A Transdisciplinary Mind: An Interview with Ian Mitroff

By Russ Volckmann

Abstract: Known more widely as the "Father of Crisis Management," University of Southern California professor Ian Mitroff came to the work of Ken Wilber and integral theory over two decades ago. No one else has brought an integral perspective to the fields of management and organization theory for as long as Mitroff. In this interview he talks about the development of his theories, the people he has worked closely with, his spiritual development and the streams of his work, including his research on spirituality in organizations. While his involvement with Wilber's Integral Institute is not what he would like it to be, he sees there the potential to develop an institution that addresses the politicization and failures of our institutions of higher education. In the face of the crisis in leadership, integral and transdisciplinary approaches have the potential for making a positive difference as we are faced with the dissolution of distinctions that underlie how we make meaning in the world.

Keywords: crisis, integral, leadership, psychology, spirituality, systems, transdisciplinary

Introduction

One of the striking aspects of Ian Mitroff's work is his ability to engage phenomena through a variety of lenses. There are several ways to approach the study and development of complex issues and systems. We can look at them through the lens of a particular discipline, e.g., physics, biology, sociology, or philosophy. We can take an interdisciplinary approach that brings together the views of several disciplines at the same time, e.g., what does change look like through the perspectives developed by various disciplines. We can take a multidisciplinary approach whereby representatives of various disciplines try to find common ground on a subject. Finally, we can take a transdisciplinary approach. According to Nicolescu (Manifesto of Transdisciplinarity, 2002)

> *…transdisciplinarity concerns the dynamics engendered by the action of several levels of Reality at once. The discovery of these dynamics necessarily passes through disciplinary knowledge. While not a new discipline or a new superdiscipline, Transdisciplinarity is nourished by disciplinary research; in turn, disciplinary research is clarified by transdisciplinary knowledge in a new and fertile way. In a sense, disciplinary and transdisciplinary research are not antagonistic but complementary. (45)*

As I will show, and as the interview bears out, such an approach is very much in the spirit of, if not identical with, that taken by Ian Mitroff in his work.

I wanted to interview Ian Mitroff because of the many facets of his work related to organization change and development, managing and leading in the face of complexity, working and thinking in organizations, all subjects that have been important in my own career. Over the years I have found in his contributions insights that many of us continue to struggle to define and consider in our work. An example of this is how to bring together the internal, external, individual and collective considerations of Ken Wilber's work in the study of phenomena and in building approaches for change and development individually and in organizations and communities. While the depth of Ian's work cannot be represented in one short interview such as this, I believe we have here a useful overview upon which to build. And I hope to have the opportunity to do so in the future.

It is probably coincidental that Ian Mitroff and I spent some of the same years at Berkeley—during the 1960s. We both graduated from college in 1961, he at the University of California at Berkeley and I at Monmouth College (now University) in New Jersey. We both began our Masters programs at Berkeley in 1961, he in Engineering and I in Political Science. He completed his Ph.D. in 1967, thus demonstrating a high level of focus and commitment, while I dragged out those luxuriously political and social student years and the agony of writing my dissertation until 1974. While Ian was on the faculty at the University of Pittsburgh (Pennsylvania) and building a strong academic career, including collaborations with a number of very talented original thinkers in their fields, I taught at the University of Arizona and got enmeshed in the human potential movement of gestalt, neoReichian, transactional and various other therapeutic modalities. Ian went on to a long and continuing career at USC where he has been active, not only as an academic, but in applying his work to the real world of corporations and government. Ian's list of publications is quite extraordinary. I dropped out of an academic career gradually, went back to school for a program in humanistic psychology in order to work with change and development in government and business organizations and limited my publishing to pieces in small periodicals oriented to change agents.

The parallels and differences in our careers are significant. Ian offers a transdisciplinary perspective to work those impacts throughout the United States and the world. My own efforts have been somewhat transdisciplinary—and even more so in the last ten years. What I find in Ian's work is an early focus with a transdisciplinary perspective that has been influenced to an important degree by the work of Ken Wilber. I came late to Ken Wilber. Ian has taken to heart the integral approach of Ken Wilber and applied it to his own life on many levels. This is not to say that Wilber is his only influence, but that it has been an important one that I suspect Ian has applied even more to his own life than solely to intellectual pursuits. In the latter it shows up in his transdisciplinary perspective and some use of the four quadrant model as a lens on the things that have interested him.

In 1983 Ian wrote: "Ken Wilber is a young scholar of immense potential. He has already produced a highly significant set of books that explore the notion of mind across both Western and Eastern viewpoints." (Stakeholders of the Organization Mind). In fact, Ian has expressed his respect for Wilber's work more consistently and longer than any other academic I have discovered.

In addition to Wilber, he has cited such significant influences as West Churchman (Systems Theory), Russ Ackoff (Systems Theory), Bruno Bettleheim (Psychotherapy), Norman O. Brown (Philosophy), Joseph Campbell (Mythology and Comparative Religion), Sigmund Freud (Psychoanalysis), William James (Psychology and Philosophy), James Hillman (Archetypal Psychology), Carl Jung (Archetypal Psychology), Herbert Marcuse (Philosophy), Erich

Neumann (Archetypal Psychology), and Marie-Louise von Franz (Archetypal Psychology). The range is wide and exciting. Another area he and I have in common is our interest in Hillman, von Franz and Jung. In the early 1980s he was using their work in his writing and his work with clients. This interest in archetypal psychology and Jungian personality theory was something I shared and used, as well, during that same period, including the publication of an article on Jungian archetypes and organization change. And while his work seems to have focused on individuals and large (corporate) systems, I was working with individuals in smaller organizations, most often at the team or project level.

