

A WAY FORWARD
FOR AMERICA AND THE WORLD:
FLOURISHING LEADERSHIP

By John T. Kesler

INTRODUCTION

Leadership in America and the world is failing. Globally we see many constitutional democratic republics seriously degrading as they lean into rightward authoritarian tendencies. This has happened in America. There are not just problems on the right. Leaders on the left are leaving massive numbers of people feeling disrespected, unseen and unheard. Leaders on the right and the left amplify polarization and despair rather than bring us together with a collective sense of hope, purpose and flourishing. Major societal institutions are not functioning well, and in fact, they are deteriorating.

There is *a way forward*, though, through as many of us as possible engaging in leadership in our own spheres of influence, utilizing evidence-based principles of flourishing (“Flourishing Leadership”). And for those who have or would undertake to have major societal leadership stewardships, they can embrace principles of flourishing bolstered by integrating developmentally mature capacities and related skills (“Mature Flourishing Leadership”).

Part 1 outlines our current societal situation by employing the lens of human development through an evaluation of how and why the 2024 U.S. presidential election unfolded as it did and of some resulting consequences after President Trump took office. This analysis reveals a great deal about the causes of the pervasive failure of leadership and deterioration of societal institutions in America and by implication in other democratic societies. This developmental lens is absent from mainstream societal discourse and commentary. Yet it is a critically important perspective, and we ignore it to our great detriment.

The next three sections describe an interrelated three-pronged approach for *a way forward* for America and the world. Part 2 addresses the importance of generating more leaders with greater developmental capacity and related skills, especially those who have or desire to have significant societal stewardships as a critical element of *a way forward*. Part 3 addresses the importance of all of us including major societal leaders, each in our respective spheres of influence, integrating evidence-based principles of flourishing in our leadership as another necessary element of *a way forward*. Part 4 provides an example of the third and final essential element of *a way forward*: inner practices that are helpful in the development of qualities of Flourishing Leadership as well as the development of complementary mature capacities in support of Mature Flourishing Leadership.

The Conclusion summarizes this message and is a call to action for everyone to take this message seriously and to take steps now in your own way to pursue this *way forward* to help stem the downward slide of civilization and perhaps over time lay the groundwork for a more flourishing society and world.

PART I

A Developmental Evaluation of the 2024 Presidential Election

In order to understand the outcome of the most recent US presidential election, we require some initial framing regarding three stages of adult development. One stage of development is called the “traditional stage.” An adult with a traditional developmental center of gravity tends to be oriented towards order, authority, and traditional community and religious values. Adults at this stage of development do not tend to think abstractly and can easily fall prey to misinformation and conspiracy theories. They comprise a small but significant percentage of adults in America and other Western democratic societies. The second stage of adult development is designated as “modern.” The Western Enlightenment unfolded during the eighteenth century, when a critical mass of people for the first time developed modern capacities such as abstract thinking, distinguishing among the domains of the “good,” the “true,” and the “beautiful,” as well as the capacity to recognize the importance of universal principles, human rights, and related applications of the rule of law. The American and other constitutional democratic republics are grounded in modernist political theory. A third stage of human development designated as “integral” began emerging significantly in the second half of the twentieth century, and increasingly so in the twenty-first century.

Each of these three stages of adult development is composed of two sub-stages.¹ For the first “early” sub-stage of each of these stages, one does not yet have the capacity to utilize in a fully developed or competent manner the gifts that begin to come online as one lives more fully into the new qualities of the new stage. A person who has grown into the maturity of a stage of development inhabits the “mature” sub-stage. The early sub-stage of the traditional adult will not be addressed here, because adults at an early traditional developmental center of gravity are a very small percentage of the adult population. However, understanding how early sub-stages of both the modern and the integral stages of adult development manifest, and how one progresses into the maturity of that stage, is critically important to understanding what has been unfolding in American society and the world. Adults may for instance grow into an early sub-stage of development but remain imbedded in that early sub-stage for years—often permanently.

Most adults in the United States and Western democratic societies inhabit the range of early to mature modernism. In mature modernism there is usually a deep investment in universal rights and the rule of law. The profile of the logic typically used in mature modernism is “either/or.” You tend to seek out what you think the most logical and superior position is. You assert that

position in debate whereby you come to better understand and deepen your own position by engaging in contestation, ideally with mutual respect and civility. You assume the dignity and ultimate worth of those with whom you engage in this regard.

There was a critical mass of leaders with mature modern sensibilities who founded the American democratic republic. At that time relatively few American adults had grown into mature modern sensibilities, but they were willing to support a critical mass of mature modern leaders and the corresponding mature modern framework of the American Constitution. The mature modern assumptions of the Constitution, grounded in the rule of law and liberty and justice for all, have over the past two centuries been attractors to that vision being more fully realized.

