by the mystics using the Aramaic is the joy of being intimate with our unique purpose. It is this joy that comes online more and more profoundly as we evolve to higher and deeper levels of consciousness.

*Susanne:* Yes, and I just want to add that a person who is at the Diplomat stage can also still be very happy if there is a good match between what they can offer and serve and the life conditions or environment they are situated within. That has been one of my main arguments for why higher is not necessarily automatically better. It's really a matter of fit. Many people who are relatively simple and not deeply self-reflective can still have a profound impact on others. They likely can't even explain why they have this influence on others or why others are attracted to be with them. I'm thinking of someone like my grandmother who would simply offer you a cup of tea and a piece of homemade bread, and yet after being with her, I always feel that something quite beautiful had just happened; that something had changed. I feel relieved of some of my burdens and seem to experience a new energy to face life. In the case of my grandmother, it has nothing to do with self-awareness; it has to do with how she is matched with her environment and the life conditions that surround her.

*Marc:* That is so beautiful to point out. Someone at the Diplomat level is not yet self-reflective but when you are around them they can exude an extraordinary sense of comfort and warmth that can feel very uplifting. In the case of your grandmother, she may not have anything much to say about world affairs, and she's probably never heard of Integral Theory, but she is deeply at ease in her story and knows what she is doing in the world. Her very deep comfort in her role and story make her a source of comfort for others. I think that does offer a reflection of Unique Self as well.

Let's move forward into the first of the postconventional stages, which you call the Individualist. This is the stage where we first begin to see the term uniqueness used in your writing. You state: "Individualists distrust conventional wisdom and the hyper-rational tenets of the conscientious and Conventional stage. They need to distance themselves from all that went before them. In this case, one must re-evaluate the self adopted yet sanctioned role identities of society and *redefine themselves uniquely* and independently of them based on one's own experience and conclusions" [Cook-Greuter, 2005, p. 22].

Could you speak a little bit more about the Individualist stage so that we can discern how uniqueness starts to come online at this stage?

*Susanne:* The biggest shift is this turning inward and reliance on one's experience as the guiding frame for deciding who we are. The Individualist is very interested in finding truth through their own experience, regardless of what they have been taught before. There is a major shift in cognition from the previous stage where one was simply unconsciously embedded in one's own social and cultural programming. The Individualist is becoming more and more conscious of how much they have been shaped by their environment and cultural context. Before postconventional awareness, one doesn't actually investigate cultural conditioning. At the

postconventional stages we start asking why we believe the things that we so far have automatically believed.

The uniqueness that arises at this stage is a desire to discover who one is independently of all they have learned. The big question at this level is: who am I? People at this level are also struggling with a lot of deep confusion. Because Individualists have already fairly matured, they can handle the confusion; they can actually live in the confusion and explore it with delight. Part of the joy of awakening to the postconventional stages is seeing the multi-faceted prism of perspectives that one can actually take, both as a self and with different people at different times. We start to see that we feel and act in different ways when we are in different contexts with different people. This is the beginning of the questioning and deconstruction that will get much deeper at the level of Construct-aware.

*Marc:* I think that distinction is a very important one to make. At this level there is not yet what we would call the full emergence of Unique Self. We are still in a place of searching. But since perspectives are becoming to come online, then naturally with them arises the beginning of Unique Self awareness. You write that people at this stage “turn inward in search of their unique gift” and begin “pursuing their own burning questions” [Cook-Greuter, 2005, p. 22]. There is a search and desire to move beyond the grid and to begin living independently. This is not full Unique Self, but uniqueness is beginning to come online here as we move toward redefining ourselves uniquely. There is a move toward uniqueness that demarcates this particular level of consciousness, even if it’s not fully embodied. You describe this as, “The desire and ability of a person to live life *according to their own unique style*” [Cook-Greuter, 2005, p. 24]. I think unique style is a nice way of saying it because we begin to become free of restrictive conventions.

We can also see at the level of Individualist that one of the expressions of Unique Self might be a sense of sheer joy and delight. When we enter into the postconventional stages, our presence becomes available and accessible to other people in a way that wasn’t possible at earlier conventional stages because we didn’t have the same capacity for self-reflection and self-awareness. A person can be functioning very effectively at the Conformist stage and doing very good work in the world, but they don’t quite have that sense of impact on the world that they would if they had self-awareness. The presence that arrives with self-awareness is something that becomes more palpable as we step into higher-level disclosures of Unique Self.

