



## 123. Spiral Dynamics with Steve McDonald Part 1

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*We Don't Talk About That with Lucas Land* (Original at: <https://wdtatpodcast.com/30>)

**Lucas Land:** In this two part interview, I talk to futurist, Steve McDonald, about *Spiral Dynamics*, which is a model for understanding human development and consciousness. It's a fascinating conversation that I think can help us understand ourselves and other people so much better. There's a lot of information to digest, so sharing this in two parts will hopefully help your digestion and not give you information heartburn.

*Welcome to the podcast, where we talk about things we're not supposed to, learn how to have difficult conversations, and talk to people about what makes them different. This is the We Don't Talk About That with Lucas Land podcast, where we do talk about that with me, Lucas Land.*

My guest today is Steve McDonald. He is a futurist and the founder of the Agency for Advanced Development of Integrative Intelligence (AADII). AADII is a non-profit Change Agency, and you're also the founder of *Future Sense*, a podcast and radio show that broadcasts from Byron Bay, Australia. So welcome to *We Don't Talk About That*.

**Steve:** Thanks, Lucas. It's great to be here.

**Lucas:** So, Steve, tell us first just a little bit about yourself. I said you're at Byron Bay, Australia, but what are you up to? Tell us just a little bit about who you are.

**Steve:** Sure. I'm a futurist and a change agent, and I'm particularly interested in the evolution of human consciousness and the future of human existence.

I've got a very diverse background. I spent 15 years as a career army officer here in Australia. For some of that time, I was a reconnaissance helicopter pilot and for most of my army time I was an officer in the infantry, so grassroots, commanding combat soldiers. I went to war in Somalia, Africa in 1993 on a humanitarian mission and that was primarily a US-led response to a widespread famine which had been caused by a civil war in Somalia. So we went over there to quieten down the civil war so that the UN could resume feeding people again. Not long after that deployment, a couple of years later, I got out of the army, went through a bit of a unclear phase and not knowing what was next for me, but I ended up going back to

flying and flew a rescue helicopter for five years working in emergency services. Then, while I was doing that, I started to do some training and consulting work on the side because I had a lot of management experience from my time in the Army. That eventually got me into full time management consulting. I specialised in change management after a while and I discovered Clare Graves's work back in 2003. Around the same time I was also introduced to Ken Wilbur's work as well.

From my reasonable experience of the different encounters you can have with human nature from war through to all sorts of extreme experiences in emergency services, what I read of Clare Graves's description of human nature seemed a really good fit with my experience. So straight away I gravitated towards learning more about that. I did some formal training with Don Beck, who was one of the authors of the *Spiral Dynamics* book, first in Australia, then I went to Texas a year later, and eventually I got qualified to teach *Spiral Dynamics Integral*, which was under the auspices of Don Beck's school.

Also during that period, I struggled with post-traumatic stress from my work in the military and emergency services and that knocked me over for about seven months. I couldn't work and went through a fairly extreme sort of healing process there, but it was also a breakthrough process as well. Developmentally, because I'd read about Clare Graves's material, I could see it as being a transformation process, and that was really useful for me.

Then, in more recent years, I have established a charitable foundation, which is essentially a non-profit Change Agency, as you described, and it has a global focus. I'm particularly interested in the global challenges that humanity is facing and will face in the near future, and how we can improve human coping capacity by understanding how to transform human consciousness. Really, the root of pretty much all of our issues that we have in society comes down to human values. If we can understand human values better and how they change and how to work with the change process, then that offers an avenue to a more cohesive and collaborative global society.

**Lucas:** Yes, one of the reasons I wanted to talk to you is exactly what you're talking about, and I assume *Spiral Dynamics* is a big part of that. When I first encountered *Spiral Dynamics*, what was really helpful to me was that it helped me be more compassionate to people that were in other memes or were different than me. I could see where their values were and where they were at.

So tell us a little more. I know we're not going to be able to really plumb the depths of *Spiral Dynamics* in an hour or so, and we can share some links for people to go deeper later, but just on a general level, what was Clare Graves's initial idea about how human consciousness developed, and how might that help us see people differently? Then, maybe we can get into the colours.

**Steve:** Sure. I think one thing that's different about Clare Graves's research is most people, when they're wanting to do a research project, they come up with a hypothesis and then they want to try and prove whether it's true or not. Graves started with an open-ended question, and that's what really marks his work as unusual and very insightful.

