

Integral Leadership Review

Volume X, No.4

August 2010



Notes from the Field

The Integral Theory Conference 2010

Sean Wilkinson



Introduction – Reasons I travelled to the Integral Conference

I travelled to San Francisco because my good friend and colleague was presenting a poster on Overtraining in Young Athletes. Nuno Matos, analysed the phenomena of overtraining (similar to depression) in sport using AQAL. I jumped at the chance to visit the conference because after three years of reading and listening to everything Integral, I wanted to experience the reality of an integral event, and the people participating. I have in the past been victim to disillusionment when the people and events stemming from a philosophy that inspired me, did not seem match the claims of the theory. I also saw this trip as the perfect time to explore some very personal question about spirituality, relationships, and psychotherapy. These all related to seeking guidance to enacting an integral future in my own life. I was very happy when I realised this was a main theme of the conference.

Goal Of the Conference

The main question I was asking while at the conference was related to the integral movement in general. Is Integral really the leading evolutionary edge in the world? At least my grounded interest was to find out if integral was something I wanted to dedicate myself to further. Context is obviously very important in this assessment. It is very early days, this being only the second conference, and is mostly the academic wing of the Integral enterprise.

As I started to settle into the atmosphere of the conference, the jury was still out. I sensed something special, but also potential for disappointment. This started familiar questions regarding my own expectations, which I hope to try to account for in my analysis.

With all this in mind my early ambivalence was enhanced by the preconference workshops. I chose my career interests in psychotherapy over my hearts desires to explore the three faces of spirit. This was to prove a mistake. The workshop surprised me with its muted tone. Elloit Ingersoll, Mark Forman, and David Zeitler all seemed reluctant to be too challenging theoretically and experientially. There was only one practical experience in the morning, and even in this the participant was asked to role play a client rather than bring themselves. This limited example was frustrating because it's small scale and still man-

aged to emphasize that we were in the presence of experienced Integral practitioners, but also that they had no intention of stretching our limits. However, this brought me to bring my expectations into consideration. Was I unrealistically expecting Integral to be at the evolutionary edge of ultra deep excavations of the psyche and embodied emotional expression? Therefore, I was projecting my own need for salvation on the very burdened shoulders of the integral leaders. Their intention was to bring psychotherapy into the Integral model, without any grandstanding that they were doing something revolutionary in the field of therapy. This was definitely a considered tone. Elloit Ingersoll suggested he still was getting the same results in addiction therapy he had 10 years ago and Mark Forman stated that some psychological injuries, at least at this time, are beyond full healing.

After the beginning of the afternoon following more tame theoretical explorations of psychotherapy I had enough and in the break joined my friend in the Three Faces of Spirit workshop. This had a completely different atmosphere. It was not hyped up ultra spirituality, especially from Diane Hamilton, but it was an intelligent experiential experience that in the past I have found would be very hard to find elsewhere. In Marc Gafni's presence it became obvious why he was both considered controversial and also a bright and engaging speaker (this would be evident through the whole four days). Exploring the 2nd person relationship to god instantly made me turn to face myself, but also the other participants in the room. The space seemed very open, but also held by leaders who could welcome perspectives, as well as challenge any projected shadow from the audience. It was the kind of depth I wanted in the psychotherapy workshop and from the rest of the conference. However, is this kind of chasing for depth in a weekend something the conference wanted to distance itself from.

After the workshops my appetite had certainly been ignited and it was now onto the opening ceremony. I loved the dedication, scholarship, and vision of the presentation from Sean Esbjorn-Hargens. The desire to come out from Wilber's shadow (no pun intended) while honouring his contribution has, for me, foresight and courage. Sean has included critiques, multiple integral contributors, and current integral writers in his vision of the whole 'ecosystem' of integral and really inspired me to get reading and contributing. Mark Forman introduced the conference's ongoing self-analysis of its own participants. It again seemed to have very modest aims and a small participation rate but did add to a pride I was feeling and thinking, "Are the things happening here evident at other conferences?" Not in my experience and this was rubber stamped by Sean when he was thanking his team and was brought to tears when showing his appreciation for Mark Forman, the chief organiser. Overall a positive start from the staff hosting the conference and still a sense of something muted in the presence of the speakers and the audience, something that might suggest that maybe we are not ready or able to come out from Wilber's shadows and become the next big paradigms to rock the world. It became apparent that Integral is looking to have the same effect (at least in scale) in the academic world as post modernism did, its main protagonist. However, a massive difference if Integral manages this feat is that it will orchestrate this paradigm shift consciously. That will surely be an evolutionary first. Sean and his team have mapped the ways integral can penetrate the mainstream and are putting these self-reflective initiatives in place to achieve this. This supports a vision of how consciousness moves from 1st to 2nd tier, through consciously enacting its own development.

To finish the first day the poster presentations were open for viewing and the mingling started to heat up. There was some very good work on display. Otto Laske, one of the big names, was promoting his work on cognitive development and how it is a better predictor of a person's level than the social-emotional lines. His assessment relies on dialectical thinking, which I am very keen to learn more about, although I don't think Wilber will be too concerned by this critique. Douglas Tartaran's poster was making a lot of waves and always had many viewers. It was a very clear and simple method for understanding repressed emotions and how to unplug these

blockages. He was the perfect embodiment of this process; my friend gave him the nickname ‘Tibetan Hulk Hogan’ due to his size and very calm and clear presence. Mona Nasserri showed the diversity of the Integral approach with her clever work on the development stages of Craft. There were many more, but too many to talk about here.