Since completing his Ph.D., his work has focused on crisis management. In fact, he has been called the "Father of Crisis Management." Yet the concept of crisis management seems too narrow to capture how he has integrated thinking from systems theory, psychology, philosophy, organization theory, leadership and a number of other disciplines. The titles of his books suggest the scope of his work. Here are some examples of his books that suggest the range of his attention:

The Subjective Side of Science, 1974
Stakeholders of the Organization Mind, 1983
Business Not as Usual, 1987
Break-Away Thinking, 1988
We're So Big and Powerful Nothing Bad Can Happen To Us, 1990
Framebreak, 1994
The Unbounded Mind, 1995
The Essential Guide to Managing Corporate Crises, 1996
Smart Thinking for Crazy Times, 1998
A Spiritual Audit of Corporate America, 2000
Managing Crises Before They Happen, 2000
Crisis Leadership, 2004
Why Some Companies Emerge Stronger and Better from a Crisis, 2005

Ian Mitroff has had the career my mother would have wished for me. In this conversation, with a bow to Frank Visser who wrote so well about Ken Wilber's intellectual career using a stage approach (Ken Wilber: Thought as Passion, 2003, Albany: State University of New York Press.), I have tried to put Ian's transdisciplinary career in perspective.

Russ Volckmann

Intellectual Foundations

Q: *You have an unusual career path. You began in engineering and moved from there to become a professor in USC's highly respected business school, the father of crisis management and an organization theorist concerned with the inter-dynamics of individuals and their relationships with the systems where they work. You added to that a focus on spirituality in corporate America. Your work includes organizational systems, Jungian archetype psychology and personality theory, the four-quadrant model of Ken Wilber, ways to challenge assumptions and a whole lot more. Then there are your*

frequent op ed pieces in newspapers where you critique politicians and policy. If nothing else, this suggests that you're having a very full life.

Perhaps we could use an exploration of the phases in your career and the major intellectual layers that you chose. In the spirit of Frank Visser, we could begin with Mitroff I. That was your post sputnik era interest in engineering. At Berkeley you majored in engineering physics as an undergraduate and also obtained an M.S. in structural engineering. Your Ph.D. at Berkeley involved a shift to engineering psychology with a minor in the Philosophy of Social Sciences. You did a dissertation about a computer simulation of human decision-making. Here you seemed to be exploring what became the title of one of your books, The Subjective Side of Science. *What were the important intellectual aspects of your work during this period?*

A: I have to back up and give a little bit more background. I essentially went into engineering because growing up I was good in math and science and for a poor kid, the first one in my family ever to have gone to a university, I literally did not know what other careers there were where one could make a good living. It was only when I got to the university that I really learned that there were all these other worlds and interests.

In high school I liked everything. It wasn't just math and science, but I liked literature, you name it. When I got to the university, I didn't think much about it because I really didn't know that universities are like most institutions: they are really not well-rounded places. They force you in many ways to choose a single discipline.

First of all, universities are organized around disciplines, which is an antiquated if not counterproductive way of organizing knowledge. Most academics really have never thought that the disciplines are just one way of organizing knowledge. That's all they are. They take them as basic elements that have descended from the heavens. But they are only political units that are there to meet basic psychological safety reasons. Most people need the certainty and security they provide.

I remember when I was a sophomore-engineering student and we were required to take a one-year course in social sciences; we had some fascinating lecturers. One was Louis Feuer. It was the first time I was ever exposed to Marx and to Freud. I remember the day in this big lecture hall of 200 people that we were talking about Freud. I had never even heard of Freud. We were reading Freud's introductory lectures to psychoanalyses on dreams. I found it utterly fascinating. But when I looked around the room, I saw disinterest at best and more often than not, sheer disgust. The reason for the disgust among my fellow engineering students was their attitude, "What the hell did this have to do with engineering!" It was nonsense to them since you couldn't put it in a formula. I found that attitude so abhorrent to me that that was really the beginning of my eventual departure from engineering.

I got a Ph.D. with a three and a half year minor in the philosophy of social science from West Churchman. West was in a business school of all places, because although he was a philosopher he wanted to teach philosophy to applied social scientists. My minor became my real major. However, I'm glad that I actually did go all the way through engineering, because I have a quantitative structured side. But without philosophy, I wouldn't be able to do things such as crisis management or most things, which are not only inter- but also transdisciplinary.

I not only don't believe in the disciplines, but I am an enemy of them because again, it is just one way to organize knowledge. Increasingly, it's a highly dysfunctional way. It's no accident why interdisciplinary efforts are extremely hard to get going in universities. It's no accident that people like Ken Wilber wouldn't find a home in a conventional university within a single department. That's a real tragedy.

