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Big Assumptions: The Sequel

“The capacity to see that we have a personal history that inclines or directs us—that our concrete experience can be tied to generalizable motives, patterns, or themes—demands the third order of consciousness.”
- Kegan (1994, p.130)

In this second “leg” of my transformational journey from corporate leader to academic hopeful, I will first revisit the key discoveries of my previous essay using the Frames of Bolman and Deal (2008) and the Big Assumptions that are part of the Seven Languages of Kegan & Lahey (2001). Our focus will then turn to Kegan (1994) and how his Orders of Consciousness have caused me to revisit my own Big Assumptions, re-examine my subjective vs. objective nature, and question the level of embeddedness with which I historically embrace life.

A Trip Down Memory Lane

In essay #1, the reader was introduced to my dilemma: Making the transformation from the corporate world, where I had been reasonably successful, to the academic world where I had no history aside from being a PhD student. There were several reasons for this career-changing shift, the most notable coming from Bateson (1999):

“Today the purposes of consciousness are implemented by more and more effective machinery, transportation systems, airplanes, weaponry, medicine, pesticides, and so forth. Conscious purpose is now empowered to upset the balances of a body, of society, and of the biological world around us” (p. 440).

I reminded the reader that Bateson was describing the increasing consumption of resources (ecological, human) that fail to balance the very systems it takes from. In my view, the differences between the corporate world and the academy were: 1) The way they view reproduction, and 2) Their product. At least in the academy, the product is a renewable resource.

In my previous essay we also visited the Four-Frame Model of Bolman & Deal (2008) that described how people tend to view the world around them. These frames are a “mental model—a set of ideas and assumptions”

(p.11) that create that first, immediate impression of how we view a situation, and sets the tone for how we will respond. It appeared my world view was crafted through two primary lenses: Structural and Human Resource.

Someone who sees situations through a primarily *structural* frame will have a respect for organizational structure, believing that organizations act as machines – systems for the efficient and effective attainment of rational goals, using the diverse efforts of it's people to optimize technology while minimizing deficiencies through analysis.

The *human resource* frame assumes that organizations and people need each other: organizations need talent and ideas and people need the place to develop to their fullest potential while pursuing a cause they can believe in. This mutual reciprocity enables both individual and organization to move forward without taking advantage of the other. In the end, both succeed.

Of course the Big Assumptions created the “cliff-hanger” as we came to the close of my previous work. Kegan and Lahey (2001) describe the Big Assumptions as those beliefs or perceptions that *have us*. They describe these assumptions as “having their roots in something “long before people became grown ups.” In my own life, my family history of abuse and the abandonment of my father when I was young contributed to those Big Assumptions that *had me*:

- I fear there will be no place of employment for me and I will either have to do something I don't want to do or am not passionate about, just to survive (*I'm not worthy and survival is all I know*)
- I will have taken a huge risk that won't pan out and I will be saddled with student loan debt and not enough income to repay them
- I won't be able to make enough money in the years I have left to secure a comfortable living in my senior years

Now that I understood how I arrived at this point, I could build a relationship with it by understanding its history. That relationship is the focus of the second “leg” of our journey.

Big Assumptions: The Sequel

Revisiting Column-Work

Shortly after completing my first essay, I was introduced to the four-column worksheet based on the Kegan and Lahey languages. The preface by Clarke for the worksheet told me my self-examination was far from over:

“We have difficulty moving beyond these sorts of pleasantly vague aphorisms to create substantive, sustainable change in ourselves and in our organizations. However, Kegan and Lahey’s *Seven Transformative Languages* provide us with the means for accomplishing the change we want to see by working on ourselves to *be* that change. But – and this is the hard part – *we have to be relentlessly focused and brutally honest with ourselves if we are to have any chance of success* [emphasis mine - damn].