In conversations with people at the Individualist stage—also known as green altitude in Integral Theory—I have noticed that they often categorically reject the notion of Unique Self. There is a refusal to create any kind of hierarchy and so a sense of core self is lost and Unique Self is viewed as somehow dangerous and pejorative. What I’ve found is that people at this particular level of consciousness are also often embedded in spiritual beliefs that emphasize emptiness over uniqueness.

If you read something like *A Course of Miracles* [Foundation for Inner Peace, 1996], you see that there is a very powerful diatribe against specialness. The idea is that if we feel special, then we can’t be at peace. The experience of specialness is seen only as the experience of ego in its negative sense in the contemporary spiritual world. Therefore, there is a conflation between uniqueness and the separate self. Because enlightenment teachings emphasize moving beyond the separate self, there is a failure to distinguish between specialness or uniqueness at a classical egoic level and uniqueness or specialness as it appears at higher levels of consciousness. It is a fundamental epistemological error, but it’s also a fundamental error in the first-person realization. R.H. Blyth [1962] wrote in his five-volume work on Zen that the seamless coat of the universe is not featureless. It is on the basis of this phrase that we came together in agreement on Unique Self. There is a false dichotomy based on realization between the need to leave the separate self behind in order to realize our Absolute identity, which is essential and empty, and the awakening of Unique Self that actually sharpens after our awakening to emptiness. In this second phase, Unique Self deepens when we realize that the universe is seamless but not featureless, and that we are in fact special. The experience of specialness at the level of Unique Self is not at the expense of others; it is not competitive because there is no separate self.



*Susanne:* I have found that people at all levels tend to have an egoic sense of specialness and achievement. I think the test for me has always been to notice if that person is saying, “Look at me, aren’t I wonderful?” That kind of egoic self-inflation happens all the way up and all the way down the developmental spectrum. That is not the Unique Self; that is the egoic self feeling special or extraordinary in some way. It always has to do in some way with comparing ourselves to others. Compared to you, look at me. That would be my litmus test for the ego. I’ve found it is a challenge to sort out whether we are hearing from the Unique Self or from that special sense of egoic self. I think this is a *very* important distinction to make.

*Marc:* You are completely right. One of the major litmus tests for distinguishing what we find again and again between an authentic Unique Self expression and a classical egoic expression disguised as Unique Self is a comparison of my specialness relative to you. We all use comparison to get a good source of measurement, so that is not what we are talking about. What we are talking about is: if I’m special, that means I’ve got to be better than you in some way.

I want to offer a second litmus that is also very powerful, which is, how does a person act when something in their egoic sense of specialness is threatened? Do they act with integrity? Is a person willing to sacrifice some political advantage, some egoic advantage, for the sake of acting in integrity in a given situation? We know that at a second-tier perspective we move beyond the old moral relativism. We don’t go back to an amber moralism; rather, we evolve in our sense of what integrity means. I’ve found that people who are genuinely in their Unique Self are naturally prepared to act in integrity in a way that is aligned with their deepest core values, and are far less likely to betray those values because they are not operating out of an egoic place.

*Susanne:* Yes, and Kohlberg often said that at the next autonomous level—what we call the Strategist in my scheme—what comes online is also a capacity to understand higher principles, and one is willing to go on the barricades for those principles.

*Marc:* That is such an important point. What I’m hearing you say is that at the level of Strategist, a person will actually identify more fully with their higher principles. We know that people at the Individualist level also have ideals and principles they want to live by, but there can often be an enormous dissonance between those ideals and their behaviors. They haven’t yet incarnated their deepest principles, so there can be a lack of integrity. Does that sound accurate to you?

*Susanne:* That certainly would be one way of expressing it. Also, in many ways, the Strategist stage is a solution to the searching of the previous stage [Individualist]. It is the stage where one really finds a place within themselves that they can call their “core self.” There is a much deeper sense of who one is and we can therefore now make decisions again, whereas at the Individualist stage it was almost impossible to make decisions because we didn’t want to commit to anything particular, causing an inability to actually make choices and to look at things in a hierarchical way. At the Strategist stage, choice becomes possible again because of this deep sense of core self. There is far less confusion than before. We can hold a core sense of self in spite of all the new capacities that have opened up. We are able to question and to not fix things, and we also don’t need a defined role or a defined self.