He was a contemporary of Abraham Maslow. There were a number of theories around at that time about the development of human nature and psychology, and most of them had no more than seven levels—stepped levels or stages—that we grow through during our lives, and all of the models around really had a kind of a pinnacle—the pinnacle of human existence: this is what you can achieve and it's the highest thing you can achieve. Graves' was teaching psychology in upstate New York, and on the course that he taught there were five different perspectives on human psychology that came from different sources. Inevitably, one of the students would put their hand up at the end of the course and say, 'Dr. Graves, which one of these is right?' and there was real frustration around those questions that drew him to his start his own research.

So his research was based around the question: "What is the nature of a psychologically mature adult?" and with that open question, he then had quite a diverse range of data-gathering methods from self-reporting from university students to unannounced observation of behaviour, which probably wouldn't be ethical these days. He also studied all sorts of parallel research into biology—the study of brain structure and that kind of stuff.

He was smart enough to know that if he was the only guy analysing his data, then his own perspective on the world would flavour the outcome, so what he did was he gathered a team of seven peers whom he called his 'judges', and he would give his data to the judges and just say, 'have a look at this and see what patterns you can find'. So it was a very open approach that he took, and very non-directive, which I think, again, is why he came up with such valuable information.

I can summarise his findings in kind of three areas. The first one is, he found this interesting relationship between the complexity of life conditions and the responsive and adaptive nature of human consciousness. He represented that as like a double helix pattern where life conditions were one strand and the human consciousness was the other strand, and as the life conditions changed then human consciousness responded and, as necessary, it either became more complex or less complex to match what the life conditions were demanding. That in itself is a really profound finding, and I guess one of the key messages out of that is that life conditions and the complexity of our life conditions in particular—and you can interpret that as being the complexity or the difficulty of the challenges that we face in life, is one way of thinking about that—that's the key driver for change.

So often in the world, we see people trying to change other people through logical arguments or emotional pressure or some other kind of tool, and yet it all comes back to the life conditions and it's something that's often overlooked. So whatever pressure is put on a person, they're just going to fall back to whatever the life conditions are demanding of them. If we can, in the future, redirect our change efforts to look first and foremost at life conditions and make sure that the life conditions are there to support whatever it is that we're hoping to create, then that offers us completely new avenues for change, which I think will be much more successful.

The second piece that came out of his research was an understanding of the human experience of change, and this is essentially like a pathway or a pattern that represents the change process. Many other people have worked on this: Joseph Campbell called it *The Hero's Journey*; Dr. Elisabeth Kübler-Ross did some wonderful work on this same pattern

when she worked with dying patients who are adapting psychologically to the death process; and the same change pattern can be found in the *I Ching*, the ancient *Book of Changes* from China; and there are many, many other cultural products from different cultures around the world. So we're basically talking about the fundamental way that everything changes in this reality. You can reduce it to its most simple form as basically a sine wave, but a more sophisticated understanding sees it, not as a flat wave or even a flat circle, but as a spiral. We go through cycles and at the completion of a cycle, we may stay the same, we may grow and move up the spiral, or may regress down the spiral as well.

So just understanding that basic pattern: that we start from stability, when life conditions change, we feel discomfort, and our normal response to that is usually to look backwards to the past and try and remember a time when things worked OK. So we usually go through this regressive values search to look through the back catalogue and find if an old way of living is going to make things better, and what that usually does is it makes things worse and so it speeds up the change process. That's a neat little trick that evolution put into the change process to make it quicker. Of course, speaking super generally, the world right now is in that regressive values search where things have changed, we're not quite sure how they should be, so we're looking backwards and going back to extreme right-wing/extreme left-wing kind of behaviours.

Then ultimately—eventually—we move through that discomfort phase into the transformation, which is like a chaotic time where everything falls apart. We completely let go of our old value structures and we are personally transformed. That includes our body chemistry, our neural networks, those sorts of things, and then we have a breakthrough, like an enlightening moment, where suddenly we can see the world from a different perspective and suddenly we see that there are new ways to live and we break out of that chaos and into a renewal zone which is highly energised, and then come back to a stability which usually brings a higher level of coping capacity.

