

Dr. Clare W. Graves

Pathfinder on the Mohawk

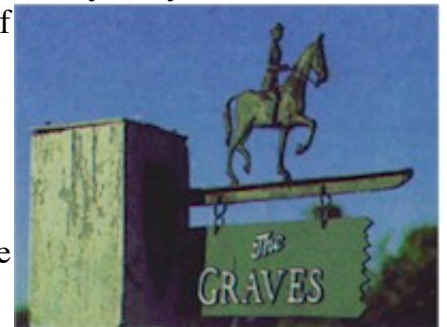
These pages are dedicated to the life and times of Clare W. Graves, Professor Emeritus Psychology, Union College, New York, and the thousands of students who were involved in his original research, and the thousands of others around the world who have been touched by the power of his "Levels of Existence" point of view.

-- Dr. Don Beck and Chris Cowan

Visit <http://www.clarewgraves.com> to review some of Dr. Graves' publications and more about his work.

INTRODUCTION

We had the great honor of knowing and working closely with [Dr. Clare W. Graves](#) for the final decade of his life. Our good friend and mentor lived and worked in the upper Hudson Valley, only a few miles from the historic Mohawk River and the Erie Canal. He appreciated the history of the place and understood its geology. When we first met him, Dr. Graves and his wife, Marian, lived on a picturesque little farm with a pond, a couple of trotting horses, and a big, feisty, spoiled black cat with no name. Their two children were grown and had their own families, but continued living nearby. Over the decade we had the honor of visiting, studying, and working with Clare Graves we came to increasingly respect the intelligence and insight of this man, as well as the gracious hospitality of the Graves household. He had retired early from teaching because of sudden health problems and, though his body could not manage the rigors of a daily schedule, his mind was as sharp as ever and hungry to apply his "point of view" to the problems of human existence.



As he often said, some people are born with brains "out of their time." He certainly seems to have been such a one. Today, his thinking is cutting edge and fast becoming mainstream. But as recently as the late 1970's, his ideas about the development of human nature were a step beyond. Though he retired from Union College as Professor Emeritus, Graves' began as a relatively obscure teacher of psychology in the years following World War II. As often seems to happen, wartime energy and post-war euphoria served as breeding grounds for visionary thinking and bold, new breakthroughs in human knowledge. Such was the case with Graves. In the early 1950's, at the end of a semester of exploring theories of personality and human development, he found himself confronting a question he could not answer: "OK, professor. Now we know Maslow and Rogers and Skinner and lots of others. Which theory is right? Which one accurately depicts the development of human nature?" He couldn't answer the question and, rather than continue to rehash older psychological constructs or participate in the debates between the conflicting theories of the day, he decided to start afresh by searching for the reasons behind shifting views of human nature. He sensed that all were part of the answer, but none was complete.

Thus, Graves sought to get to the mind of the matter and explore why people are different, why some change but others don't, and how better to navigate through the emerging and often chaotic versions of human existence. He conducted elegant studies for thirty years, using batteries of psychological tests, interviews, and observations. He cross-compared his data with those of all the other theoreticians he could find. From that mountain of data he built a fresh theory, a next step along the path to understanding who

we humans are. As he put it:

"Briefly, what I am proposing is that the psychology of the mature human being is an unfolding, emergent, oscillating spiraling process marked by progressive subordination of older, lower-order behavior systems to newer, higher-order systems as man's existential problems change."

In other words, human thinking evolves in recognizable packages as the world around us gets more complicated and we try to keep up. At the same time, we are constantly altering our world because we are clever. Graves was one of the first psychologists who understood that we live, act, make decisions, and undergo change through complex systems. His informal drawings and illustrations would be familiar to any serious student of quantum physics, general systems, and chaos theory. (Click to access a one minute [audio clip](#) of Dr. Graves discussing his theory, 1974.)



Chris Cowan Clare W. Graves Don Beck

Dr. Graves' orientation was to integrate "bio-," "psycho-," and "socio-," thus plowing across the fields human knowledge and breaching the walls of academia that separated disciplines and departments (not a favored activity when budgets were on the line). He anticipated and understood the then yet-to-come surge of discoveries in neurobiology. As early as 1971 he was pointing to the critical importance of mind/brain research with a focus on how the mind is shaped by neurological structures and networks, and how it is activated by the interaction of chemical agents and life's conditions. Such speculations amounted to heresy in those golden years of the humanistic views that led to today's political correctness and egalitarian orthodoxy, but Graves held fast. (He was discussing the difficulty of taking a holistic position when this photo was taken in 1981 during a weekend spent at the Graves' home with a [video](#) crew.) He would often summarize his point of view in the following constructs:

- Human nature is not static, nor is it finite. Human nature changes as the conditions of existence change, thus forging new systems. Yet, the older systems stay with us.
- When a new system or level is activated, we change our psychology and rules for living to adapt to those new conditions.
- We live in a potentially open system of values with an infinite number of modes of living available to us. There is no final state to which we must all aspire.
- An individual, a company, or an entire society can respond positively only to those managerial principles, motivational appeals, educational formulas, and legal or ethical codes that are appropriate to the current level of human existence.