*Marc:* First, I just want to note that what you are calling “core self” sounds like a further emergence of what I am calling Unique Self. Second, we also often talk about how sub-identities become more conscious at the Strategist level and how the awareness that comes with this stage allows us to integrate previously compartmentalized sub-personalities. Instead of just being aware of these different roles and sub-identities that we have, we are actually able to integrate them in a real way. I notice in your writing that you begin to use the

phrase “self-actualization” when you talk about this level. There is an emergent self-determination and self-actualization that arrives at this point. Even more importantly, you point out that at this stage we are moving past confusion to a place where truth can be approximated. More complex arguments begin to carry more weight than feeble ones. There is an ability to make discernments. Qualitative differences come back online, shadow is acknowledged, and a greater degree of wholeness is possible.

You use the word “uniqueness” again at this level of consciousness, but you use it differently than you did at the Individualist stage. You point out that, “Depression is often based on loss of courage, loss of self-agency, and guilt for not having fulfilled one’s unique human promise, which is the promise to become the most one can be” [Cook-Greuter, 2005, p. 26]. At this level, a person really feels the responsibility for fulfilling their unique human promise and in this way Unique Self consciousness is beginning to emerge more sharply. In my language, I would say that one starts to feel their Unique Obligation. The notion of obligation comes back onboard, not in a mythic conventional sense, but in a postconventional reclamation of obligation. Here, when we talk about uniqueness it’s not just that we are freely searching for our uniqueness as our own personal burning question, but rather we start to feel an obligation to fulfill our unique human promise. We feel the responsibility to become the most that we can be.

*Susanne:* Yes, and there is also another component of this new stage, which is the full acceptance and acknowledgement of interdependence. This is really the first time when a deep sense of our interdependence starts to define our experience, whereas at the previous stage we are still largely defined by independence. At the Individualist stage, it is me trying to figure it out; it is me on a search. I am at the center of the story. At the Strategist stage, we have the cognitive capacity to see ourselves as part of the larger systems that surround us and we therefore feel a deeper sense of obligation and responsibility.

*Marc:* Fantastic, there it is—Unique Obligation in the context of a larger We space. When you talk about responsibility in your article, you talk both about responsibility in the interdependent sense, which is what you are emphasizing now, and you also emphasize the responsibility to fulfill our own “unique human promise” in order to “become the most that we can be.” The emphasis is not only on interdependence, but rather interdependence as the context for our obligation to become the Unique Self that we are.

*Susanne:* Yes, that’s true. Self-actualization is a big word at this level in the way that Maslow used it. We are trying to live our *unique offering* and express it in a way that will allow us to fully blossom and do the most good in the world.

*Marc:* Of course, the interdependent context is critical because as you say, “One needs the caring presence of others to become the most one can be. Others are vital to one’s well being because only through a dynamic and intimate exchange with others can one gain deeper self-knowledge and wisdom” [Cook-Greuter, 2005, p. 26]. This framing really supports the notion of Unique Obligation because we are no longer just searching for our gift in terms of self-identity as we were in the previous stage. We are now actually feeling our larger obligation to the whole.

*Susanne:* Yes, indeed.

*Marc:* You say that it is at this Strategist level that a core self begins to emerge for us. There is a sense of self-esteem that arises in the healthy sense—not in an egoic form, but in an authentic form. And, you pointed out, one of the great things about this level is that a person is able to begin looking at their shadow, and therefore is able to experience a greater sense of vulnerability. I’d love if you could elaborate on this a little more and then

we can weave that back into the Unique Self conversation. What is that sense of shadow and vulnerability that arises? How does this appear in a way that is different from what was experienced at the Individualist level?

*Susanne:* At the Individualist level there are some questions arising about the self and who one is; it is still vague. At the Strategist stage, one becomes able to be quite explicit about what kinds of things one sees and realizes within oneself, both in regards to one's strengths and vulnerabilities. Here, we find that there is far less defensiveness about being an ordinary human being with difficulties, problems, vulnerabilities, and blind spots, and also a far greater willingness to share those. Because one is also aware that these struggles are there for all of us, we feel a real need for others to be in our lives, because it is only in dialogue with others that we can get a mirror on our blind spots and therefore make them conscious objects rather than have them be unconscious. This brings a new level of self-acceptance and humility because we realize that there will always be things that we cannot see about ourselves.

