

A Short Introduction to the Eco-Soulcentric Developmental Wheel: Stages of Life, Rites of Passage, and Cultural Transformation

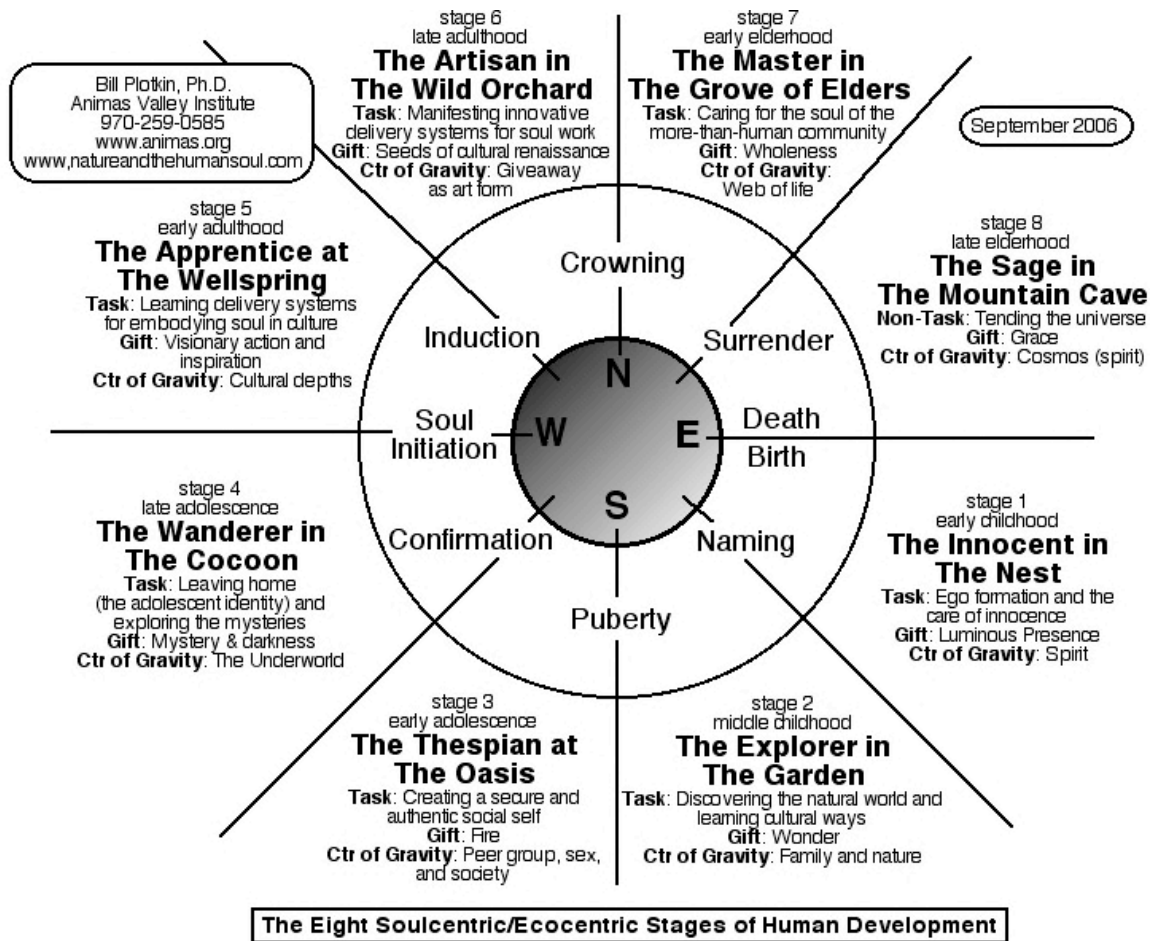
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The Eco-Soulcentric Developmental Wheel is a model of what the stages of human life look like when we mature in full resonance with both nature (“eco”) and soul — when we are in a continuous process of becoming fully human throughout the lifespan. There are eight life stages on the Wheel, two each of childhood, adolescence, adulthood, and elderhood.

The eco-soulcentric stages contrast with the *egocentric* stages in which most contemporary people are encumbered. Egocentrism — living as if the ego is the core of our psyche and that it should or can decide what’s most important in life — is a disorder due in part to the loss of effective rites of passage but more generally due to the loss of healthy cultures and the resulting erosion or disappearance of the practices and perspectives that support optimal human development.

Optimal human development — every child, woman, and man progressing through the eco-soulcentric stages of life — is the foundation for cultural transformations that are profound, generative, and life enhancing.

