Training Mental Complexity and Ethics at MAPLE

(If You Don't Want to Grow Stay Far Away)

"There is a type of constructive nonviolent tension that is necessary for growth. Just as Socrates felt that it was necessary to create a tension in the mind so that individuals could rise from the bondage of myths and half-truths to the unfettered realm of creative analysis and objective appraisal, we must see the need of having nonviolent gadflies to create the kind of tension in society that will help men to rise from the dark depths of prejudice and racism to the majestic heights of understanding and brotherhood."
- Martin Luther King Jr., Letter From Birmingham City Jail

Why Does MAPLE Exist?
A Context for Change

The training provided at MAPLE **keeps residents at the developmental edge** of their current skills and capacity for understanding. **This inevitably results in growth**. It is frequently uncomfortable, challenging in myriad undesirable ways, and not for the faint of heart. Residents don't hesitate to mention that it is also **a deeply worthwhile, life-affirming, and transformative experience** that alters the course of their lives for the better. This training builds the compassion and the confidence to discern and **live one's fullest life**.

If you were to drive to the end of Page Road in Lowell, Vermont you'd find a building sitting halfway up a hill with a picturesque pond out front (currently complete with mother duck and ducklings). Nothing out of the ordinary. Stepping into the building you'd see yet more normalcy. People walking around, tapping on laptops, folding laundry, cooking lunch, having meetings. You might start to think this was a pretty normal place. You'd be wrong.

If you arrived at a different hour, say 5am, you'd find a starkly different scene. Two arcs of cushions face the teacher and people are chanting together with an energy similar to that of a concert pit when the band plays their most famous song. You might start to think was a strange place. You'd still be wrong. But you'd be less wrong.

At MAPLE we begin to discover that being wrong feels a lot like being right until we encounter something that changes our minds. And at MAPLE changing our minds is central to the work of the organization. We strive to grow such that more often, more quickly, more accurately, and more compassionately we can directly encounter and respond to the challenges at hand.

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Now, you may be getting the sense that this is a different type of "changing one's mind" than planning to go hiking but deciding instead to relax at home with a book. You'd be right. MAPLE's multi-faceted training develops the mind in a specific fashion, an aspect of which can be described as *mental complexity*. Mental complexity refers to the way that our minds construct and understand reality. Over time our minds can become "more expansive, less distorted, less egocentric, and less reactive,'' as psychologist Robert Kegan explains. Mental complexity is positively correlated with leadership effectiveness and the ability to navigate environments characterized by volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity (or VUCA) that are becoming increasingly common in our global age.

> *"Mental complexity refers to the way we*
> *construct and understand reality. It can become*
> *more expansive, less distorted, less egocentric,*
> *and less reactive over time."*
> *-   Robert Kegan, Phd*

This matters because as a society, we are currently facing a number of serious, complex, seemingly intractable, and interrelated issues our old systems, policies, and ways of thinking are ill-equipped to address. This is a crisis of complexity. Globally, these problems include climate change, social inequality, rapid biodiversity loss, and economic instability. Domestically, the loneliness crisis and opioid epidemic are pointing to deeper, nonmaterial social and cultural struggles. The cultural narratives guiding our lives are leading not just to peak levels of anxiety and depression, but increasingly, to global devastation.

It's essential to stem the tide of these issues. As Albert Einstein notes, "**We cannot solve our problems with the same level of thinking that created them.**" Our world is increasingly in need of leaders who recognize the interconnected nature of these problems and are able to craft effective and ethical solutions. This means we need to start thinking about these issues, and our world, in a fundamentally different way. In other words, **we need a large-scale developmental shift in mental complexity**. MAPLE is a carefully cultivated practice space designed to level up the mind that created these problems. This is done by developing the capacity, skills, and confidence to effectively and ethically navigate our own minds and the complexity of our world today, making us capable of truly addressing the critical issues we are facing.