The difficulty is in moving from the comfort of abstractions and distant evils to the messy agitations and personal discomforts of the immediate details of everyday life. And yet, that’s all there is. That is life. If we want to accomplish our goals we must learn to work with individuals who we see every day. This activity is designed to nudge you toward that goal. Pick an individual whose daily behavior presents you with difficulty, whose presence is an irritation to your sense of well being. Work through the columns below using insights gained from K&L. Remember Kegan’s refrain (and reframe): What has this person been sent here to teach me?”

Since I am not employed at the moment, I asked my partner Michael if he would be willing to use this four-column with me. We had been together for a number of months – long enough for the “honeymoon” phase of our relationship to be over and for us to have gotten on each others nerves in one area or another. In the interest of space, my focus here will be on Michael’s problem *with me*, and how the columns caused me to have to revisit those Big Assumptions and how my personal history continues to haunt me.

1. **Complaint** – *What did she do?*

Debe seems to overload herself and wants to juggle school, home projects and a job when Michael has provided her with the ability not to have to work full time

2. **Deconstructive Criticism** - *What was s/he thinking? How does s/he understand the structural, symbolic, interpersonal, political realities of life?*

Debe is naturally better at juggling multiple priorities and she isn't trying to overload herself as much as she is trying to be responsible and be concerned with having the money to pay back student loans and put money aside for retirement.

3. **Deconstructive Criticism** - *What are his/her primary commitments and core values? What are the pressing goals that arise as a result?*

Debe core values (part of her Big Assumptions) is that nothing lasts forever and she isn't completely confident that the current situation will be long term and she has also been through two major layoffs. Her core commitment is survival

4. **On-going Regard** - *What can you actually say to him/her that conveys your honest assessment of his/her contributions to your shared goals?*

Debe is honest and open and has enabled Michael to come out of his shell and let some of his guard down (Michael had a very difficult time with this due to his own Big Assumptions and difficult with sharing personal feelings. This would have been easier if he were talking to a co-worker and been able to keep his personal feelings separate).

5. **Public Agreement** - *What specific proposal can you make to him/her for collaborative effort that both of you can support?*

Debe and Michael agreed that she will be welcome to continue to "talk with the outside the head voice" about what balls she is juggling but if a particular item comes up often enough to create a concern in Michael about Debe being overloaded, Michael has agreed to voice that concern.

This column exercise was extremely helpful for three reasons:

- It showed me how much the fear and insecurity of my childhood still played into my thinking. Column three said it best: My core commitment was for survival.
- I saw how much Michael had Big Assumptions of his own. He was as much a victim of his losing his father at the age of six as I was in my own situation.
- Using the four-column exercise made things *objective*. There were clear steps to take, and order of progression, and an end result that was an agreement.

Michael and I have used this exercise again since that first time, and the words of Kegan and Lahey ring true in my mind: You can't have a violation without a prior agreement. Now, the first thing I ask myself when there is a conflict is, "Did we have a previous agreement about this situation, or will I be embedding myself into a position that has no basis?" As much as this new order of thinking will be important as I approach the end of my academic program, the Big Assumptions were still looming large and made me realize how much they overshadowed my interpersonal relationships.

The Evolving Self

Kegan (1994) examines the demands that modern life make on us, our relationships, our ability to resolve conflict, and the successful mastery of our own life journey. He describes indicators of increasing orders of conscious ability (see figure 1):

The Evolving Self			
	Independent Elements (<i>first-order conscious ability</i>)	Durable Category (<i>second-order conscious ability</i>)	Cross Categorical Knowing (<i>third-order conscious ability</i>)
Logical-Cognitive	<i>Can:</i> Recognize that objects exist independent of own sensing of them. <i>Cannot:</i> Distinguish own perception of an object from the actual properties of the object	<i>Can:</i> Grant to objects their own properties irrespective of one's perceptions; can construct a narrative sequence and timeline. <i>Cannot:</i> Reason abstractly, discern	<i>Can:</i> Reason abstractly; form negative classes; see relationships as simultaneously reciprocal. <i>Cannot:</i> Systematically produce all possible combinations of