In contrast to people at the mature modern stage, where rather than using either/or logic and respectful contestation as a framework for addressing differences of opinion as is typical, at the mature modern stage, those with a developmental center of gravity at the early modern stage often feel that there must be something wrong with somebody who holds a different position than they do on important religious, cultural or political issues. They tend to be more deeply committed to traditional cultural preferences than those at mature modern. They use their modern cognitive capacities to vigorously defend their traditional positions, often cherry-picking evidence to support those positions, frequently ignoring superior evidence to the contrary (although no one at any level of development is immune from that).

In the late 1990s in America, a decision was made by the leadership of the Republican Party that, as a matter of policy, they were going to demonize the Democrats in Congress. Republican congressional representatives were for instance encouraged to stop socializing with the Democrats and to not live in Washington D.C., where traditionally even families of politicians across the political spectrum intermingled socially. As this strategy pushed attitudes and actions in that direction over time, that shift undermined a more mature orientation of maintaining mutual respect, and at least to some significant degree degraded respectful communication across political divides. This amounted to the Republican Party devolving in maturity and increasingly aligning more fully with early rather than mature modernism.

Meanwhile during the past few decades, the Democratic Party began to align with early integral sensibilities. One of the first new qualities that comes online in the early integral sub-stage is seeing contexts that traditional and modern people don't see so clearly, or don't see at all. A frequently used name for the early integral sub-stage is "context aware." Those with an early integral developmental center of gravity tend to take particular notice of and give special consideration to people who have been marginalized or discriminated against, and how their particular circumstances have deeply impacted who they are and how they are treated in society. One of many examples of such special attention is becoming deeply sensitive to LGBTQ issues. Such concerns spawned what has been characterized as the "diversity, equality and inclusion" ("DEI") movement. Taking account of DEI considerations in America in the first two decades of this century became a hallmark of leading universities, many large American corporations and

the U.S. military, and has generally been understood as further living into the vision of liberty and justice for all by more fully including the marginalized.

Unfortunately, one of the profound shortcomings of many at the early integral stage is that they tend to privilege themselves and the highly marginalized and tend to patronize and sometimes even reject traditional and modern people who “don’t get it.” Those at early integral often don’t appreciate how offensive and even threatening this is to so many people. They frequently push their championing of the marginalized to extremes. The result of such extremism is often perceived by others as a hostile rejection of the traditional and modern values that most people hold dear.

Such patronizing attitudes are often characterized as “political correctness” and “wokeness,” particularly in elite American universities. At such institutions both faculty and students who have traditional or modern opinions often don’t find much of a forum to express their social and political views, which is contrary to the tradition in American higher education of providing opportunities to listen to and evaluate all ideas. Beyond that, they are often intimidated and shunned, and speakers reflecting such values are sometimes even banned from speaking or teaching on college and university campuses.

From an early integral perspective, all historical hierarchies are typically viewed as creating inappropriate impositions of power. In this context anyone who has power through a hierarchy is essentially viewed as an oppressor. Since white men have historically dominated in holding hierarchical power, there is sometimes an attitude that if you are a white man there is something inherently wrong with you, and more generally, historical male roles are viewed as defective by definition. This throws male children and young men into a vacuum in terms of how they should grow and develop in a healthy way when their very identity—their maleness—is suspect. There are many early integral narratives of this sort that are deeply critical of people (and their core identities) at the modern and traditional stages. This is also a factor in why the Democratic Party has been losing many people in the working class, including in communities of color.

Conservative media is effective at highlighting the threatening nature of such early integral perspectives in ways that frame the Democratic Party and anyone who is left-leaning as inherently evil.

For many traditional and modern-stage people who wanted to protect what is critically important to them—their families, communities, and core values—they see the tradeoff they made as worth it: supporting Donald Trump as a presidential candidate, someone who is obviously profoundly morally flawed, is justified because they believe he will protect them and ensure the survival of civilization. as they see it. There is relatively little appreciation in the progressive community and the Democratic Party as to just how deeply feared their cultural and political positions are. Such early integral attitudes and cultural and political positions are now significantly integrated into the messaging of the Democratic Party, and they are understood as a profound threat to be feared by a sizable portion of the rest of society. To the extent that progressives do recognize the

apprehensions behind such deep opposition, they often perceive such concerns and opposition as being morally repugnant, as reflected in Hillary Clinton labeling most Trump supporters as “deplorables.”

Kamala Harris said all of the right things in the final weeks of her presidential campaign, expressing sentiments along the lines such as: “I’m going to be a president for everybody. I’m going to put one or more Republicans in my cabinet. We are going to address our challenges by bringing everyone together and listening to everyone’s opinions.” However, more than half of the country didn’t trust what she was saying. Various factors contributed to this lack of trust, such as many voters not knowing her well enough, with President Joe Biden dropping out essentially at the last moment, and others not trusting a woman or a person of color being president. People were also uneasy because of the increased price of food, consumer goods, and housing under the Biden administration, etc. In addition, for many millions of Americans the ethos of the Democratic Party increasingly represents an existential threat to the America that they recognize and cherish.