The ability to see from one's own and from others' perspectives, choose among them wisely, and drop them when needed enables a range of consideration usually absent from critical conversations around global issues. As we learn to hold in mind the big picture of these issues, act with generosity and humility, and exercise power with compassion, we become capable of seeing past narrow interests to what is really at stake. We learn to hold seeming paradoxes so that a new way of thinking can come forward.

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What Brings People to MAPLE?
A Cultural Story

An early insight that compels people to come MAPLE (or occurs as a result of time spent here) is that our culture installed in us a narrative and a set of values that are governing the vast majority of our preferences, ideas, and behaviors. Basically, we are operating by values and beliefs chosen for us by our social environment. This realization can breed passive or active support for those very values as we strive to moderate cognitive dissonance. If this realization is accompanied by a sense that the way we've been seeing things and living is not making us happy in the way it promised it would, the tension and suspicion often grows. We begin to question those values are truly benefiting us, the people we know, and the world at large. As one resident puts it:

"What you realize, even if you do just one retreat, is the degree to which you have been colonized by ways of thinking and understanding that have been installed in you by the world."

We are told that to be happy, we need a good job, good relationships, and good health. Some of us prematurely suspect that this won't actually afford us true happiness. Some of us try it to the best of our ability and find that it doesn't suffice. Another resident comments on this experience:

"The narrative that pulled me out of here was largely installed by the culture. I thought, maybe I just haven't tried to do the whole job things well enough. I made a whole plan, I got a good job with cool people that paid well and I could do online, I got a girlfriend, I moved to [exactly where I wanted to live]. That was the dying gasp; I was doing all the things that are supposed to make you happy, and yet, something was still missing."

What often happens next is we start looking around for other options. Maybe we find a few people who seem to be doing something different, or we join a few groups doing things that are outside our comfort zone. We start going to yoga, we try out meditation, take up a new hobby, and seek out experiences that feel a little more wholesome. We generally look for a different, ready-made option. Perhaps one of those options is MAPLE.

These new communities can have great benefit. They may help us change our lifestyles in ways we couldn't on our own. Maybe we start going to yoga every week, find that it boosts our health and happiness, and we get a taste of a more satisfying life. We find various ways to supplement our lifestyle. For some of us this will be enough. But for others among us, there is a growing sense that the piecemeal supplementation of our current

lifestyle isn't going to cut it; we need to make space for deeper change. That's when MAPLE starts to look like a really solid bet. One resident describes their experience thusly:

"I had a lot of questions that our culture dismissed. Soryu (the head teacher at MAPLE) affirmed that these questions are important and lives these questions. Before coming to MAPLE, I was seeing how almost everything is based on selfishness, and I kept getting feedback from society and my family and everyone around me that basically said, 'Don't worry about those things, that's a waste of time.' Here [at MAPLE] those things are extremely important. We ask, are we being selfish? Are we being compassionate? Is this culture our best bet? How can we find true, deep happiness? To see someone actually live in accordance with their values, like Soryu does, is inspiring and affirming."

Occasionally we meet people who throw a wrench into the cogs of our rules about what we are capable of individually and collectively. Soryu often does this for people; current and former residents also seem to have this effect on others. People who find their way to MAPLE for short or long periods often learn about MAPLE through current or former residents and are drawn to a sense of presence and realness about them. One current resident describes being inspired to train at MAPLE after meeting a resident:

"Wow, this person is for real. There's a presence about them that is remarkable, that stands out. They're living their lives in a way that just seems different; they're more at peace with themselves and the world. There's a kindness, a compassion, a presence to them."

Seeing these qualities in someone who seems a lot like us makes it harder to ignore the quiet desperation and unanswered questions we often find below the surface of our own lives.

Understanding Mental Complexity:
A Brief Framework

What does developing mental complexity look like? Key to understanding this concept is that **the way we construct reality informs what we understand to be the Truth of "the way things are"**. We tend to identify with our construction of reality, as we look at the world through a certain set of glasses that we don't realize we are wearing–our lenses start to seem inherent to who we are. Robert Kegan describes the developmental shifts in lens that occur as we mature.