That is the background and the reason why I finally ended up taking the three and a half year minor in philosophy of social science—which by the way, the U.C. Berkeley College of Engineering did everything in its power to talk me out of and put up hurdles, because they didn't understand what the hell did that have to do with engineering. I tried to explain to them what I was doing. For some reason or other as a young kid—even in my mid 20's getting a Ph.D.—it hit me that philosophy was the most general of all things to study and I just kept it going. That was probably just as well that I didn't go to a philosophy department because that would have been just as disciplinary and killed off the search for general knowledge. That's a brief summary of my background.

Q: You make it very clear that being a scholar in a university is a real challenge.

A: Yes, but it's more than that. First of all, most people in universities are not really scholars. I consider myself more of an intellectual because of all the reasons I just listed. I do have disciplinary training and I have widely studied the disciplines. But they are artifacts. Most people think of them as real things. They're not. They are artifacts. But secondly, a very narrow interpretation of scholarship takes place in universities that is not for a broader public or for the problems of the world. It's mainly for other members of the narrow community. Frankly, I'm not interested in that and it turns me off. It's for the same reason that I'm not a member of any organized religion. It's just too narrow for what I am.

Q: You mentioned your work with West Churchman. What was it about his work that you found was inspiring?

A: A number of things, although I didn't know it at the time. Churchman was one of the few people at Berkeley—he obviously had an enormous intellect—who had a real systemic view of human knowledge. He was one of the developers of the systems approach. I've talked to Ken Wilber about this. Ken doesn't really mention Russ Ackoff and West Churchman as developers of the systems approach. I do think that Ken's notion of systems is even broader for the reason that it includes spirituality. Churchman didn't get that part until later in life when he was confronting his own demons, largely around alcoholism through AA. But it's kind of strange since his mentor, E.A. Singer, Jr., was one of William James' best students. If James were alive today, he and Ken Wilber would have a powerhouse relationship. I have no doubt about that. They would be talking with each other and interested in one another.

Churchman was one of the most powerful intellects on the Berkeley campus. At Berkeley you had all of these Nobel Prize winners and top professors running around, but West was truly different than all of them. He was deeper. He was very smart and, in addition, he was wise. He just attracted students. He was a magnet. He was a magnet for all the students like me who had been hurt by all these disciplines.

The disciplines are like Chinese foot binding. They attempt to bind the mind. They are almost like cults. If you look at what goes on in Ph.D. education, a lot of it I just call sheer indoctrination. And too much of it is fear based.

You come out of most Ph.D. programs terribly afraid to do anything out of the mainstream. That's important when we talk about what I did in spirituality or crisis management. Most people, whether they are tenured or not—in fact they are tenured—would not do certain studies because they are horrendously afraid of what the rest of the profession would think of them. They are terrified. So the built-in censorship is incredible. We talk about authoritarian regimes around the world and authoritarian organizations. One of the biggest is the contemporary university. I will say it and I won't make friends. I think most academics are like sheep and they're not really independent. Even though they supposedly have the luxury of academic freedom, they are afraid to use it.

Q: I'm sharply aware that I laid out my plan for this interview in somewhat of a linear fashion and having read as much of your work as I have, I should have known better.

A: Well, would you have a linear interview with Ken Wilber?

Q: Right, exactly.

A: Everything is related to everything else, it doesn't matter where you start or end.

A Whole Systems View

Q: This formative phase of your work when you were opening up to all of these new disciplines and perspectives seemed to transition as you moved into academia and began publishing. Your focus became a deeper question of the relationship between the workings of the human mind and emotions and scientific and technological innovation and creativity. I wonder if this is Mitroff II, because this is a time when you seem to be saying things that people are still struggling to express in the literature today. Here you seem to take an organic systems view of organizations and roles, whether they are internal or external, that are played out in these systems. It's here that you advocate for nonlinearity and a transdisciplinary theory of inquiry.

A: I wouldn't necessarily call it Mitroff I or II. It may be a sense of maturity or just reading more and deepening my understanding of concepts or my appreciation of them. I think that was always there, at least in my mind it was. It wasn't necessarily always expressed because things unfold, but all that stuff was back in my getting my Ph.D. and this three and half year seminar which met every week on the philosophy of social science.

That was not a conventional philosophy of science. We read Jung and Freud. We might have read Ken if he'd been more available. I think Ken was just starting out at that time, so he wasn't there. I, independently of my mentors, discovered Ken Wilber. One of the things—I mean everybody has strengths and weaknesses—about West Churchman's greatest strengths was that he was very intuitive. He was very smart, but he was much

more of a thinking type: his dissertation was in symbolic logic. Again as I said, he was an alcoholic; he openly acknowledged he was in AA. He came to spirituality later in life, really realizing that spirituality was the most powerful force of all. But he still came to spirituality mainly through a rationalist perspective where the concept of God plays a prominent role. God is the guarantor of knowledge. But that's very abstract; that's impersonal. That's not necessarily a kind, loving God. It's certainly not a God that helps one in recovery, to manage life's problems, a giver of goodness and so forth.

Q: *In this early period of writing is where you begin to present your admiration of Wilber's work and you take what I would call a developmental perspective of human psychology and the idea of the path of transcendence. During this time, you formed professional relationships—and perhaps they went beyond that—with Ralph Kilmann and Dick Mason, who I think was at the University of Arizona. I noticed his preface to Stakeholders of the Organizational Mind was written in Tucson where I taught in the early 70's. You began to coauthor a lot of works with Mason and some with Kilmann over a number of years.*

A: I was very selective, very particular. Dick Mason was also a student of West Churchman, so we had a common vocabulary. Dick and I met when we were both at Berkeley.