*Marc:* So important and so gracefully said. I'd like to try and raise a particular issue here and see how it might relate. In the Unique Self teaching, I have developed a particular understanding of shadow and it's an idea we've been working on, which I first began to develop about a decade ago. I used to call it "soulprint distortion." I now call it Unique Shadow. What we mean by that is that shadow is not merely our unconscious; shadow, at its core, is when we are living a lie about who we are. We've distorted some sense of our Unique Self and we're not living the fullness of our life, which is why our unlived life appears as shadow.

Every lived life has a unique quality. It is like the DNA code of spirit that exists not only at the level of body but also at the level of soul. When I'm not fully living the fullness of who I am, there is a lie in the system that distorts. That Unique Self distortion is a result of taking a part of my light with its unique frequency and placing that unique frequency of light in shadow. From there, we devolve and our Unique Shadow expresses itself as shadow qualities that demand the self awaken to its own fullness. In other words, our Unique Shadow is trying to move us from a small "s" self to a capital "S" Self so that our unlived life will be lived. In this sense, we're not just talking about shadow in the more generic sense that it is popularly used, we are talking about Unique Shadow and how we can actually paradoxically follow our Unique Shadow back to our Unique Self. Our Unique Shadow becomes like a doorway, a hint as it were, toward our Unique Light.

In this sense, I wonder if that is why at the level of the Strategist, which is the beginning of second tier or teal altitude in Integral Theory, we are able to actually begin working with shadow, because what you call a core self is emerging, which I'm going to call a core sense of Unique Self. It seems that once you are in your Unique Self, you don't need to grasp in the same way that you would at earlier levels—you don't need to cover up. There is a degree of self-acceptance that allows us to hold the reflection of our shadow with more ease, and that therefore gives us a unique tool. At this level we are more likely to identify Unique Shadow and begin to deepen our sense of core self because we are able to look at these parts of ourselves in a much deeper way than we could before. At earlier levels we desperately felt the need to have an identity that worked to cover over any negative qualities that might tarnish our positive self-image.

*Susanne:* Yes, and we need to also be careful because one of the observations I've had is that people at this level can also admit vulnerabilities and shadow in a very honest way, but it can actually be done in order to bolster the self and to feel good about the self. It can be a way to say, "Look at me and how honest I am about my failings." But, yes, there can be, at this level, the beginning of a healthy and beautiful expression of Unique Self that actually comes out of the deep experience of one's own shadow, which opens us to deeper dimensions of ourselves.

*Marc:* That's fantastic. Shadow work itself can and often is hijacked in service of the ego. Claiming to do



shadow work actually becomes another—paradoxically—shadow form of getting power. Let’s move from Strategist, where a sense of core self has emerged, and into Construct-aware. What are the new qualities and characteristics that emerge at Construct-aware?

*Susanne:* At Construct-aware, one finds themselves in even deeper disillusionment about what they can know and how they know it. There is a qualitatively new capacity to differentiate and question even more deeply at this level than there was at the Individualist level. We become even more deeply aware that we are not just culturally and socially programmed, but programmed on an even more fundamental level because of our embeddedness in language. Language itself creates a structure that parses reality in such a way that we don’t often realize it and we just assume that the world is the way it is because our language causes us to see the world in a particular way. To become aware of this is a much deeper disillusionment than even the first level of disillusionment experienced at the Individualist level. It takes a lot of strength to sit in this place.

Suddenly, what we thought we knew we were about becomes uncertain and we aren’t so sure about who we are. We may have thought that we had found a deeply human way of being in the world as a self-actualized being and that our own self-actualization was also modeling and helping others to self-actualize. But now we’re suddenly not so sure that this hasn’t just been another self-delusion and another way that we have been aggrandizing ourselves in order to feel powerful and strong. For some people, this level can be very painful. We start to see all our attachments to how we create meaning, especially through language, and we start to confront deep existential paradoxes that we cannot, from an egoic position, overcome simply with more effort or dedication. We cannot find our way through with more of what we have been doing up until now. It really takes a wholly new and dramatic shift in consciousness to navigate this new territory, which is why it can be a very painful experience for people emerging into this level.