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Let's start out with the developments of childhood as an starting point for understanding adult development. When very young, children are governed by (or identified with) their impulses. The experience of impulses and feelings are True and constitute "the way things are"; they are the primary lens. As they grow, impulses and feelings start to become things that can be moderated in service of different needs and desires. Children learn to control their impulses to varying degrees; the impulse not to finish the broccoli can be transcended in service of the desire to have dessert. A teenager's impulse not to do chores can be transcended in service of the desire to get allowance money. In each developmental shift, individuals become capable of exercising choice among options in an area that previously was seen as the inalterable Truth of "the way things are". Identity is continuously constructed based on a sense of one's needs and desires.

The transition to adulthood marks a developmental shift in which the social environment and relationships therein are adopted as the lens for constructing reality, and become what primarily identify with. An individual's sense of their needs and desires becomes mutable based on group norms and values. In this shift, they become the views and ideals they see around them, and if someone says something negative about their group, they become defensive because their sense of identity has become tied to the group. If someone criticizes a view of their group, they feel as though they personally have been criticized. They are at the mercy of their social environment, and they hold its values to be what is ultimately True.

About one third of adults experience an additional shift in mental complexity. This enables them to develop an internal seat of judgment separate from the beliefs and values of those around them (and may relate to mid-life crises, as individuals push back against the values and ideals they adopted based on social norms). This is an important indicator that mental complexity can, but does not necessarily, continue to develop through adulthood, a claim that has been verified over the past few decades by research in the fields of adult developmental psychology and neuroplasticity. To get a better grasp of mental complexity and look at MAPLE's role in facilitating developmental shifts, let's take a quick look at the levels of adult development as conceived by psychologist and researcher Robert Kegan.

Kegan's model lays out five developmental stages that describe qualitatively different ways of making sense of reality. Each stage uses a fundamentally different lens to see the world, and bases their identity on this lens. We'll skip over the first two stages, as 87% of Westerners complete them by the end of adolescence; they are characterized by impulsive and self-centered behavior most commonly seen among children and teenagers, as in the earlier examples. The three primary stages seen in adulthood are the *socialized mind*, the *self-authoring mind*, and the *self-transforming mind*. Let's take a look at the perspectives and tenets embodied at each stage.

Stage Three: *The Socialized Mind.*
- Lens: interpersonal relationships
- "My family, tribe, or culture defines my needs and preferences."
- Individuals look to their group to inform how they should act and what they should value.

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- Individuals are identified with the beliefs and values of their family/society/culture.
- The central fear is exclusion from the group.

Stage Four: *The Self-Authoring Mind.*
- Lens: self-authorship, identity, and ideology
- *"*My identity and ideology, separate from what others believe or think, define my interpersonal relationships."
- Individuals show greater independence, develop a seat of internal judgment distinct from the views of individuals in their social environment.
- Individuals are identified with their own sense of self-authorship and personal ideology, which govern their relationships
- The central fear is that they might fail to meet their own goals or standards, or lose control over their lives

Stage Five: *The Self-Transforming Mind.*
- Lens: the dialectic between ideologies
- "A continuous, dynamic sense of self-transformation defines my identity, role, or ideology in a given situation."
- The sense of self is based on the "dialectic between ideologies" (in Kegan's words), and ongoingly co-created with reality
- Notably distinct from the previous stage, the sense of self is untethered by a particular identity or role, and instead formed through the navigation of various identities, roles, and interactions with others.

A mismatch between individual capacity and environmental demands can create a lot of suffering when people don't have the resources or support to rise to those expectations. That, precisely, is what MAPLE is all about; it is an environment that supports individuals in dedicating themselves to facilitating a developmental shift in their lives for the benefit of all.