When I went to the University of Pittsburgh, my first job, Ralph Kilmann came there a few years later from UCLA and he was very smart. Ralph was brilliant and we shared a lot of interest in Jung. The point is these were people with whom I could talk. One of the difficulties of going through and doing this is that you are lonely in a way. Most people are trained at best to be positivists. They learn a mixture of crude empiricism and crude rationalism, but West and Wilber are way, way beyond that. It's like saying, what's a methodology for human inquiry that's founded on an integral approach? I mean, most people aren't even aware of the question, let alone how to respond. Ralph was a kindred soul; we did a lot of pioneering work together. We wrote a lot of papers.

Q: *In this early time when you published Stakeholders of the Organizational Mind, which I think is a most extraordinary book for its time, Dick Mason wrote the preface, referenced Basho and wrote Haiku. This suggests possibly that your collaboration was more than just an intellectual relationship.*

A: It was more than that, sure. It was partly spiritual or developmental or whatever you want to call it. *Stakeholders of the Organizational Mind* was an attempt to look at the fragmentation in the social sciences and to think, rather naively, that one could heal it. It's like reading one of Ken's passages years ago—don't ask me which one, but I remember—he was naïve enough, he says this laughingly, to think that his overarching framework would be embraced by all the people he put into his framework. If anything they were hurt and insulted because every one of them wanted to think that they were the whole picture and to be relegated to a quadrant or to a particular level was not only crushing, but made them mad as hell.

Let me put it this way. Over the years, I don't know how many Ph.D. dissertation committees I've served on. Almost without exception all of my colleagues, except for

maybe West, have this mantra: Take a problem that the student has, it's really not their problem, it's a problem of the discipline. Every dissertation advisor encourages the student to whittle it down, to narrow it down, to bite off a small chunk so it's do-able. ***No one asks them ever to be expansive.***

My mantra is: Take an issue or a problem and expand, expand, expand it until you reach the limits of your comfort zone, where you can no longer expand it or your intellectual powers break down. You don't know what to say; it becomes meaningless, and so on. The point is no one goes the other way. It's like Ken saying, "It's turtles all the way up and turtles all the way down." Russ Ackoff said, "If there are no limits to expansion, there is no limit to atoms." But most people don't get that and it's part of the mantra of current university positivism that one will eventually come to the atoms of human knowledge or whatever it is.

Well, those are only concepts. Most people don't understand that what they're proposing is not just an epistemic strategy, but also a psychological one. They're telling us about their comfort zone. Most people are not comfortable with wholes or holons or whatever you want to call them, but they are only comfortable with very small atoms. Why does the modern university or most organizations attract and develop a preponderance of atomists? Except for the sociology of knowledge or philosophy, at times, no one asks that question. It's just part of their background oxygen.

Q: When you were writing Stakeholders of the Organizational Mind, how would you describe the state of your own spiritual development?

A: I wouldn't say it was particularly great because I really didn't know much about it. I came at it more from philosophy. Philosophy was a substitute for me for the particular religion into which I was born, and really didn't have a lot of meaning for me. So I never called myself a religious person. I think I was on a spiritual quest without knowing it at the time. That's really what it was. To say I went to study philosophy because I felt uneducated or undeveloped is true, but I think the spiritual part of it was unknown to me at the time. I think I had some awareness that it was partly spiritual, but it certainly wasn't developed.

Father of Crisis Management

Q: Then the next phase as Mitroff III sees you for the first time being recognized publicly as a father, the Father of Crisis Management. During this period you're collaborating a lot with Ralph Kilmann, Thierry Pouchant and others. It seems like a remarkable transition, because here you're taking these larger concepts and you're beginning to apply them to what is unthinkable or unknowable. Would you comment on that?

A: That's partly true. Part of it is that I took a one-year sabbatical leave of absence from University of Pittsburgh and went to the University of Pennsylvania Wharton School where Russ Ackoff was. (Russ was one of West Churchman's first students.) While I was there, I was part of an applied research center and one of the clients we had was McNeil Pharmaceuticals, a division of Johnson & Johnson. McNeil made Tylenol and I worked with the executives there on a very interesting project around assumption analysis.

When the Tylenol poisonings occurred I was truly shocked. I was personally hurt, because I knew these executives and they were good people. This light went on in my head. I just knew instantly that something—call it crisis management, whatever—was now going to be a prominent feature of today's world. It's like once these things happen, you always have airport metal inspections. You never go back. They become marker events.

Partly I was bored. I had done *Stakeholders of the Organization Mind*. Now, what more, what new was I going to do? I was thinking of leaving academia to go into a leadership position or something. I was really bored with the academic world. Lo and behold, along comes this new thing and I realized that, oh my god, it's literally now going to be an important feature of the world. When you build a world that is so interconnected, the time of system's approach has arrived. An interconnected world is imminently susceptible to disruption.