So, Clare Graves was a man out of his time. In the late 1970's Canada's *Maclean's Magazine* referred to his concept as "the theory that explains everything" ([reprint](#) available). While he would personally cringe at such a claim, his work is massive and elegant - a comprehensive thinking process, systems package, and action strategy whose time had not yet come two decades ago. But time has a way of sifting the wheat from chaff when it comes to ideas. Constructs with greater explanatory power and practical application tend to prevail. Only now, a full decade after his death in 1986, are Graves' contributions becoming widely known and recognized. The theory of human emergence, change and transformation he proposed has been richly fleshed out and validated rather than replaced by contemporary research.



Sometimes when looking at the breadth of the theory people will ask, "But is Graves' work practical?" The answer is: eminently so. While he was involved in scholarly research as a social scientist, a large portion of Dr. Graves' work was actually conducted and reported in the business sector. His article, "The Deterioration in Work Standards," appeared in the *Harvard Business Review* of November, 1967. Not only did he predict the erosion of America's productivity, but he laid the foundation for the current interest in total quality and reengineering. In a nation-wide series of seminars he conducted with Beck and Cowan in the early 1980's, Graves astonished the business people in his audiences with his currency and acumen, "nailing" the problems they were just then realizing lay ahead. As you will discover, the Graves conceptual system provides the human factors component that the followers of Edwards Deming have been seeking and others do not yet realize they lack. Value Engineering and Clare Graves run hand-in-hand. His framework maps out how to transform a company or a culture to make it healthy and receptive for the introduction of complex technologies and rapid change.

In summer of 1984 Don Beck joined with Clare Graves in a presentation of his theory at a major conference of the World Future Society in Washington, DC, not realizing that this was to be his last public forum. Don still has fond memories of him bounding out of the taxi at the hotel following his flight from Albany. He had continued to suffer the ill effects of a series of heart attacks and other medical problems for a decade, severely curtailing his activities and short-circuiting the popularization of his work. But Graves's energy level was high on this trip, and he relished the opportunity to let his visionary mind speak once again.

After the usual introductions, the stage was set. Graves rose up in a majestic pose and in his deep, still resonant voice bellowed out, "I call my point of view The Emergent, Cyclical, Double-Helix Model of Adult Biopsychosocial Systems Development." This audience of futurists did what most other groups over the years had done when he spoke those words. Some sighed, others muttered, a few giggled, and many exclaimed "uh", "wow" or "oh, no" to indicate they knew their minds were about to be invaded by a powerful new meme or that they were about to encounter a stream of complicated gibberish they would probably not understand.

Typically, Graves paused to let the murmur die down - he knew what it was about - before he retorted, with a twinkle in his eyes: "Well, damn it all, that's what it is!" The crowd roared, then relaxed as he then explained his point of view with a lucidity and force that left his listeners asking, "Why had we not thought of this before? Why is something which makes so much sense not more widely known? This is the key to unlocking some of our most difficult riddles."

The futurists had no way to know how poor health and a scholar's rigorous need to fill in theoretical gaps had combined to delay the complete presentation of Graves' framework. He fully expected, but was unable to experience, the revolution in brain/mind research that has fleshed-out his thinking during the last decade. Yet he knew "emergent" models were coming, and that understanding the interaction of the many forces impinging upon a person would be the key to the next psychology.

Graves struggled to depict his thinking graphically. (We wish he had had access to virtual reality, holography, and 3-D computer modeling.) He was attracted to the double-helix of DNA as a visual metaphor for his "emergent, cyclical" model because it showed the links between two interdependent strands. Because the parallel strands of DNA do not depict the expansion of conceptual space that occurs along the developmental track, we converted to a Spiral vortex which better reflects this emergence of human systems as they evolve through levels of increasing complexity. In fact, many of the original

Graves drawings rely on just this form so it is quite in line with his thinking. Each upward turn of the Spiral marks the awakening of a more elaborated version on top of what already exists.

Well, once you start thinking "like a Gravesian," you will find this point of view has the power and precision to deal with people and social forces of all kinds, from hostile warlords and virulent -ism's to the relief agencies caring for their victims and peace-keepers befuddled by the mess. Remember that the same Gravesian principles of Spiral Dynamics apply to a single person, an organization, or an entire society. Since the model describes human nature in a universal sense rather than through personality types or racial, gender, and ethnic traits, it provides a common language for grappling with both local and global problems. It offers a unifying framework that makes genuinely holistic thinking and actions possible. That was the way Graves thought - how does everything connect to everything else? It is in making connections - what system(s) fit with whom, doing what, when? - that Spiral Dynamics offers a next tier of explanatory power.

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