Growth at MAPLE: Developmental Shifts
The What, Why, and How of Changing Minds

What Developmental Shifts Are Taking Place?
The training provided for residents of MAPLE serves to challenge individuals at the developmental edge of their capacities. There's a common sentiment that it is harder to stay the same than it is to grow a MAPLE, and the particular ways individuals grow can be seen through the two stage shifts currently possible in adulthood. These shifts are the ones necessary in order to grow leaders equipped to face today's complex problems.
The first major shift during adulthood is from the socialized mind (Stage Three) to the self-authoring mind (Stage Four). This means transitioning from an

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identity based on social and cultural norms to developing an inner compass that enables greater choice around which socio-cultural values are taken on. In an ethical frame, the self-authoring mind can be identified by the development of conscience to the degree that someone won't stand by silently if they see a wrong being committed, even if others in their group are consenting to its occurrence. In this stage, individuals are identified with their ability to put down and pick up values in the larger cultural context, the sense of the identity they've created for themselves, and the ideology that has issued from that.

The downside of the socialized mind is that cultural narratives are adopted as Truth and followed implicitly or explicitly without further consideration. Individuals may know exactly what the cultural story is on a conscious, explicit level and still be entirely beholden to it if they decide that it is the Truth, and then they will actively, rather than passively, perpetuate that narrative. Alternatively, many individuals passively live cultural values as implicit Truths. These very narratives often perpetuate the suffering and destruction in the world and are baked into an idea about "the way things are".

In order to transition from the socialized mind to the self-authoring mind, we need to cultivate the capacity to look directly at these narratives and beliefs that are held so dear and see how they construct reality and behavior both personally and culturally. To be able to tell a story that creates a peaceful and compassionate culture we need to be able to see the impact of the story we are currently living by and the choice available to us in regard to the stories and beliefs we adopt.

The shift from a socialized to self-authoring mind enables us to act with greater integrity, because we become willing to hold to what we know is right, even if it means we'll be in conflict with those around us, or need to disagree with others. **This means that we become able and willing to stand alone in doing what is right**, even when those we might call our "tribe" are standing together in doing what we know is wrong. We are able to stand by our values, even when they conflict with the values others around us are holding, and even when it comes at the risk of exclusion from social groups we deeply care about and are part of. In the practice at MAPLE, we are expected to do what we know most deeply to be right and for the benefit of all, even if others disagree. This, above anything else, is cultivated and rewarded.

The second shift possible during adulthood is from the self-authoring mind (Stage Four) to the self-transforming mind (Stage Five). In this shift an individual's sense of identity and ideology become dynamic and flexible, which enables them to take on roles and modes of interacting that are most contextually effective and appropriate. They are no longer beholden to specific identities and ideologies and gain the capacity to both try on and put aside various lenses and ways of seeing.

The stage change to a self-transforming mind is incredibly elusive: fewer than 1% of adults have reached this level. Instrumental for facilitating this shift is to have revealed to us the limitations and distortions our mind creates when it clings to beliefs, which is exactly what the ecology of practices as MAPLE serves to accomplish. There is evidence of a movement towards this stage in interviews among residents who describe an increasing sense of fluidity of view, participation, and identity achieved through their practice. There is an increasing sense of capacity to respond dynamically to events in a flowing and adaptive way. One resident describes this as a "fresh, adaptable, pivoting way of approaching any situation. Then you can use whatever tools you have in your toolbelt to

deal with it, to act skillfully, lovingly." The skill of presence cultivated in meditation enables us to be in the here and now, rather than staying stuck on our ideas about reality is or should be.

Why Are These Developmental Shifts Important?

With each shift in mental complexity we can look directly at our previous lens. In doing so, the possibility of choice and freedom around our use of that lens emerges. If we choose to make use of this choice point, we can learn to adapt in healthy and effective ways to the challenges we face throughout our lives, releasing limiting beliefs while cultivating those that enable compassion and wisdom. These shifts are vital because they enables qualitatively different relationships among people. In the shift from a socialized to self-authoring mind we become capable of caring deeply about others who hold ideologies that differ from, and even conflict with, our own. We cease to demand that others believe what we believe, we foster peaceful coexistence across conflicting ideologies, and we extend our compassion far beyond the ideas in our own or others' heads. Until we achieve this we will live by the assumptions of our implicit narratives and the conflicts their rigidity creates.

How Do Developmental Shifts Occur?