The sad thing is when you see 9/11 and Katrina. Most of what happened in Katrina was predictable, including the poor response of the government and FEMA and all the rest of that. It shows how little learning has occurred in 20 or so years since I got into this thing. It's pitiful. We oscillate between frantic fear of being overwhelmed and then doing nothing.

You don't want to get me into what I think of the current administration: It is the worst that I have ever seen in my life.

Anyway, there is another part that also comes out of William James: the world is a laboratory. You learn by going out to the laboratory. One of the ways I learned crisis management was doing a lot of consulting. Most academics don't really understand applied research. That's how I got highly sensitive confidential data that I wouldn't have been able to get any other way—by going in and doing crisis audits and talking to hundreds of executives in all kinds of organizations.

The one area where I would critique Ken is I don't think Ken is sufficiently aware of the intricacies of organizations. I know that's not his primary concern, but I think that would give an added flavor and dimension to his work. One of the things that were very important to Churchman is implementation. For William James and West you don't just have a true proposition or assertion about the world, but you have something that is true if and only if you're able to make changes in the ethical quality of our lives. That means that ethics and implementation are integral to knowledge. It's not like most of my colleagues say, "Oh well, I have a true statement and I'll just tack ethics and implementation on at the end." Oh no, ethics is there right in the beginning, in what we call true and what properties we observe as true or characteristic of human beings.

So ethics is built right into our very theories and facts, if you want to call them that, at the very beginning. Also, you don't have a truth unless you are able to make a change in the world. What good is it to say I have a theoretical solution for how to end poverty and world hunger if I can't do anything about it? That's a partial truth at best. So the point about crisis management: it's not just going out into the world; it is not only learning from the phenomenon that is out there integral with the world, but learning how to make a difference in the quality of the world.

What is so frustrating still is that we know a lot of the reasons why crises happen and even what to do to avert or to lessen the impacts of many of them. Yet we still have all these barriers. That's why you want to say integral politics and integral this and that are

so important because the main lesson—you know Ken and Albert Einstein have both said that problems cannot be solved at the level of development or the language in which they are first presented.

Q: Or created, yes.

A: So you have a problem like Katrina because it's the fault of a system in its lack of development; it cannot be solved at that level. That is one of the primary lessons of Katrina in applying the thinking of Ken. Katrina shows you can only solve social problems—depending on what you mean by solve—on a higher level of human and social development.

Q: One of the people that you were actively involved with, both in the area of crisis management and later in the area of ethics is Thierry Pouchant.

A: Thierry was a student of mine at USC. He was a very good student—very bright and a very nice person, a very good person, a good soul. Thierry and I still stay in touch.

Integral Spirit

Q: In Mitroff IV you were active with the early years of Wilber's Integral Institute, you published The Spiritual Audit of Corporate America and you participated in the formation of the American Management Association's Management, Spirituality and Religion group.

A: The *Spiritual Audit* represented the fact that I've been doing crisis management for all these years and, while intellectually exciting because it's so complex, it is a downer in many ways because bad things are happening. For years I've been wondering, actually angry, and asked why no one had gotten out there and done a good empirical study of spirituality in a setting where most of us spend the majority of our waking hours. I did not want to ask—as the typical studies have done—how many times a day do you pray or what the practices are? I, frankly, was bored with that. What does that tell you?

I was more interested in what **meaning** spirituality and religion had for people and how organizations could practice it without blowing up and fractionating all the employees. I was absolutely astounded that no one had done that. Finally, one day I said, okay, my energy is now there. I'm going to get out and do a series of interviews. I had a collaborator on the east coast, Elizabeth Denton, and I went out and did sixty interviews. At one point I remember talking with my good friend and colleague, Warren Bennis who said, "Come on Ian, you've done enough with twenty interviews. You know what you are going to find." I said, "You're right Warren, but the interviews are so rewarding that I can't stop doing them."

Q: Speaking of those interviews, you defined what you mean by spirituality based on what you got from the interviews, what people told you spirituality was for them.

A: Right. It was not my definition because I'm now aware that one of the first issues, spirituality, religion and Ken's work, is to have a better grasp of the multiple meanings of the definition. The reason I get defensive is that constantly I'm asked by people, "What's your definition of spirituality?" I have to correct them and say, "You know, it's not mine." What I knew instinctively is that I did not have to ask people what their definition was. You get a definition by asking people what meaning 'blank' has for them. Here's the academic mind: they first have to have a definition of what they're studying before they study it. If you had a perfect definition, for crying out loud, you wouldn't need to study it. It's just absolutely insane. But those are people who have low tolerance for ambiguity. This is not incidental.

Q: Maybe I've fallen into that trap on the subject of leadership, which I'd like to talk with you about, but I want to note the definition that emerged from your study. Spirituality was the basic desire to find the ultimate meaning and purpose in one's life and to live an integrated life. Is that a fair summary?

A: That's part of it, but the other part was this feeling of cosmic connectedness. I didn't use the word 'cosmic', and these are not theologians or systems people, but ordinary people who had a sense that the universe was a seamless fabric; it was interconnected. That's one part. Secondly, they didn't believe that it was just here, the result of pure blind mechanism. There is a force, a god, call it what you want, behind it or an expression of it. Third, we were put here to do good, to find meaning and purpose in our lives. There were ways to say that God or whatever you call it is an ultimate ground or guarantor for being and it has consequences. A lot of people, not everybody, said if you believe this, your business had to do good. It had to produce ethical products and services.