That was the second packet of information that he produced, which is really useful. The third one was an understanding of the layered nature of human values and human development—that there are these steps or stages or layers that we grow through from when we're born to when we become a mature adult. Again, it's driven by our capacity to interact with our life conditions and the complexity of those life conditions as to how quick we might grow through these stages, but everybody goes through the same ones. They're represented in *Spiral Dynamics* as vMememes (*Editor's note: short for values-attracting meta-memes*), I think that is the language they use there. Each one of those represents a discrete framework for making sense of reality. It's embedded very deep in us; it seems to be pre-coded because everybody seems to go through the same process, and it shows up on the surface level as what we feel is important, what motivates us, what doesn't motivate us, our general values, ethics and our behaviour. So all those things change when we transition from one value system to the next.

Those are the three things: the relationship with the life conditions; the change process; and the values progression.

**Lucas:** Ok, so listeners, if you didn't get all of that, you can rewind and go back through it. I was taking notes and I'm going to re-listen to it too, because there is a lot of good stuff there. I think for a lot of people, if they've never heard some of these ideas before, it can be a lot at once, but that's a really good basis for understanding how he, or was it Don Beck that then developed the colours of *Spiral Dynamics*?

**Steve:** Don Beck and his co-author, Christopher Cowan were the ones who developed the colours, and that was at the time when Don was going to South Africa and working there. So that came after Graves had passed away, I believe.

**Lucas:** So for me, just to maybe simplify some of what you're saying, the things I find really, really helpful in these basic things that Clare Graves was researching and finding—one is that we all go through these stages of development. In a lot of the other systems, it's easy to maybe see them as layered or levelled in a way that says there's people at the bottom that are sort of primitive or backwards and then there's people at the top that are better, and what I appreciate about *Spiral Dynamics* is, 'no, we all go through', and then, as you said, you can also kind of go back. You keep going around cycles and sometimes you're moving forward and sometimes you're moving backwards, and it just fits a lot better with the reality of human experience, I think, that we all go through those different stages.

**Steve:** It does. When I started teaching *Spiral Dynamics* in the corporate world, particularly here in Australia, I guess that because of the cultural differences between Australia and the US, I ran into an obstacle in the language—the jargon that was being used in the *Spiral Dynamics* book. It was like people had to learn the language of *Spiral Dynamics* first, then they had to learn the concepts. It seemed like an unnecessary step, so I started to change the language that I was using, and I eventually settled on the word 'layers' to describe of the stages or vMememes. I use 'layers' because they are nested inside each other, so they're like the layers on an onion or those Russian dolls—you open a big Russian doll and there's a whole bunch of little ones inside it.

So as we grow, we start out at the basic 'Beige', survival, Hunter-Gatherer kind of value set, and then the next value set gets layered over the top of that and the next one layered over the top of that. So even if we're operating from quite a sophisticated value system, we still have all of these basic value systems inside us and we can very quickly spiral back down to them if life conditions demand that of us.

**Lucas:** Yes, and what I notice is so helpful is that we often—and I want to get to the colours and break down some of the memes for people quickly—but I've heard some people say, like ... there's a certain percentage of the US that consider themselves progressives that are in this 'Green' meme, but part of the problem is they see themselves in this Green meme and they're looking down on the rest of those backwards other memes that are retrograde and can't catch up, so they sort of see themselves as having arrived at the pinnacle. What's

brilliant and beautiful about *Spiral Dynamics* is that says, no, you still are all those other memes.

**Steve:** That's right.

**Lucas:** And maybe your job is really actually, instead of saying, 'hey, why don't you catch up to me and be like me?', is to help everybody be the healthiest version of where they're at so that they can continue to grow and develop.

**Steve:** I agree 100%, yes.

**Lucas:** And that's such a shift in how we approach, like, everything.

**Steve:** It is. One of the interesting things about Graves's model is that the model predicts that people will interpret it and use it in different ways depending on which value system they're operating through at the time, right?

**Lucas:** Oh yeah, interesting.

**Steve:** So that is also a tricky thing when it comes to the real world knowledge and application of *Spiral Dynamics*. It depends where someone's at when they learn about the model as to how they perceive it and how they might use it, so it makes it quite an interesting and rich topic. But one of the things in the First Tier of consciousness, which is the first six layers or stages—so that's from Hunter-Gatherer right up to Relativistic or Post-Modern, 'Green'—there's an inbuilt rejection factor. So whenever we make a values shift and grow to the next value system, we automatically reject where we came from. That is an obstacle to the application of the model. It's only really when we start to poke into Second Tier and we start to be able to have those very clean insights without any rejection bias that we come to the conclusion that you just made that OK, that the best thing we can do is actually to nurture everybody and help everybody where they're at.