I’ve been playing with the idea of differentiating two different stages in Construct-aware. Currently, Construct-aware is an awakening to an awareness of how language molds what we see and experience and how it can trap us into false security. A deeper step into Construct-aware would be what I call Ego-aware, which is when we really start to see the shenanigans of the ego and how it works. We start to see how we are getting triggered constantly and we start to see the hall of mirrors that we live within. There is often a lot of suffering because we don’t know what to do to get out of this predicament. We see it clearly, but we don’t know how to get out because we see that every effort is just part of the same egoic struggle. I haven’t met many people who are joyfully living at this stage. The only joy to be found is on the very edge between good and evil. We can get energy out of that place of tension between opposites because that’s where it’s most alive. That is where one is probably closest to something transcendent and where the opening is. It is where we sense that possibility. It is not a place where things are fixed. Peace comes when I don’t rest on either side of the polarity, but find myself right in the middle. I find what John Kesler calls the “still point.”

*Marc:* There are so many important things in what you just said it is hard to know which thread to pick up. The deepening sense of uncertainty, which deepens paradoxically in direct proportion to a deeper sense of self, is a critical topic. Many years ago I published a book called *Reclaiming Uncertainty as a Spiritual Value*, and what you say from the developmental perspective is deeply resonant for me. So thank you for that.

As this Construct-aware stage emerges, there is a deep disillusionment that takes place. There is a real deconstruction that begins to happen in such a way that the ego, even in its most sophisticated and advanced forms, can’t overcome the deep paradoxes that underlie the very nature of reality. Then as we fall deeper, we become more and more aware. We start to see very intensely the clever, brilliant strategies of the ego. We may have been sure that we had completely moved beyond ego and suddenly we have this startling awakening to the insight that we are still totally in ego. With that awareness, the lines between wisdom and folly blur; the lines between right and wrong blur; not in an amoral or immoral sense, but rather we become aware that

the lines we had once drawn to guide our actions are actually much more complex and unclear. We start to see how everything interpenetrates with the other: the good, the evil, the wisdom, and the folly. Any simple dualistic distinction between wisdom and folly or between good and evil drops. It is about this stage I think that Blake wrote, “If the fool would persist in his folly he would become wise.”

Construct-aware is the stage that, as you say, “There begin to be moments in which the personal self disappears. The regular practice of turning inward and observing one’s own mental processes also often leads to the spontaneous experience of a direct mode of being in which knower and known momentarily merge and the personal self disappears” [Cook-Greuter, 2005, p. 30]. Now I would point out that the personal you refer to here is personality or egoic separate self. What this stage represents, in the Unique Self mapping of the emergence of the four selves, are glimmers of the True Self. They’ve been called peak moments. I might call them “peek” moments because they are peeks into our True Self. To quote you, in these peak states there is a process of “dismantling the vestiges of the conditional self” [Cook-Greuter, 2005, p. 30]. This is a very important stage, and it is part of what is necessary because it is actually cutting through the aggrandizement that can occur at the earlier stages. There is a need for disillusionment and, to borrow Trungpa’s term, to cut through spiritual materialism. The personal self—in the sense of personality or separate self—really has to disappear in some fundamental sense. That gives birth to a whole new stage.

The fascinating thing is that you don’t describe uniqueness at all at this level. Although uniqueness is still present, this stage is about getting beyond what we might call the vestiges of self-aggrandizement that happen whenever we are engaged in identifying with our uniqueness. There is a disillusionment of self and a contact with the purity of the transcendent through these moments of True Self.

*Susanne:* We also call this level the Magician. I would think in the Medieval Ages that the town fool often had this kind of role.

*Marc:* Yes, the jester in King Lear can speak truth to power in a way that no one else can. In the old literature of the *Zohar* [Matt, 2009], King David is called the jester of the king because what laughter really allows us to do is hold paradox in a way that the ego can’t. As we step into that Magician place, it is the emergence of the jester or the holy fool. But not the pre-personal or pre-rational fool; it’s the fool that emerges at the level of Construct-aware. There is a certain kind of joy that comes from this as well. It is a different quality of joy and we can sense very quickly when we are with someone who is holding that level of awareness. It is a very particular quality. It is not that comforting grandmother quality that we talked about earlier; rather, it is a very different kind of energy that has a very powerful and recognizable texture.

*Susanne:* I wonder if you have thought about it in terms of this being the first level where emergence has a very palpable presence. This person is finding their way between the paradoxes in a spot that is particularly alive because it promises the emergent. In that way they are like a door. We feel that they are open to something, even if we don’t know what it is. That transmits the kind of energy that others pick up on because it has that impish quality as well as a novelty quality to it. It is as if some door opens in their presence and what once seemed impossible now feels possible.