Q: Let me quote from the book about that because here is where you manifest that integral perspective of the individual and relationship to the culture in the system. You say,

> The data suggests strongly that those organizations that identify more strongly with spirituality or that have a greater sense of spirituality have employees who are less fearful for their organizations, are far less likely to compromise their basic beliefs and values in the workplace, perceive their organizations as significantly more profitable and report that they can bring significantly more of their complete selves to work, especially their creativity and intelligence, two qualities that are especially needed if organizations are to succeed in today's hyper competitive environment.

A: Yes, that kind of summarizes it, which is what previous studies or non-existent studies hadn't done. Here's another point of it. I didn't say it, but I would say it now, is that among the many qualities in which academic institutions or departments are lacking, first of all they don't have a sufficient enough systemic or integral vision or philosophy, but they're lacking sorely in any spiritual development. I'm convinced everybody in the world ought to be in therapy or in some spiritual program. That's a given. But I think universities sorely need it, because if you take what Ken and other people take seriously,

you cannot have anything pretending to be knowledge independently of these paths and states of development. Ken says it many times, he can tell a person's level of development by their definition of leadership. I can tell a person's level of development by their definition of knowledge: what they regard as true, good or beautiful or however you want to put it. So everything is a reflection, by definition, of our development.

Q: Interestingly since the early 80's, you've been really an advocate of people paying attention to Ken's work. I'm wondering if you can say a little bit about how your relationship with Ken has evolved over the years and what you think we need to be paying attention to around his work?

A: That's a good question. A few years ago, I can't remember after what book I read, I was tempted to call him on the telephone. I got his number and as one knows, Ken is notorious in not returning phone calls. But I did happen to get his email and said I'd like to come and meet him. I trekked out to his home. He had been living up in the mountains behind Boulder and we spent a day together. Then I came back for the first of the integral business meetings.

Ken is a most unusual, if not daunting character and I say that with great affection. I know very few other people who could seclude themselves for that amount of concentrated energy for his writing. I've said to him in writing and in person, every time I read one of his books, I feel like two-thirds of it I've already heard. But it's not just sheer repetition; it's like a deeper appreciation. He goes over it, but something is added each time, so it's enriched.

I haven't found anybody as comprehensive as Ken Wilber. There well could be; it's not that I know everything, but I read a lot and look for comprehensive minds. I got that when I was taking this three and a half year minor because there was not only West Churchman there, but also one of his teachers, Thomas Cowan. Cowan constantly scoured the intellectual landscape for people who were deep and comprehensive. Tom Cowan would have found him above all people. Tom Cowan was a professor of jurisprudence. He read James Joyce because in *Finnegan's Wake* Joyce has a lot to say about the law.

But there was no one else when Ken's work came out. I read his original grid of internal/external and then the individual and the organization and how he got there by literally one day sorting on the floor all these different religious traditions and voila, this framework appeared to him. He had Don Beck's work and you could see the states of development West and East. Some people have obviously hinted about this before, you know, the people that had come before Ken that he cites, but I didn't find anybody else. I wish that Ken were closer. I'd have more frequent contact, but I do understand that Ken would literally be besieged if he took all the speaking engagements. I wish he would selectively come out and speak in a few highly select gatherings.

Q: How would you describe your relationship to Integral Institute and Integral University?

A: They are not as close as I would like them. I have just fallen out of the loop and I don't know why, because I would really like to be more involved for a lot of reasons. The most

fundamental is that I don't think I would describe a university as a university any longer unless it was integral in a deep way. I certainly would not describe something as knowledge or, let's put it this way, it's a lower form of knowledge. In that sense, it fails. The current university almost never asks—almost like our political institutions—why they are such failures. Some do, but you can say why, with all this knowledge of crises, have we failed to have this impact in the world?

It's as my wife reminds me, and I know it myself, the opening passage of A.A. Milne's *Winnie The Pooh* has Christopher Robin dragging Winnie the Pooh down the stairs. He's dragging Winnie by its foot and with each step down the stairs, Winnie's head is going bump-bump-bump. As this is happening, Winnie is thinking to himself, if only my head could stop bumping, maybe he could figure a better way of coming down the stairs. Well, that's kind of symptomatic of our times, except the bumps are big: wars, pollution and all the problems we have. Again and again, there are really illustrations that the problems we have are the direct consequences of the current level of development or low level of development and as such they cannot be solved at that level.

The Challenge of Development

Q: *Let's talk about the idea of development for just a minute. You've mentioned William James and of course he had his developmental model about the intellectual or cognitive development of students that he's studied. He found that in the course of a four-year college education, they would develop one level. There have been some follow-up studies with engineering students in Colorado and Pennsylvania, for example, that affirm this pace of development that occurs in higher education. So, in terms of development, do you see a great hope for verticality?*

A: Yes and no. Let me back off and give you a philosophic musing about that. It also comes from William James because I ruminate a lot about this. I get epiphanies. One of the famous passages of William James—I'm not sure whether it's varieties of religious experience or his essays on pragmatism—but he has this passage where he says, "Imagine that we were present at the moment of creation and the creator put this basic bargain or question to you." The creator says, "Now, I can give you a universe that is completely fixed, determined. There will be no good, no evil, your actions will make no difference, or I can give you a universe that is open, uncertain, your actions will make a direct difference. What do you choose, choose wisely." James chose the latter. Hold that thought and let me bring it together with another thought.