The most effective way to transition from the socialized mind to the self-authoring mind is to live in an environment where someone else isn't giving you all the answers or providing you with all the solutions. Ideally, the environment and individuals therein express a faith that in time you will be able to find or devise for yourself the necessary answers. This manifests in various ways at MAPLE as residents learn to lead in the face of ambiguity without allowing them to forget the standard of compassion, ethics, and responsibility to which the are beholden.

Residents rotate through roles at the monastery and nonprofit, which necessitates and enables a consideration of multiple perspectives. Even as residents are pushed to act from a personal seat of judgment, an acknowledgement of the formal roles that exist and a respect for the functionality of hierarchy allows effective leadership without implying superiority or inferiority.

Additionally, adopting the values and ethical standards upheld at MAPLE often conflicts with people's existing cultural norms. This dissonance can make explicit formerly implicit assumptions, which makes possible closer examination. For example, we strive to harness despair and hopelessness for growth and change, as opposed to shaming and "fixing" them. **Society says, if there isn't a solution, we should ignore the problem, just forget it. At MAPLE we say, we will face this. We will find out if there is or isn't a solution.** We will keep going until we know for sure if there is a way out.

While there is no skipping steps, MAPLE facilitates movement towards the self-authoring mind (Stage Four) by developing of a personal seat of judgment separate from socially- and culturally-installed values while simultaneously hedging against its downsides. **Ethical guidelines upheld in community combined with practices of awakening such as meditation and circling help loosen the self-righteous sense of false autonomy that befalls self-authoring thinking.** This enables us to see our identity and beliefs as constructions rather than inherent and immutable characteristics, which paves the way towards the self-transforming mind. In this way we become capable of

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making the cognitive leap to the self-transforming mind, flexibly adapting to reality even when it conflicts with our ideas about it, which enables us to deal more effectively with the challenges we face in each moment.

What Residents Learn at MAPLE:
The Freedom to Choose

"Being here for two years, being around Soryu, weakened the culturally-installed self-view enough that when I left, I encountered all this stuff about environmental and societal collapse and it could puncture me quite deeply. This allowed me to let go of the old cultural story I was holding and open to this new identity. There was another part of me ascending into power that was about doing what I feel deeply to be right and true, regardless of whether I think that's going to make me happy. And that actually leads to much more happiness, but the reason I'm doing it is not because it makes me happy. When I was deciding if I was going to come back to MAPLE to be a resident again, the part of me that is very high integrity had a lot more power and clarity than the cultural narratives that had taken me away from MAPLE the first time."

MAPLE is a place where, automatically, your lifestyle will be overhauled and your most fundamental assumptions questioned. One resident comments, **"It offers a sort of competitive other culture, and hopefully more and more people want to be a part of it."** All you need to do is get yourself there, and keep yourself from leaving. You'll be waking up at (or before) the crack of dawn 6 days a week to chant and meditate, whether you like it or not. You'll be given leadership roles, whether you like it or not. You'll be held accountable for your actions and their impacts, whether you like it or not. This experience of growing and learning within a supportive community is both transformative and immensely challenging.

At some point, whether you like it or not (some people legitimately like it, and others legitimately do not), you must begin to make decisions based on an internal sense of conscience. You will have to chose when options are nebulous based on your best guess or sense of the benefit to all. This is an essential skill for effective change agents. It won't suffice to lean on others for answers or solutions; other people have their own work to do in this world, and you yours. One resident speaks to this point:

"Being put in situations that required my leadership had me notice all the small and large ways that I shift responsibility onto others, and here, people demand that you take responsibility, they don't let you shift it off onto them."

In many places, others will be happy to tell you what you should do and how you should do it. At MAPLE, you become truly responsible for your intended and unintended

actions. A resident notes, **"There are so many different ways you can negate that responsibility. Saying, "No, someone else can do that, someone else has always done that."** There's a bottom line here: get it done. Others won't just absorb the responsibility you try to pawn off. As a result growth deepens and we become more capable and confident relying on our conscience. We become less beholden to the default values and norms around us. We can hold our own perspectives up to the light alongside others' and examine them both without automatically rejecting or accepting either.