		overall patterns, form hypotheses.	relations; test hypotheses.
Social-Cognitive	<p><i>Can:</i> Recognize that persons exist separate from oneself.</p> <p><i>Cannot:</i> Recognize that other persons have their own purposes and viewpoint independent of oneself.</p>	<p><i>Can:</i> Construct own point of view and grant others their distinct point of view; role-play; manipulate others on behalf of own goals.</p> <p><i>Cannot:</i> Take own point of view and another's simultaneously; maintain interpersonal relationships.</p>	<p><i>Can:</i> Be aware of shared feelings, agreements, and expectations that take primacy over individual interests.</p> <p><i>Cannot:</i> Construct a generalized system regulative of interpersonal relationships and relationships between relationships.</p>
Intrapersonal-Affective	<p><i>Can:</i> Distinguish between inner sensation and outside stimulation.</p> <p><i>Cannot:</i> Distinguish one's impulses from oneself, that is, is embedded in or driven by one's impulses.</p>	<p><i>Can:</i> Drive, regulate, or organize impulses to produce enduring dispositions and identify qualities of self (identity formation).</p> <p><i>Cannot:</i> Internally coordinate more than one point of view; distinguish one's need from oneself; identify enduring qualities of the self according to inner psychological manifestations.</p>	<p><i>Can:</i> Internalize another's point of view in what becomes the co-construction of personal experience, enabling deep relationships.</p> <p><i>Cannot:</i> Organize own states or internal parts of self into systematic whole; distinguish self from one's relationship; see the self as the author of one's inner psychological life.</p>

Figure 1: Three Principles of Meaning Organization, from *In Over Our Heads*, Kegan (1994).

In reference to the Evolving Self, Kegan says:

“ ...the different principles of mental organization are intimately related to each other. They are not just different ways of knowing, each with its preferred season. One does not simply replace the other, nor is the relation merely additive or cumulative, an accretion of skills. Rather, the relation is transformative, qualitative, and incorporative. Each successive principle subsumes or encompasses the prior principle. *That which was a subject becomes the object to the next principle.* The new principle is a higher order principle (more complex, more inclusive) that makes the prior principle into an element or tool of its system.”

As I reviewed the columns of the chart, it occurred to me that some of the issues I described in my Big Assumptions exercise (Kegan & Lahey, 2008), were reflected in this chart. What I noticed was that many of the *adults* I know (including myself) have not progressed past some of the stages listed here (my own challenges are in bold), which are supposed to represent a transformation into adolescence. Why is that?

As I began to read *In Over Our Heads*, it occurred to me that what Kegan is describing is a *normal* transformation into adolescence (whatever we define as normal). This seemingly normal rite of passage from seeing oneself as subject to that of object makes sense as part of a healthy progression into adulthood. But what happens when that progression isn't healthy, or is punctuated by a traumatic event such as the loss of a parent, divorce, or a parent is who isn't able to act as an example? Can we expect children who are part of these scenarios to progress into adolescence at the same rate, or is it possible they can reach adulthood and have never mastered some of these essential stages?

Consciousness and Identity

In the research I am doing on identity, these seeds are planted early in a child's life. Mead and Vygotsky talk about meaning-making and the identity of self, and Stryker and others talk about how we then translate that identity into a social identity through interactions. For a healthy identity to be cultivated, our own self-image is then affirmed by those whose feedback we consider valuable. If those valued opinions give us feedback that makes us believe we are either willfully misbehaving or emotionally ill, how long will it take before we are convinced they are correct and we adopt that identity as our own?

“What sort of thing is it that adults expect of adolescents? If we think of these expectations as primarily about behavior, then the adolescent who cannot meet them will be seen as misbehaving or

incompetent, someone who will not or cannot do what he or she should. If we think of these expectations as primarily about feelings, then the adolescent who cannot meet them will be seen as disturbed or emotionally ill. The problem with both these ways of thinking is that, unwittingly, they project onto the adolescent a way of knowing that is just like that of an adolescent who is meeting the expectations, except that the disappointing adolescent is somehow running this mind incompletely, or the mind is somehow disturbed. As a result, the disappointing adolescent is seen as a loser, an incompetent person, and one who, by reason of stubbornness, inability, or illness, is unable to come through for us, evoking our pity or hostility”(p. 37-38).