*Marc:* That is precisely it, Susanne—that is the very delight that we are talking about. It is that precise point where it is a delight to realize that I didn’t really understand this and now I am understanding this, and there is this new thing that is emerging from that paradox and there is a deep anticipation of it. That is also where the possibility of surprise comes in, because as we dance on this edge it produces a kind of original delight and newness; a kind of joy, which is again of a particular recognizable quality. So how do you see Unique Self playing out at the level of Construct-aware?

*Susanne:* There is a kind of back and forth and feeling in between quality. Sometimes I've described it as feeling as though everything is possible and then feeling like we are nothing. We feel that pair of extremes in our self-sense. Then we face the fear of really living up to all that we can be, and really stepping out into our calling. We can feel pulled back or anxious about it rather than shining in our fullest brilliance. I think that is something that we observe at this level more than at any other. If I understood the concept of Unique Shadow that you described, I would say that this is the spot where the brilliant light of our Unique Self becomes most bright and where we often shy away from it or are scared of it. At the same time, it is an opening. If we can become aware of our pulling away and follow the invitation to really be our Unique Self, then we can indeed start to do so consciously at this level.

*Marc:* That's great. At this level of Construct-aware, Unique Self becomes more conscious than at any previous level. Then when we move up to the next stage of consciousness, what you refer to as the Unitive or Ironist stage, all of a sudden uniqueness comes overtly back online quite dramatically, and you actually use the term "unique self" for the first time in your writing. There is a precise description of Unique Self in a more ultimate post-enlightenment sense. You write, "This new paradigm has a universal or cosmic perspective." You say, "Unitive individuals experience themselves as part of an ongoing humanity embedded in the creative ground fulfilling the destiny of evolution" [Cook-Greuter, 2005, p. 32]. Here again there is an evolutionary context, which is essential to this highest level of Unique Self. You say, "The two sides of the Pascalian paradox are integrated. On the one hand, feelings of belongingness; on the other hand, feelings of separateness and uniqueness actually demarcate this stage. Uniqueness and belongingness are experienced without undue tension as changing perceptions of many possibilities of being" [Cook-Greuter, 2005, p. 32]. I would also add that at the stage of Unique Self, uniqueness and belongingness actually merge as one. This is one of the key demarcating characteristics of what I call a Unique Self encounter. Paradoxically, it is through our Unique Self that we experience our Unitive manifestation. Not only is there no tension, but also uniqueness becomes the very way that we merge. There is a huge humility and grace in people who embody this stage. The person at this stage isn't experiencing uniqueness at the level of separate self. Rather, we find our embodiment as a unique identity participating in this evolutionary process. A person becomes completely lined up with their unique life's work and become an expression of their Unique Self as part of their shared humanity.

*Susanne:* There is indeed a leap that is made at the Unitive stage. We pass into a place where we are able to remain a witness to our own being and to what is happening, rather than just being passively driven by the ego, which is constantly assessing, measuring, and comparing. At the Construct-aware level, there is still an endless looping; an endless trying. At Unitive, there is a relaxation. There is a capacity to remain in that spacious awareness that had been intuited and experienced occasionally before, and that space can now be accessed systematically and enduringly. When you are in the presence of somebody who is stabilized at this stage, you can generally sense it because they are relaxed and they don't have to deny or reject their ego and they always have access to this transcendent dimension that underlies the ego structure.

*Marc:* So with this relaxation of the ego, our story can come back online in a postconventional way?

*Susanne:* Yes, and without guilt. Before it felt like, "Oh my God, here I go again telling a story and trying to explain myself." At this level our stories have a lighter touch. We realize that of course we are human beings and of course we cannot help but tell stories. That is the way we human beings interact with each other and how we make sense of the world. At the Unitive level, we just aren't attached to it. We don't believe in the supremacy of any one story and we can give up on trying to find the right story. We can hold our story lightly and yet still act within it and use it.

*Marc:* And yet when we say, “No story is the right story,” we aren’t talking about that kind of unenlightened relativism and pluralism of the Individualist stage. We are talking about a much higher level where a person has already integrated an ability to see and differentiate multiple perspectives and voices. One sees that there is already a natural holistic hierarchy of perspectives and we can therefore merge again with our story in a way that allows us to live in a very full and unattached way.