The Eco-Soulcentric Wheel is laid out on the template of the four cardinal directions. The diagram accompanying this essay shows the eight stages, beginning in the east and proceeding clockwise (sunwise) around the circle, ending again in the east. On the outside of the Wheel are the eight stages. The name of each stage is a coupling of a human archetype, such as the Innocent, with an Earth archetype, such as the Nest. The diagram notes three additional aspects of each stage: the developmental tasks; the gift that people in that stage contribute to the world simply by being present in it; and the psychospiritual center of gravity (the hub of the person’s life, what their day-to-day existence revolves around). Inside the circle of stages are the names of the nine transitions or passages between the stages. These nine transitions are the occasions for rites of passage. But the timing of the passages and the rites that mark them are not a matter of chronological age or the desires or beliefs of parents, religious authorities, or the individual-in-transition. Rather, the passages occur after the individual has had sufficient success with the developmental tasks of her or his life stage, at which point Mystery shifts the individual’s center of gravity from one stage to the next.



When human maturation goes well, in other words, it is primarily due to success with the developmental tasks of our life stages. This is what moves us forward. What takes place *between* the major life passages — during the stages themselves — is actually much more significant than the passages and the ways we mark them with rites. But both are essential and interdependent: Without day-to-day success with the developmental tasks of the stages, we either fail to reach the next passage or do so only in a partial or distorted manner. And without effective rites of passage, we might enter the next stage in only a partial or compromised way.

In *Nature and the Human Soul: Wholeness and Community in a Fragmented World* (New World Library, 2008), I've described in some detail the specific developmental tasks of each stage, as well as other aspects of the stages.

Due to the loss or degradation of vibrant cultures, most contemporary people — at least 80% — get stuck in the third of the eight life stages, which is to say in early adolescence. By “adolescence,” I mean a psychosocial stage, not a chronological interval coincident with the teen years. And the early adolescence in which the majority of post-pubescent Westerners

sleepwalk through the rest of their lives tends to be not even a healthy adolescence but, rather, what I've called a patho-adolescence. This is an egocentric existence focused upon the attempt to look good to others; to conform and/or to rebel against the ordinary and mainstream; to "get ahead" in the dog-eat-dog competition for material possessions, financial wealth, and social status; and to minimize the experience of challenging realities by way of addictions (whether to substances or to compulsive behaviors such as shopping, impersonal sex, or gambling).

The natural and wholesome virtues of a healthy adolescence have become relatively rare, virtues such as the cultivation of personal authenticity that grows hand in hand with social belonging and cooperation; the discovery of the joys and responsibilities of a healthy sexual identity and of erotic embodiment in intimate relationships; the desire and capacities to contribute to and help create a healthy, just, sustainable, imaginative, and life-enhancing human community; and an ever-developing reverence and gratitude for the web of life, with all its creatures and habitats, and a desire and capacity to protect and enhance the Earth community of which we are all natural members. In a healthy, mature culture, these virtues are defining qualities of early adolescence; their development is not postponed until adulthood.

This begs the question: What, then, *is* adulthood, *true* adulthood? From the perspective of the Eco-Soulcentric Developmental Wheel, adulthood is a stage of life that has become progressively rare in the Western world over the past few millennia. It is not meaningfully defined in terms of the acceptance of "mature" responsibilities, or in terms of raising a family, contributing to community, earning a living, or honing a craft or vocation. All these achievements are fully realizable (and, except for raising a family, ordinary) in a healthy early adolescence. (In mature societies, although sexual exploration naturally begins in early adolescence, starting a family is normally postponed until the achievement of true adulthood.) Rather, true adulthood is the stage of life in which one consciously recognizes and embodies the unique life of one's soul. This is a psychospiritual state that contemporary Western society would consider mystical, but would seem quite ordinary in a healthy society.

By "soul," I mean our individual and unique place or niche in the Earth community — not our place in the human village (identified by social and vocational roles) but our place in the greater web of life (identified in terms of nature-based metaphors, human archetypes, or other mythic or poetic images). Your soul, in other words, corresponds to what poet David Whyte refers to as "the largest conversation you can have with the world" or "the truth at the center of the image you were born with." This niche, this

conversation, this truth, this image, is not primarily cultural or merely human; rather it is ecological and mythopoetic, which is to say clothed and communicated in the metaphors, symbols, images, dreams, and archetypes of nature and of our own wild minds.

From the perspective of the Wheel, then, true adults are people for whom three things are true: (1) they experience themselves, first and foremost, as members of the Earth community (and, secondly, of a family and a human village or city, and perhaps also of an ethnic group or religion, a state or nation, etc.), (2) they have had one or more revelatory experiences of their unique mythopoetic place in that Earth community, and (3) they are embodying that mysterious place as a gift to their people and to the greater web of life.