If you read modern physicists, they are really doing scientific metaphysics. They're taking Einstein, and extrapolating to the whole of the universe. They don't really understand that by doing this they're being metaphysical. They just think they're being imaginative. There is a guy at Penn State (Lee Smolin?) who proposed using evolutionary biology coupled with cosmology. The outcome is that universes are continually being born, this guy speculates. Every time a universe is born, the fundamental physical constants get reset; like the ratio, the mass, the electrons, and protons. That affects whether stars and living things get born and so forth and so on.

I'm walking down the street one day and I said, "Why in the hell is it that we only have these big picture speculations from physical scientists? Why shouldn't the social

sciences do the same? Here's the thought that came to my mind and I shared part of it with Ken one time. Suppose every time a universe is born, the ratio of good to evil is reset. We're apparently in a universe where the ratio of good to evil is slightly larger than one, but it seems like it's very close. I can't prove it, but I feel it. Back to William James, it's a real struggle. We don't know for sure whether goodness will triumph. Now, let's take it one step further. Here is the next step in the epiphany: Suppose every time a universe is born, it takes more or less time to transcend the stages of human development. So we're in a universe where it takes—you talk to Ken—roughly seven years of hard work to transcend, if you can, each stage. Well, given the span of the human lifetime, that's not much time for us to develop much.

So you can speculate. Suppose we were in a universe where it only took three or so years to span a level? What would that universe be like? We can't jump to one of those other universes. We can't do time travel, yet. Nonetheless, the ethical, moral imperative is, no matter what universe you're in, always act to increase the ratio of good to evil. Do everything you can to engage in transcendence in the universe where you find yourself. Maybe those principles, I'm just saying, are themselves indicative of different levels. But the point is that we almost never have that kind of conversation. Because we don't, we—all of us, including me—we fall into despair.

Q: *It's like we're living in a period where all those things, at least in our generation, we were raised to believe in about what this nation and its fundamental values are being challenged.*

A: I started off as a very poor kid, I mean really poor. I would not be where I am, well-off, with my wife, if I hadn't been born in California, had not gone through the University of California, gone to Berkeley, where I had almost free tuition, where I could take out student loans which were forgiven—in effect I got a free education. So, do I begrudge paying taxes? No, I really don't and I'm offended…

Q: *I saw a bumper sticker that said, "I'm a Democrat, please tax me."*

A: Yes, well I'm a recipient. I wouldn't be here were it not for the benefits of the state of California. I had to work hard and I had to have brains, but to give tax breaks to the super wealthy, what does that represent? When you talk about sliding back regression to the lower levels of development; that is so pathetic.

I think probably the most important question—because I know a lot of my liberal west side friends in L.A. have almost given up hope—they see this as the end of the American Empire, which may not be the worst of all things. Stop being the world's bully. They are in despair that the changes wrought by the Bush Administration may do irreversible or irreparable damage to the U.S. I'm afraid of that. What Katrina showed: poor, mostly black people like rats—I think that had a profound impact visually on even a lot of conservative Republicans. They too, are disenchanted. Whether that will translate in voting or whatever, that's another thing.

Q: *What you seem to be advocating, for example, in your book Crisis Leadership, is a shift from being reactive to being proactive in dealing with all of the crises and the issues that we're faced with.*

A: But here's the rub: You cannot be proactive. The word proactive is a low level way of saying higher development. Most people really get hung up on hierarchy. It's a post modernism politically correct crap where they think of rigid hierarchies. It's a bad word, so they don't want to say something is better than or worse than anything else. **By avoiding better or worse, in fact, they are saying it's better to avoid better or worse. So they've just done it. That's the irony of their position.** It's not only relativism, but also postmodern crap! They think post modernism is 'better than.' It is the only correct way. You can't be proactive unless you've reached a different stage of development.

What's Next?

Q: *Given this history, what are you working on now and where do you see your next phase going*?

A: I'm working on a variety of both popular and more intellectual books. I wouldn't say scholarly. You have to go out into the world of big publishers with agencies. One is a book on un-reality. The main title would be *America the Delusional*. My wife has a Ph.D. in education and she worked at the Pittsburgh public television station with Fred Rogers [Mr. Rogers—a popular children's program]. We're working on a very popular book applying Fred Rogers to the world of work. That's a more popular way to talk about a lot of the stuff that is really too difficult for most people to read. Although they need it, they avoid it. I work between a variety of projects and they are all interesting to me. I do have good students. I enjoy teaching. But what I think is really, really key is we have to get more integral universities and integral this and that. We really do.

Q: *I've heard that Integral University just established a relationship with the Fielding Institute [Santa Barbara, California]…*

A: That's interesting because Fielding is adult education.

Q: *…at the master's program level*.

A: That's good enough and that's a good start. I think Fielding is a viable alternative.