**Lucas:** OK, well before we get to too deep into that, let's back up. I'm thinking I'm going to link in the show notes to a visual (see: [https://miro.medium.com/max/2700/1\\*FTIZgLIPSh\\_iGhpWRL2c9w.jpeg](https://miro.medium.com/max/2700/1*FTIZgLIPSh_iGhpWRL2c9w.jpeg)). Maybe you have one that's your favourite or one that you've created, and I've seen some others that I can link to. I would encourage people, as you're listening, maybe go to the show notes and get the a picture of the colours as we're talking through the different colours to help you visualise the idea of *Spiral Dynamics* and what we're talking about.

I know there's a lot to unpack in all the layers and all of the memes, but give us a brief rundown of the colours in *Spiral Dynamics*.

**Steve:** Sure. The model that Graves came up with is a fractal model. In other words, you can look at it from a different scale and it looks the same, so you can apply these colours or layers to the individual experience that we have growing through life, and you can apply it also to a whole species level and everything in between those scales. What I'll do as I just quickly go through each one of the colours or layers is I'll talk about it from both of those places—from an individual and a species level—and that'll help people understand a little bit better.

So starting out at 'Beige', which is Layer 1—at a species level we're talking about the first emergence of *Homo sapiens* from whatever we were before that: Hunter-Gatherer kind of existence, very much embedded in nature and working in harmony with nature, and pretty much almost on automatic in terms of life; really just responding to our immediate needs for hunger, shelter, those sorts of things. At an individual level, that is representing when we're first born as a baby, where we're kind of helpless, we're just eating and sleeping and existing and there's no sort of richness of culture or anything around life. It's really like, 'oh, wow', you know, discovering the world and trying to make sense of it and just surviving. That's an individually-oriented layer, and as we go up the layers, they alternate between individual and communal focus.

From the individual 'Beige', we go to the communal Tribal (Purple), which at an individual level represents early family life, where mum and dad are kind of like the heads of the tribe and the tribe has customs—things that are okay to do and things that are not okay to do—and you have to learn what the customs are and just follow the guidance of the heads of the tribe. Of course, at a species level, that is literally the old traditional tribal living where you've got a tribal head, usually a chief, historically. The group is generally considered to be up to about 150 people in a tribe, roughly. You've got a piece of tribal land that you live on that has a boundary around it and life is pretty much lived inside that tribal boundary. It has an animistic form of spirituality. At the first level, 'Beige', there's no real structured spirituality that we've been able to understand because there's no real strong written records of life and that stage so long ago, but certainly there was this explosion of tribal culture around about 50,000 years ago, and part of that was the development of an animistic form of spirituality where every physical thing is seen to have a spirit within it. The mountain has a spirit, the river has a spirit, the plant has a spirit, these kind of things.

Thinking, in the communal systems, is very long-term, whereas thinking in the individual systems tends to be short term. So in tribal societies, like in here in Australia in Aboriginal culture, we have stories that we know are 30,000 years old because they talk about astronomical events that happened 30,000 thousand years ago that science is detecting—those kind of things. It's amazing to think that stories can carry knowledge for so long throughout history.

What happens with each of these layers is, when we live life according to the values of a particular layer, at first it's very, very useful, but it goes through a cycle where it peaks and then, after a while, because the universe we live in is always becoming more complex, the

growing complexity makes our values set have an expiry date. So there comes a time when a particular way of living no longer works so well and we have to transform to the next most complex layer or colour in order to solve our problems. So after living the tribal way for a while, we find that it's not working so well anymore and we go through the subconscious transformation process driven by life conditions.

The next or third layer, Layer 3 is 'Red', which Clare Graves called Egocentric. You can think of it, from an individual perspective, as the time when you start to become a teenager—you go through puberty, you've got all these different hormonal and emotional drivers happening, you want to break out of the control structure of the family, you don't want to follow mum and dad's orders anymore, you want to make your own mark on life, discover who you are and discover your own power—and you go through that wild phase your teenage years of breaking the rules and just doing whatever you want to do, just to see what happens, right? At a species level, that equates to the breakout from tribal living into a roaming warlord kind of existence, which you still see in places like Somalia, for example. Maybe the biggest example in history was Genghis Khan. There's a great movie about Genghis Khan called *Mongol*, which shows him growing up in a tribal setting and then these raiders come in and kill his relatives and wreck the tribe, and that pressure is enough to transform him into one of these warlords. Of course, history shows you, I think he conquered more land on the planet than anybody else has so far. It's very Egocentric, as Clare Graves said; it's very self-centred and it's about changing the world to suit what you feel you need. It tends to typically be confronting, raw; it's still not really engaging the rational mind so much, it's very much driven by irrational urges—the instinct's wants and needs—so it's still quite primal. In everyday society, we kind of play this out in sport—we use sport as an outlet for that kind of raw emotional power-orientation.