In stark contrast to Kamala Harris, in the last days of his presidential campaign many of Donald Trump’s comments became increasingly dark: misogynistic, transphobic, xenophobic, and alarmist, about the danger to America of anyone who opposes him. Clearly the strategy was to trigger in the American people the fear reflex of the primal brain—the amygdala—of the American people. When fear activates the amygdala, pushing a person into reacting to a perception of an existential threat, one tends to bypass more normal, more principled considerations and move into a self-protective reaction where logic plays little role. Developmentally this represents a regression for modern-stage people from modern sensibilities grounded in universal principles and the rule of law to more traditional sensibilities that preference a “strong man” leader who does what is necessary to protect the traditional community without much concern about law or ethics, while distracting them from threats such as Donald Trump’s unrestrained drive for increasing power, self- aggrandizement, and greater wealth.

Most American voters understand that Donald Trump did in fact lose the 2020 election, that he knew it, and that among his various efforts to deny that loss, and among many other efforts, he encouraged a mob to storm the U.S. Capitol Building to stop the peaceful transfer of power to a newly elected president. The peaceful transfer of power after a presidential election is a hallmark of American democracy and a necessary foundation of any legitimate democratic republic. Essential to any modern democracy is the rule of law. Donald Trump has made clear in this and many other ways that he doesn’t care about the rule of law. In addition to trying to overturn an election, he has frequently expressed his desire and intention to jail his political opponents. He is in many ways pursuing an agenda of revenge against those who oppose him, and he is beginning to find ways to use the National Guard and the American military to repress Americans who publicly express opposition to his more extreme agendas.

He has been undermining America in another important respect. A hallmark of civilization based on modernism is trusting in the importance of science. President Trump has terminated billions of dollars of scientific research, a hallmark of America's contribution to the world. He ignores many of the important messages of public health and environmental science. One example of this is his bringing into his administration pre-scientific and conspiracist leaders, such as Robert F. Kennedy Jr. as the Secretary of Health and Human Services.

In short, President Trump is doing his best to establish himself as an authoritarian leader in a pre-modernist, pre-rational, pre-scientific and pre-democratic mold. He is complimentary of other authoritarian leaders who oppose the universal principles of a modern democratic republic, and he clearly aspires to be as they are and lead as they do. He pursues pre-modernist isolationism with selected uses of violence and American expansionism such as his threatening comments towards Canada and Greenland. He is skeptical of America's alliances, as well as the international standards and institutions that were established after World War II. President Trump is often labeled as being the leader of a new populist Republican Party that he has molded to his will. Whatever you call it, he has led his party and over half of the American public to support a pre-modern modality of leadership and positions that are severely undermining the American democratic republic.

In summary, a significant percentage of Americans view Trump and the current manifestation of the Republican Party as an existential threat to America, even as a significant percentage of Americans view the existential threat to America as those on the left and the Democratic Party. The situation is extremely volatile, presaging increasing possibilities of violence. On the current trajectory, American and other democratic republics suffering similar dynamics are increasingly becoming destabilized. Related to that, the alliances and global institutions that have maintained some significant level of global order since World War II are in danger. Without some dramatic action, such as is proposed here, national and global chaos and environmental devastation will become ever more likely.

PART TWO

A Way Forward Through Leadership with Greater Capacity and Skills

A key element that may eventually help lead America and the world out of this crisis is the emergence of a critical mass of people with mature integral leadership capacities and related skills. One of the deep ironies of early integral tendencies is that while people at this stage embrace language and principles that are profoundly inclusive, their actions tend to mainly privilege only themselves and the highly marginalized. They often look down on traditional and modern people who don't see the contexts they see. On the other hand, people who are at the next developmental stage—a mature integral developmental center of gravity—are more apt to fully realize this inclusive vision. They tend to honor and embrace everyone. It doesn't matter

whether you are a rural worker with very little formal education, a religious conservative, or a progressive academic from an elite institution. A person at mature integral is likely to view each person as a being of ultimate worth with well-founded concerns and opinions.

By its very nature, mature, integrally informed leadership connects with each person, whatever their background, orientation, or developmental center of gravity, to help them feel safe and heard, to honor their worldview, and to address their concerns. Such leadership is also proactive in designing and supporting forums and processes by which people can come together across their differences in many different ways and make progress on the challenges before them in a spirit of mutual respect, care, and concern, to deepen a shared sense of community and a shared commitment to liberty and justice for all.