Q: *One of the challenges that is continually being cited since the 80's and many of your comments today have suggested is that we face a crisis of leadership in our society and in our businesses. Can you comment on what you see as being important for the future development of leaders and leadership in our organizations today?*

A: I think I've said it. The current leadership, again, is an expression of the current development of society and of organizations. What did we hear on national news this week? Verizon or Cingular is cutting back on their promised pensions to workers, even

though they have the ability to pay them, because they are anticipating risk—or whether it is greed or whatever. There are exceptions for a few specialized organizations like Patagonia and some very special enlightened leaders who I think are more spiritually developed.

Q: Like Herb Kelleher?

A: Yes. People like that. Yvon Chouinar, the guy who runs Patagonia, just wrote a book, *Let My People Go Surfing*. He knows he has the kind of people who are dedicated and will not take advantage of the organization. How would you explain what he is about to, say, the head of GM because Ford and GM are failed companies now.

We could turn around the world and say certain societies are failed countries. They just don't work. Take Mexico. Maybe take us. They're failed. Largely, today's current organizations have failed. They reached the end of their lifecycle. They reached the end of the assumptions or the conditions to which they were responsive, mainly that level of development, World War II. But they have not made the transition to the 21st century. Bush is even farther back than that. He's in extreme regression. One of the things going on is this debate over intelligent design. It's laughable because there is a form of intelligent design. You want to talk about terms of integral philosophy that does make sense, but not in the ways that is being currently framed.

Q: It's like the skeptics say evolution is not a theory; it's a fact.

A: Yes, but even scientists don't get it. I accept evolution. It accounts for things pretty well. But what is it that sets the mechanism in place? Why do we live in a universe where evolution is possible? That's the way for me to frame it. How a "higher power" (or what) intervenes and at what level and I don't know? And then jump to, it intervenes because we have these complex mechanisms and intelligent design or the creation shows that people don't understand systems development! Therefore, it must have come into being all at once with all its properties—you can't have a conversation with people who believe this. One of the worst things I think has happened in this country, and I'm a part of it too, is that we're unable to converse now across the divides. I've never seen it so divisive, never in my lifetime. Have you?

Q: No.

A: Not even during Reagan and Nixon, not even at the height of the Cold War, not even at the height of the Vietnam War, which was divisive. Maybe because we've had 40 years of such division, I don't know. Do we have a basis for hope that we will transcend this? All I can say is, I really hope we do. I hope we have hope. I don't know what else to say.

Q: Transdisciplinarity, not just in the academic sense, seems to be at least a theme that is something you would advocate. Do you have any notion of a transdisciplinary agenda or anything like that?

A: I think it is the integral program and ideas that we've talked about. It's integral in terms of the scope of knowledge and the scope of the development of people and of humanity. So I'd say Ken's integral philosophy is a theory of transdisciplinary knowledge and development. It's one and it's as good as I know. I don't know of any others.

Most people have a low level meaning of interdisciplinary. They think, "Oh well, maybe I learn x and I learn y and I do joint studies of x and y together." That's not what Churchman's notion of interdisciplinary is. Every concept in every field of knowledge and every branch of knowledge **presupposes all** of the concepts or at least some of the concepts of every other field. That's very different. Take physics! You don't do physics as much as physicists would like to believe without human beings that are organized into communities. The laws of physics maybe are just "out there" but as far as they are known, they are known by people.

Q: This is an affirmation of a theme that I think you expand on and develop very well in Stakeholders of the Organizational Mind and the application of that seems to be what the integral approach is all about.

A: There is one place where I do disagree with Ken and I've talked to him about it. I do agree when he locates the 'it' in the exterior. If I go back to my first book, *The Subjective Side of Science,* yes there is an external world. I don't doubt that. But that external is only meaningful because there is an 'I', and internal world.

I don't like the words subjective, objective. I want to totally ban them from the vocabulary. They are outdated. Yes, there is a world that people regard as "it." That's the crucial point; **people regard it as it.** It does not regard it as it. That means there are people on the internal, left hand side that regard the external world as it. The right hand side is impersonal and objects and all the rest of that. But that's really a continuum. It's true that there are different senses of the right hand side; there are different concepts of the world and spirituality. I accept that, but it is misleading.

Q: One way that I think he's been trying to make that distinction more recently is that he would see in the lower right quadrant phenomena like communication, for example. But the means, the mechanisms, the computers, the telephones or what have you, of communication that are taking place, those are all artifacts.

A: I agree with that. I agree. Artifacts mean they are human artifacts. They are not artifacts of nature. The concept of nature itself is a human artifact. You could say the concept of the human body is now an artifact. In fact, in reality we are on the way—make no doubt about it—to becoming cyborgs. There is no doubt in my mind. What will happen if there is a line or lines when we will cross over and what will it mean to be human? The thing I would say about the internal and external dimension and even the 'I, we', those things are not only in flux as they have never been in human history, but more and more they are design possibilities. I'm not sure they are not also design nightmares. Mainly, that line is being manipulated and eroded by human beings.

Q: *There is an item in Ray Kurzweil's newsletter today that there is a meeting of people addressing the question of the legal aspects of people who are part human, part machine…*

A: …but my point is when is it going to be that we're going to have things that you can't even say are part what? That's almost quaint—their question. They're not looking far enough ahead. Here's what the intelligent design people don't get: that's not the problem. It's dumb redesigns that we are faced with when we got through all these redesigns of people.

Q: *Ian thanks. I look forward to your next book.*

A: Thank you.