In my own case I was a latch-key kid; the oldest of a single parent. I displayed a lot of maturity for a kid my age (and was physically taller than most by the time I was 10). My mother assumed I could watch my sister and brother after school in an effort to save babysitting costs. This isn't a statement about my mother's parenting skills – how many parents today are doing this because both parents (or a single parent) need to work in order to provide for their family? The point I am making is that I was placed in a situation to be the “adult” in the household long before I was mentally or emotionally capable of that kind of responsibility but because I *seemed* mature, this was the role I was given.

Not only was I robbed of the mentoring I should have had by an adult, I was in a role of “challenge without adequate support,” a situation Kegan calls toxic and promoting defensiveness and constriction (p.42). I can now look back and see how these early years of my life set me up for failure but who can place blame? When I found myself in the very same situation as a single parent, I called upon my very mature 10-year-old to do some of the very same things. Thankfully, my situation was temporary but even now, there are some residual effects and she is almost thirty.

Our complex world has created a climate where the situation I was in is far more commonplace now than it was when I was growing up. How many children today are raising themselves, trying to make sense of their world without adequate support from loving (and present) adults, then are sent to school where their teacher might be the most consistent influence in their lives? What kind of pressure is then on the teacher (and the school system) to give each child the individual attention they need to thrive?

If my mother wanted me to adopt the same the same thought process she valued – the same intrinsic concern for relationships that she had - then she needed *to be there* to mentor me through that process. Instead, that

mentoring was left to whatever influence was presented: Other adults, older siblings of friends, mass media, etc. It is little wonder that when I actually reached adolescence I was (in her eyes) incorrigible. I had made my own mental meaning-making connections and had established cross-relational values that were far different than hers, This caused a constant struggle for power and caused me to leave home at sixteen.

When Third Order Isn't Enough

Kegan's explains the complexity of partnership on page 85:

"The idea here is that when we are not aware of these "stories" (our personal histories) they continue to author us, and not merely our past, but our present and future as well.

When we are unaware of these "dramas" we may unknowingly cast our spouses into roles and act with them on the stage of our relationship according to a script they have no way of understanding."

This couldn't be more true in my case. I was an East Coast Sicilian, raised with a certain sense of values, and a particular sense of family and national identity. My family had values where money was concerned, how celebrations were conducted, etc. For example, in my family Christmas Eve is a big holiday. There is eating just about from dark on, with the main course being seafood. We opened out gifts after that, and then went to Midnight Mass. It was probably the most lavish holiday of the year for us.

I married a Midwest German man, whose family was very subdued in everything. My family argued about everything - at least we spoke at a "heightened" state of discussion. My husband always thought I was yelling at him. Our first Christmas together we were invited to his parents house, where his mother put out cold cuts and potato salad. WHAT????!!!!??? I was an Italian, not a German, and the cultural and geographic differences caused us to see everything from separate perspectives. We divorced after 13 years.

I agree with Kegan's passage on page 103:

"In traditional cultures or subcultures there exists a more homogeneous fabric of value and belief, a shared sense of how the world works and how we should live in it. When we live in communities of mind as well as geography, the number of

original decisions we have to make about how we conduct our lives is dramatically smaller."

I had a sense of wanderlust even as a young child, so I left home right after high school, but I have often wondered how much differently my path would have turned out if I had stayed and married from my own culture. No regrets. If there is a way to make the path harder however, I will always find it.

"More often, such "information" communicates itself in the very fabric or ground of living. We see how we are supposed to handle this or that situation, and how we are "supposed to" is how we suppose we should as well. Handling this or that situation in the supposed ways is not merely the solving of this or that problem but the very expression of our atonement or in-tune-ment with out community" (p.104).