In psychological adolescence, we appropriately define or identify ourselves in terms of our social or interpersonal roles — friend, son or daughter, lover, spouse, parent — or in terms of our job, craft, profession, or other community roles. In true adulthood, in contrast, we define and identify ourselves in terms of our soul-rooted or ecological roles — our mythopoetic identities. Here are four examples, mere intimations of the mythopoetic identities of four people I know: the woman who generates perception-expanding images and identity-destabilizing questions; the man who guides others into the oceanic depths of the psyche; the woman with a sparkling heart who walks the path of the bear; and the man who weaves cocoons of transformation for his people.

A second essential difference between adolescent and adult identities is that the former are *chosen* (or given or imposed by others) while the latter are discovered or remembered or reclaimed or confirmed. We are born into this life with our soul identity but are not conscious of this identity in childhood or early adolescence. Recovering or remembering this identity is the goal of the initiatory process that begins in what I call late adolescence (a psychospiritual stage reached by only a minority of contemporary humans) and that ushers us into true adulthood. The central mission of Animas Valley Institute is to assist people in recovering and embodying their soul identities.

But the process that leads to true adulthood is only one of several initiations in a full human lifetime. Each eco-soulcentric stage of life can be understood as an initiatory journey. Gestation is the first such journey, and birth the first passage. Early childhood (which, on the Wheel, I call “the Innocent in the Nest” — see diagram) is the second initiatory journey, and attaining consciousness of an individual, autonomous self (which I call “Naming,” usually occurring around the fourth birthday) is the second passage. Middle childhood (“the Explorer in the Garden”) is the third initiatory journey, and

psychosocial puberty the third passage (not to be confused with physiological puberty, which can commence anywhere from age 9 to 16). Early adolescence (“the Thespian at the Oasis”) is the fourth initiatory journey, and the following passage is Confirmation (confirmation of having achieved a social presence that is both authentic and socially accepted). Late adolescence (“the Wanderer in the Cocoon”) is the fifth initiatory journey (which includes the first descent to soul), and Soul Initiation (the commencement of true adulthood) is the fifth passage. And there are four subsequent initiatory journeys and four passages, which together constitute the second half of life.

So you can see that from the perspective of the eco-soulcentric model, we don’t progress from childhood to adulthood in one fell swoop. Rather, there are two major life stages that intervene — namely, early and late adolescence — and there is not just one life passage along the way, not even just two, but three (Puberty, Confirmation, and Soul Initiation). In men’s development, for example, it’s not boys to men; rather, it’s boy Explorers to young male Thespians to a kind of androgynous late-adolescent Wanderer to a first-stage true man (an Apprentice at the Wellspring). These are four very different life stages, each with its particular developmental needs, milestones, and opportunities.

Although there are differences in the developmental paths of boys and girls (and differences for heterosexuals, lesbians, gays, bisexuals, and transgendered), the core developmental dynamics are the same.

The greatest psychosocial differences in the manifestation of gender occur in psychological early adolescence. This is also the stage in which development is most differentiated in terms of masculinity and femininity. There are fewer gender differences both before and after early adolescence. In societies stuck in patho-adolescence, however, gender differences are magnified and amplified throughout the lifespan and often embodied and acted in unhealthy and unnatural ways.

Our genetic endowment affords us something like a free ride through the life passages of birth, naming, and puberty although, outside a healthy culture, these passages usually result in flawed or distorted versions of the first three life stages. Real maturation beyond early adolescence does not occur at all without success with the developmental tasks of early adolescence and attention to the most incomplete tasks of childhood. In healthy cultures, true elders and adults provide effective initiatory processes (and passages) for youth through the two stages of adolescence and into adulthood.

Real rites of passage primarily mark and confirm psychospiritual transitions that have already occurred; they do not bring about transitions that have not yet been developmentally earned or attained. Effective rites of passage are a huge support for those who have recently achieved a new life stage, achieved by virtue of their success with the developmental tasks of earlier stages. Well-designed rites incorporate gratitude for and ritual severance from the previous stage, an introduction to or familiarizing with the new stage, a ceremonial induction into a new way of being in the world, and a community-wide acknowledgment of and support for changes in social standing, opportunities, and responsibilities.

From the perspective of the Eco-Soulcentric Developmental Wheel, life is a sacred pilgrimage through eight stages. The first half of an eco-soulcentric life culminates with the discovery of mythopoetic destiny, the meaning of one's existence, the gift that one is blessed and burdened to contribute to the ever-unfolding dream of the Earth, the ever-evolving story of the Universe. The second half of such a life constitutes the hazardous and joyous embodiment of that destiny. The embodiment of soul destiny is the greatest gift we can offer the world. During times of radical cultural breakdown and opportunity — like our current era — the embodiment of individual destiny is the greatest generator of life-enhancing cultural change.

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