What was most inspiring was walking around and talking to people. The attention and depth of each conversation was like a comfy king size bed after sleeping on the floor. Shared beliefs and ideals are a beautiful cocktail for lower right reciprocity, and was making my upper left experience a very happy one. I went to sleep that night very excited about the next three days and looking forward to the coming talks.

The Main Event

Instead of a blow by blow account of the presentations and events that happened over the next three days I am going to jump through and conclude my overall experience.

All in all I was mostly disappointed by the presentations. Not that they were particular bad; I may have been unlucky to have chosen the wrong people to see for what I wanted. It was always difficult as there were seven lectures at a time and I usually would have been happy in most of them. What was most apparent was there was almost no experiential experience in the talks I went to, but apparently others did have exercises in them. And the ones that were more intellectual were more a reporting of the papers I had already read and did not extend my knowledge. There was also a distinct lack of empirical research that is so important to support the theory.

Zak Stein’s is the one talk that stands out in my mind as one that left me unsure. After plenty of consideration and re-reading I did not follow his argument and agree with the criticism of his paper that can be found on Integral life. This perspective suggests he had done a disservice to Wilber in his critique of the Growth to Goodness assumption in the model. His main point is that higher does not always mean better. However, his examples were not too convincing as they seemed to be of higher development in one line and severe pathology in another. Surely Wilber is suggesting higher overall when considering all the lines as better, which for me is difficult to get away from. I definitely concur that we have a significant challenge assessing development accurately and understanding the move to disentangle the drive towards excessive developmentalism, but this critique by Zak did not address Wilber convincingly. It did, however, open up the huge issues faced by the community related to how accurately and ethically assessments of levels can be done.

The panels in my opinion, unfortunately, did not get the most from the speakers available. This may be because there were usually five or more different viewpoints that would limit the depth that could be covered. Again, apparently some were better than others. Surprisingly my best experience was in the metatheory discussion. In this panel, although a very intellectual conversation, the dynamics were very fluid among the speakers and a lot of ground was covered with the audience engaged. Overall, though, I think a lot of work is needed with this format that definitely lacked preparation.

Parallel to talks were the conversations and interactions with the other integral folk. This was getting better every moment. This was the best place to explore the theory and the conference, sharing on current work and future plans, and plenty of banter and flirting. This was especially evident in the dance party on Saturday night. I am an experienced clubber and really enjoy dancing, but this was the best dance floor I had ever witnessed. Everyone got into the groove with great enthusiasm and not much ego was evident. It seemed to exemplify healthy collective stage development, that is for sure. Too much can be read on one night’s efforts but it is

definitely one of the highlights of the four days. That night six of us stayed up all night discussing, sharing, being present and playing integral games, an experience that all will remember fondly.

The keynote talk was a bit strange. Robert Kegan was definitely a very elegant and entertaining speaker that kept the attention throughout his talk. However, the level his talk was pitched at seemed very pluralistic in content. His transformative self does not for me outline the full complexity of second tier development, at least in the talk he gave. It seemed to be the wrong speaker for the crowd he was addressing. Not all agreed with me on this point and I was open to reconsidering my opinion on this.

Lastly, the awards ceremony once again showed a shared respect and love between everyone at the conference, which was admirable and for me unique. However, it was also very evident that the leaders of the conference were on their last legs, and unfortunately left a lot of disappointed presenters in the poster section that were not given time by the judges for the prize of best presentation. They had a lot to hold through the four days and definitely had run out of steam, something that might be considered next time.

To sum up, my experience of the Integral theory conference is one of mixed emotions. It is exciting and truly wonderful to meet like-minded people having a similar view on life and doing comparable work in the world. The academic ambitions of the conference are important and the vision well thought out and inspiring. However, whether Integral is going to make an impact on the world is still far from clear. If it does how much of a part the conference will play is also far from clear. At the moment it seems there is a very long way to go. More projects are needed, more empirical research, as well as creative developments in theory and application. However, it is only the second conference and much has already been achieved. There are many extremely accomplished figures in the organisation; there are successful companies in coaching, conflict management, psychology, business and education springing up, and, I believe, in Integral sports. Also, the conference itself in an established American University is an amazing achievement in itself.

In terms of my personal questions I am clearer on all of them from my time in San Francisco and feel privileged to have had so many important interactions. My overall experience makes me determined and hugely motivated to do my bit in the integral community. My reading list has expanded with my increasing determination to contribute. I am almost certainly going to sign up for Integral Coaching Canada, and I will be joining the Integral London Life Practice group to enhance my own practice. My near future is definitely entwined with the integral community and on reflection I am very happy and excited by this.

About the Author

Sean Wilkinson is a tennis coach living and working in Shrewsbury. However, he is far from a conventional tennis coach. He has a masters in philosophy, begun training in psychotherapy, meditates daily, reads everything Integral and sees his personal growth as essential to the development of his sport, club, and players. He works with his best friend and business partner John Thompson, in their company, Integral Tennis, which is striving to put Integral ideas into practice to demonstrate to the world and themselves its potential. Developmental profiling of players, systemic relationship awareness and the interconnections from them to parents, to club staff, to governing body representative are all consciously considered. Also, self-awareness, acceptance with determination and responsibility are key parts of their tennis curriculum. However, they are keen that through an integral lens the players at their club will be more successful relatively to traditionally structured clubs due to their holistic approach. This has meant a real and difficult engagement with red, blue and orange skills and motivations in their community and themselves. It is a big challenge, but one that is already showing considerable results nationally. It is still only two years in and requires a lot more hard graft. Outside of

this he is very keen at exploring lower left practices around themes of presence and authenticity in personal development.