One resident describes this process as "unlayering what society has told me is appropriate or acceptable, and ceasing to function from that place. Instead, **we question how the world works, and learn to access a place within that is more real than automatically thinking 'this is right' or 'this is wrong'** based on what we've been taught." This task is not necessarily straightforward. Many residents voice the difficulty:

<p style="text-align: center; color: green;">**"It would be a lot easier if it were just like, 'Here's what you should believe.'"**</p>

It's easier to use the work someone else has done and not develop one's own sense of judgment and discernment. And yet, if we are to become wise, compassionate leaders we must learn to act responsibly and ethically even when, especially when, those around us are not. Leadership means taking on the right challenges based on an understanding that transcends what we might want in a given moment. Sometimes this is as big as shifting political tides to counteract global ills. Sometimes this is as small as a loving hand on the shoulder of someone who is struggling. Each action becomes deeply important when we strive to live with integrity through the wisdom of our conscience.

One resident speaks to the freedom and responsibility inherent to becoming a true leader: **"You'll be constantly faced with decisions you can't find the answer to anywhere but in yourself, only you can answer that question. A real leader is not only prepared, but invigorated by answering that kind of question, and answering it well."** MAPLE strives to prepare residents for the challenges they will face as leaders by demanding both adherence to and deep questioning of the training and their sense of what is right. It creates a strong structure within which deep weaknesses can emerge and be dealt with directly, with the tools and resources to find the way through. You get to test for yourself what happens when you start to drop the assumptions and stories that have run your life and choose to look directly at reality. To the extent that you are willing to take a good, honest look at your perspectives and motivations in each moment, side by side with your goals and aspirations, you will grow.

<p style="text-align: center; color: green;">**"It's amazing to see another option of how to live. It's free, in terms of doing what is of greatest benefit to all of life. There are no rules besides that, and that could mean anything in each moment. It opens the door to things that would normally be considered crazy, but that are not crazy. They're actually what is best for others, yourself, and the world."**</p>

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Putting the Pieces Together:
Life at MAPLE

Through meditation we learn to see through our construction of the world to glimpse a reality less fettered by our ideas about it. This increases our capacity to look directly at the lenses we use to understand the world. It is this shift, taking our previously invisible filters and looking directly at them, that enables increases in mental complexity. **By doing this practice in a community built on rigorous ethical standards we learn to lead with integrity by being held accountable for our actions.** Our peers will demand that we soften our rough edges and work on our negative patterns so that we can lead more effectively, and this will support us in growing through a reconciliation of the emotional and intellectual beliefs feeding our actions.