In the absence of this life mentoring, how is one expected to learn how to thrive, successfully raise children, be a successful partner in an intimate relationship, and generally live a happy and spiritually rooted life? If we don't have some example set for us, then we become what Kegan calls a "fish out of water" (p. 105). By the time I attained third-order consciousness, I had already had children, and been married and divorced. Still, I was embedded in a personal history that influenced my Big Assumptions.

Personal and Professional Relationships and the Fourth Order

While I may have been able to mask my insecurities in a professional setting, I was less successful in personal relationships (as described above), given the abandonment I felt with the exodus of my father at such a young age and the resulting absence of my mother as she tried to make a life for herself and her children. As a result, I have not been successful managing the roles Kegan describes (p. 107) for intimate partners:

1. Be psychologically independent of, but closely connected to, our spouses
2. Replace an idealized, romanticized approach to love and closeness with a new conception of love and closeness
3. Set limits on children, in-laws, ourselves, and extrafamilial involvements to preserve the couple
4. Support our partner's development
5. Communicate directly and fairly
6. Have an awareness of the way our personal histories incline or direct us

As someone who sees life primarily through a human resource lens, I have always been supportive of the development of the people around me (intimate partners included). In fact, it is not uncommon to point out another's assets and make suggestions as to how they might develop their "gift." In the corporate world, my ability to communicate directly was an asset; in my personal relationships it was seen as condescending. Professionally I have been seen as "aloof," maintaining a professional separation between my team and myself. In intimate relationships, I exert a far greater measure of loyalty but I expect the same in return and when I haven't received that, it has triggered that same propensity of believing I have no value.

My heart is in the right place, but my order of consciousness isn't. Kegan describes the move from the Third Order of Consciousness to the fourth as:

"The ability to thus subordinate, regulate, and indeed create (rather than be created by) our values and ideals—the ability to take those values and ideals as the object rather than the subject of our knowing—must necessarily be an expression of a fourth order of consciousness, evinced here in the mental making of an ideology or explicit system of belief" (p.91).

This is seeing life from the 30,000 foot view; it is the ability to *have an experience* without the *experience having us*. It involves what Kegan calls "values about values," and relationships to one's relationships." Hey...I'm from Jersey...what the heck does this mean?

The Fourth Order sounds like something I would expect in a manual of effective leadership. On page 154 (at the bottom) Kegan states the following:

"We are told we must come to see that "your job belongs to you," "you have some control over your work," "your job is who you are," "the most trustworthy source of authority comes from within the person," "treat the business as your own," "act on your own values," "stand for [your] own autonomy," "be conscious of, but uncontrolled by, the expectations of [your] bosses," "recognize fully that [you] are not in this job simply to seek [your] bosses' approval," and "the key to survival is not in [your] bosses' hands; it is in the quality and integrity of the work that [you] do; it is in the quality and integrity of the way [you] manage [your] relationships."

I understand this in theory. It creates a role where we have a job, but the job doesn't have us. We have a role that we are asked to fulfill, we own our work and how we develop that role and execute our work is ours to own. In practice, these things sound like seeing my job through a symbolic lens, accepting a symbolic ownership of my work and my role within the organization. This is where I see some of the professional problems I have had.

In the large corporate settings I have been in, such as Apple, the company has created a corporate culture where you are either an "insider" or an "outsider." While all the quotes in the excerpt may be found in the new employee manual, in actuality things are quite different. The culture is such that being an employee of XXXX company (in this case, Apple) becomes part of your very identity. You wear the t-shirts. You have the Apple sticker on your car. You have every gadget Apple makes in various iterations. All your friends know you work for Apple and want to take advantage of your discount. In short, the culture is such that your identity becomes fused with the company. It is no longer that you have a job...it is that your job has become part of your identity. This is not unique to Apple, but at least there it is almost cult-like. As a result you are never *not* on the job. You don't have a job because the job *always* has you.