After a while, again, life conditions change, driving us to change to a more complex way of being and we move to the fourth layer, which is coded 'Blue' in *Spiral Dynamics*. Clare Graves called it Absolutistic and it takes us into a new zone which I call the rational zone. This is because, up until now, in 1, 2 and 3, we've been primarily driven by emotions, instincts, basic needs, whereas once we move from 3 to 4, the frontal lobes develop to completion and so our rational mind takes charge and we're able to rationalise away some of our emotions and urges. We start to conceive of cause-and-effect relationships so we can live in a much more disciplined and structured way. That change in humanity, historically, came about around the time of the Agricultural Revolution, where we learned how to crop on a large scale so we didn't have to spend all day working on subsistence farming or gathering food; we could actually settle down and build towns and large cities and have specialised people doing the large-scale agriculture to feed us. The extra complexity that came from living in large groups like that meant that we had to develop this rational-minded approach that allowed us to follow rule sets and live a disciplined life so that we could live cohesively within towns and cities. So the mindset that comes with this—from a personal perspective, this is kind of when you've run yourself ragged as a teenager, living the wild life, and you suddenly had this realisation that, 'OK, I've got to knuckle down and get on path here, I can't just live my life like this because I need a regular income, I need future goals' and those sorts of things. So that's when we settle down into more mainstream life, when we move into this fourth layer. The thinking associated with it is typically looking for a higher authority to give us written



guidance on how to live our life. We're basically looking for a set of rules from a higher authority, and often, for many people, that comes in the form of religion. It was around this time in history, when humanity emerged into this fourth layer of being human, that the religious books from our main structured religions were written—from this kind of mindset of 'there's a certain way to live, there's only one right way to live, actually, and here are the rules for that, and if you follow those rules and everything will be good.' The rewards for that come way in the future because we're in a communal system and its long-term thinking, so you hear people from this mindset saying, 'OK, if I do really well in my career, by the time I retire, I'm going to get a gold watch and I'll have money saved up and things will be great'; from a religious point of view: 'if you live a good life, follow God's rules, then when you die, you'll go to heaven and be rewarded there.' So the rewards always come later in this mindset.

Then, as with all the value systems, after a certain time, *if* your life conditions become more complex, then you will also transition out of this one. So it really does come back to life conditions. There are still places on the planet where people are living quite happily at Tribal Layer 2—like in the wild rainforests of Papua New Guinea, for example, just north of Australia—because they don't need to live any different. They have everything they need, their life conditions have stayed stable for thousands of years, and there's been no driver for them to move out of that value system.

**Lucas:** Just real quick, there are areas of Bolivia in the Amazon, in northern Bolivia, where there are tribes that haven't been contacted, and luckily they have some protections that they are left alone. I know people feel like we've encroached on so many places and it's hard to imagine people living like that, but these are modern people living that way, so that's true.

**Steve:** Absolutely. It also speaks to the power and the resilience of these simpler value systems—basic survival, basic tribal and family bonds, basic power requirements—that they are able to last so long successfully, and like I said, they don't go away; they're still nested inside us even when we're living in more complex places.

**Lucas:** Well, I'm pausing you, maybe kind of halfway through to reflect on this, because it tickles some of the things I'm always interested in. Part of it is our very, very short memories that we have as human beings to not remember that for 90+ percent of *Homo sapiens'* existence, we did exist in more tribal groupings, and so of course they lasted that long. They've outlasted us already, right? For thousands of years compared to the short amount of time that we've been in the kind of civilisation that we are now.

**Steve:** Yes.

**Lucas:** So this is where we'll end Part 1 of our conversation. Stay tuned next week for the conclusion of this conversation with Steve McDonald.

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*A final thought from Brené Brown: "The willingness to show up changes us. It makes us a little braver each time." Until next time, keep showing up and keep being brave.*