To become capable of discerning our implicit, deeply held beliefs takes work. It takes seeing the patterns playing out, increasing our capacity for attention, and gaining the strength to exercise choice in each moment. **It is something of a superhuman feat to use the mind to see itself; it allows us to drop the assumptions and ideas creating and sustaining suffering and global destruction.** When we grow this muscle for self-reflection and a developing a wider perspective we become capable of finding ways of dealing with the pride, selfishness, and "groupishness" which lead us to defend our "selves" at the expense of "others". It's necessary to move beyond warring ideologies to find a way of living in relation to each other and the environment that is based in compassion rather than greed and hatred.
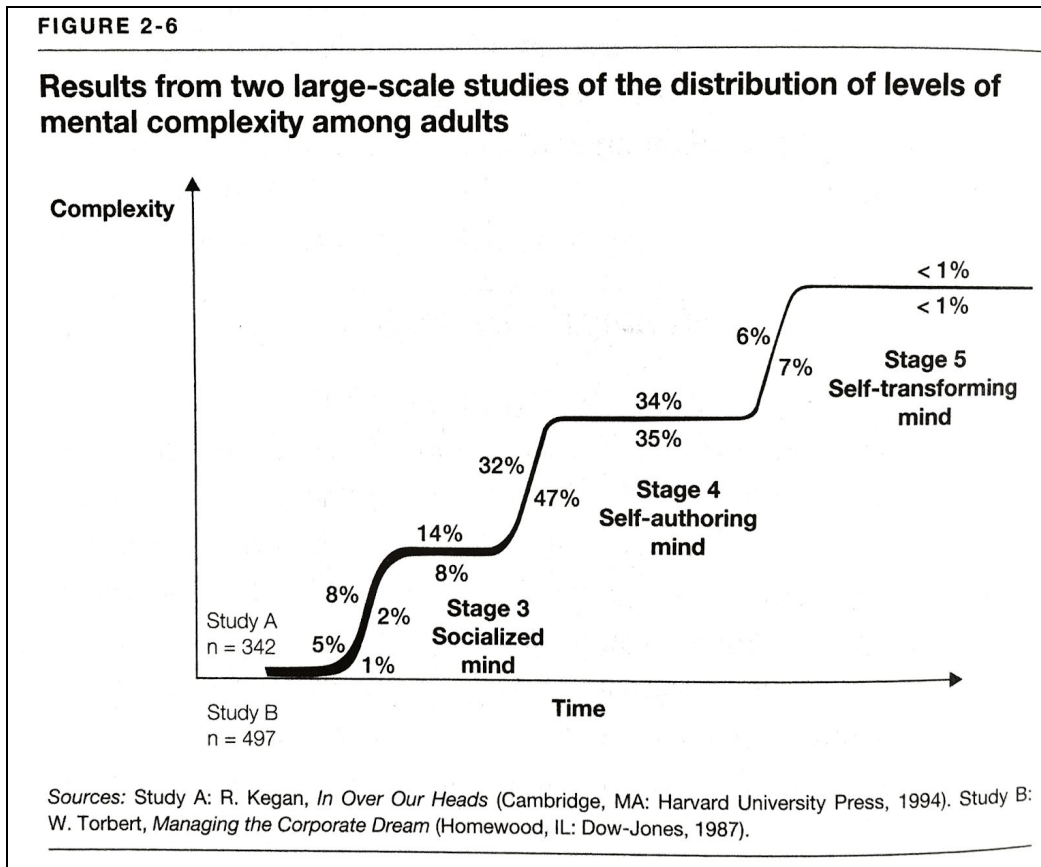
We create a practice space and apply what we learn to life until there is no difference between practice and life. This takes great effort, is deeply fortified by the support of a community, and has proven to be deeply worthwhile for a great many. The capacity to effectively lead the way through complex problems without succumbing to greater or lesser evils is becoming increasingly important as our society evolves. There is time before the end to find the story that never ends, threading a world of hope through the eye of truth into the belly of possibility.

"Through practicing responsibility, we learn to use our gifts to be of service to the world. Through practicing awakening we learn to surrender and let go of everything so that we can meet reality exactly as it is. And through leadership we learn to make decisions and take action when no one knows what the right answer is."
- Peter Park

If you're up for the challenge or would like to support our efforts,
don't hesitate to reach out. We'd love to talk.

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Distribution of Levels of Mental Complexity Among Adults

FIGURE 2-6

Results from two large-scale studies of the distribution of levels of mental complexity among adults

Complexity

< 1%
< 1%

6%

7%

**Stage 5
Self-transforming
mind**

34%

35%

**Stage 4
Self-authoring
mind**

32%

47%

14%

8%

8%

2%

**Stage 3
Socialized
mind**

Study A
n = 342

5%

1%

Study B
n = 497

Time

Sources: Study A: R. Kegan, *In Over Our Heads* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994). Study B: W. Torbert, *Managing the Corporate Dream* (Homewood, IL: Dow-Jones, 1987).

Current estimates indicate that 46% of adults are at Stage 3, 41% at Stage 4, and <1% at Stage 5. Although the stages are discrete, an individual's behavior may show evidence of different levels in different contexts, so these numbers indicate the primary level individuals demonstrate. Additionally, each stage retains the ability to function from any previous stage, but earlier stages cannot choose to function from later stages.

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