*Susanne:* That is a very important distinction to make. We can actually choose to tell different stories. We can choose to tell a relativistic story for personal purposes or we can choose to tell our story for a higher purpose. Sometimes it serves somebody else or a particular group or context for us to tell a particular story and we can do that without being attached to it as being the truth or the only story that can be told, but rather as a story that will serve that particular context.

*Marc:* The last postconventional stage on your chart is the Transcendent Self. Transcendent Self is in some sense a stage, an expression beyond the Construct-aware and Unitive stages. Clearly it’s not measurable through standard testing. I know you are hesitant to even talk about the Unitive because the classical instruments for measuring development don’t quite capture it. With that in mind, could you give us a sense, or just a feel for what we are talking about as we emerge into the place of Transcendent Self?

*Susanne:* We grow in our sense that things are really okay—that everything is just fine. We see that everything is happening the way that it has to happen. This doesn’t mean we don’t act or that we are just *laissez-faire* about everything. If somebody acts inappropriately or hurts others, we may choose to interfere as necessary, but there is far less attachment. And this increasing lightness in our attachment enhances our capacity for joy.

*Marc:* Clearly, at this level Unique Self becomes the greatest explosion and expression of great joy. The archetype of the prophet is very much an expression of this transcendent Unique Self level. In Buddhism, I would say this is very close to the tenth ox herding picture. There’s far less attachment, there is a lightness, yet there is also a full ability to act, and a kind of profound seriousness. The seriousness and lightness paradoxically live together in an almost seamless way as the person responds at an even higher level to what we call Unique obligation. But here obligation becomes seamlessly integrated into the natural flow of the free functioning self. We often associate duty and obligation with the shadow of the Diplomat/Conformist: “I have to do my duty,” “I have to be obedient.” Spinoza talked about obedience very disparagingly, and it was Spinoza’s critique of obedience that contributed to the enlightenment in all of its glory and shadow. That was the initial thrust out of the conventional stages. At the higher levels of consciousness, duty as Unique Obligation becomes delightful. Duty and delight become one word—there is no split. It is a given.

*Susanne:* That absolutely resonates. You are talking about that freedom that comes with having full access to the whole realm of feelings normally described as good and bad, sad and joyous, without the attachment to preferring one over the other. They are co-existent.

*Marc:* Yes, and the joy at this level is the very joy of Being itself.

*Susanne:* Yes. There is a delight in just being in this body and having all these experiences and not wanting it to be different. There is a joy in things just as they are.

*Marc:* It is at this place where bodhichitta at the highest level emerges from *shunyata*. In the Hebraic tradition, it is the prophet in his ultimate expression and the powerful calling and sense of obligation to action. It is not

driven by pushing; it is driven by a cosmic pull. That cosmic pull first comes online at the Construct-aware stage and deepens at the Unitive before coming into full flowering at the Transcendent Self.

*Susanne:* I think another quality of this stage is that we have no attachment to outcome. We don't feel ourselves doing something for a particular outcome, we do it because it needs to be done—because it calls us. It is not an effort, it is a natural response and that is different than any level before.

*Marc:* That is a very critical and salient characteristic that you just added. There is a very strong emphasis on this quality in Kashmir Shaivism; that is, to not be attached to the fruits of our labor. It is the ability to act decisively and fully impassioned with complete non-attachment. It is full attachment within non-attachment. It is acting in full-bodied engagement with the world and yet not being attached to the fruits of our labor.

.... Well, I think it is just fascinating to see that from the Individualist stage through the Unitive stage you have intuitively described the actual emergence of what we call in Kabbalah “berur,” which literally means the clarification of uniqueness. In our original dialogue, you expressed reservations about the idea of Unique Self. So for this dialogue I went to your core material. What I found to my delight is that you had actually in some sense forgotten, in your opposition to Unique Self, that in your own work you actually have a very deep sense of the Unique Self intuition—you actually use the term even though we were totally unfamiliar with each others work—and your unfolding of the higher levels of development is, in a real sense, a tracing of the emergence of higher and higher levels of Unique Self awareness. It was an utterly delightful and unexpected surprise for me to see that you have unpacked these ideas in a way that is so similar to my own inclinations.

*Susanne:* Yes, that is very true, that is amazing and surprising to me as well [laughter]. This has been wonderful. Thank you so much for this dialogue. I have enjoyed and appreciated it.

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