My own awakening in my professional roles is how much I have tied my own identity to the job descriptions I have had, and how much my own sense of value has come from them. As a result, when there was conflict on the job I had a tendency to take the conflict personally, since my own identity was so embedded in what I did. It is the subject-object battle again but for some reason this passage made that more clear. The challenge I have going forward is in finding a balance – being an individual who has a job and owns her work, and being a participant in a corporate culture that keeps me an "insider."

Fourth Order and Personality

When I took the Myers-Briggs personality test, nothing came as a surprise. I am an INFJ: Introverted, Intuitive, Feeling, Judging. According to the Myers-Briggs website (<http://www.myersbriggs.org/my-mbti-personality-type/mbti-basics/the-16-mbti-types.asp#INFJ>), people with my personality seek meaning and connection in ideas, relationships, and material possessions. We want to understand what motivates people and are insightful about others and conscientious and committed to their firm values. We develop a clear vision about how best to serve the common good. We are also organized and decisive in implementing our vision.

The bigger surprise was not in the occupations what are best suited for INFJ types, such as counselors, clergy, missionaries, teachers, medical doctors, dentists, chiropractors, psychologists, psychiatrists, writers, musicians, artists, psychics, photographers, child care workers, education consultants, librarians, marketers, scientists, and social workers, *but in the order of consciousness I perceived those occupations to require*. I was not consistently performing at that level of consciousness—but why not?

As I conducted an Internet search of one of the more problematic aspects of my personality—the fear of abandonment—that feeds the “survival mode” I always seem to dwell in, I came across information on Borderline Personality Disorder. While I don’t think I have a classic case of BPD (described below) I do think I have some of the symptoms that as a child might have been more pronounced than they are now:

This disorder occurs in most by early adulthood. The unstable pattern of interacting with others has persisted for years and is usually closely related to the person’s self-image and early social interactions. The pattern is present in a variety of settings (e.g., not just at work or home) and often is accompanied by a similar lability (fluctuating back and forth, sometimes in a quick manner) in a person’s emotions and feelings. Symptoms include:

- Frantic efforts to avoid real or imagined abandonment
- A pattern of unstable and intense interpersonal relationships characterized by alternating between extremes of idealization and devaluation
- Identity disturbance: markedly and persistently unstable self-image or sense of self

I’m not acting as my own psychologist here, yet I realize that my familial experience has left some scars that may need more time to heal. If nothing else, knowing about this has helped me contextualize it and has made me more determined to move on.

Reflections

With the semester drawing to a close, and the need to have a daily dose of Kegan, Bolman & Deal, Clarke, and Bateson over, I will breathe a giant sigh of relief. Not because the reading was lengthy (it was), thought provoking (it was), or easy to digest (it wasn’t). I will be more relieved

because it will give me time to reflect on what I have read, go back and re-read, and make what I have read applicable to my life.

If I were asked, “What is the one thing you can take from this class and make a transformational change with?” I would have to respond, “The irony of it all.”

I have lived *outside* of New Jersey for over two-times the number of years I lived there as part of my family. I have lived in Colorado for half of that time, and I have lived in the home I currently occupy for a longer time frame than I have lived *anywhere* else. Yet the patterns, ways of knowing, attitudes, ways of interaction—they all point to the Sicilian kid from Jersey. How can that possibly be? I have not lived near family members, have become highly educated, have married, had children, and divorced. I have not lived within the culture that I was raised. But that culture, that family, those experiences, are as much as part of who I am as my name. And for as many good things as I can say about that cultural footprint, it has caused me to remain embedded in a particular order of consciousness. Ironically, I am confident this embeddedness has effected my personal life (and its failures) as well as my professional life.

How much change I am capable of remains to be seen. I am who I am. But as I mentioned as I began this second essay, now that I understood how I arrived to this point, I can build a relationship with it. That step begins my next Order.

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