A related significant gift that emerges once individuals arrive at the mature integral stage is the capacity to work well with complex adaptive systems. Such complex adaptive systems awareness and capacities create the possibility of designing solutions that work well with a much higher order of complexity than the modern mind or our modernist societal institutions are able to do. Clearly, one of the challenges of faltering leadership and societal institutions across the world is the lack of capacity to deal well with the complexities of our local/global twenty-first-century societal dynamics and ecological issues. Inherent in the mature integral sensibility is appreciating that all human life and civilization are deeply embedded within local to global interconnected ecosystems.

When you combine the mature integral capacity to understand, empathize and work well with all people and points of view with this greater systems-awareness and capacity, mature integral leaders with adequate training are able to connect well with virtually everyone, and to weave together the concerns and aspirations of all of us in a way that we can all come together to make progress on virtually all important issues that are before us. Such approaches can work through and/or complement our existing pre-integral processes and institutions until such processes and institutions evolve adequately or further deteriorate and are replaced over time by more mature, integrally informed processes and institutions.

One other critical dimension of a more mature leadership is having “mature character,” that is, virtuous character and morality consonant with one’s mature integral cognitive capacity. On the one hand, mature character certainly includes traditional qualities of good character and related virtues such as trustworthiness, honesty, integrity, self-control, courage, humility, gratitude, generosity, perseverance, hope, being forgiving and non-judgmental, etc. In addition, there are also developmentally related moral qualities of character such as having love, empathy, and compassion for all people on earth, as well as care and concern for all living creatures in the context of a global ecosystemic reality. This scope of loving and caring awareness tends not to fully come on-line prior to the mature integral stage of development.

At the time of the founding of the America democratic republic there was a critical mass of mature modernist leaders who embraced mature modernist universal principles like the

importance of the dignity of and respect for all mankind, and the importance of liberty and justice for all—all within in the scope of our nation state—at a time when the vast majority of Americans had not attained mature modernism. With a critical mass of mature integral leaders with virtuous character and world-centric morality in America and the world, we might be able to turn the tide, creating the conditions for the birth of a mature, integrally informed world civilization before it is too late. This is of course the optimistic hope that our rapidly degenerating society can avoid a devastating collapse into tyranny and/or chaos.

This mature integral stage of human development would include those same universal principles found in mature modernism, but would not delimit them to the borders of a nation-state. All people everywhere are our brothers and sisters and deserve the same respect and rights. Unlike many people at the early integral stage, those at mature integral tend to see the importance of nested communities. That is, all community and institutional environments are important in and of themselves, from families—the most important of all institutions—to all sorts of civic and religious institutions, all levels of political organization, and regional global organizations. We are relational beings who are naturally drawn to relational environments. Contracting one's boundaries into various kinds of isolation is a form of regression, unless there are unresolvable pathologies in greater collectives.

So even as we may maintain national boundaries for the foreseeable future, if we free up the energy and connections of human creativity and imagination, we will see a great deal of creative emergence that weaves its way without the strict limitations of traditional boundaries. There are already large metropolitan areas such as Los Angeles functioning almost as global city states with deeply embedded economic and cultural relationships extending all over the world. Over time, mature, integrally inspired public policies will begin to accommodate these endless synergistic interconnections, and political and other boundaries will begin to take on significant dimensions of porousness and evolution, even as they may remain critical to control and channel things like current and emerging mass migrations caused by climate change, which are just beginning.

There are two additional mature sub-stages of adult development beyond mature integral² with even more profound capacities of leadership and design than mature integral. There are not many examples yet of such people or of their process and institutional designs, let alone mainstream leaders in those additional stages. Yet we can learn much from the limited examples that exist and the profound possibilities that are already arising from those that inhabit advanced altitudes of adult development.

Theorists and practitioners who work from mature stages of development later than mature integral move beyond the body/mind integration seen at mature integral, and include the powerful sourcing of deeper pure awareness, inspiration, and creativity—one might say the integration of body/mind/spirit. One can see these sensibilities in the work of Otto Scharmer, leader of the Presencing Institute and affiliated with MIT. In his landmark book, *Theory U*:

Leading From The Future As It Emerges,³ he shares an approach that systematizes how groups can optimize planning and decision making by experiencing the dramatic re-framing that can result from sourcing inspiration beyond the thinking mind. In terms of leadership, they talk about “leading from the future.” Building upon decades of action research at MIT, the process shows how “individuals, teams, organizations, and large systems can build the essential leadership capacities needed to address the root causes of today’s social, environmental, and spiritual challenges.” As they express it, they show how to update the “operating code” in our societal systems through a shift in consciousness from ego-system to “eco-system awareness.”

Those who work from such elevated domains sometimes develop approaches that embrace the simplicity beyond mature integral multi-systemic complexity and identify seemingly simple and radically effective approaches to our complex challenges. James Ritchie-Dunham provides an example of this. In the book *Econsynomics: – The Science of Abundance*,⁴ he and his co-author Bettye Pruitt posit a theory of economics based on Abundance rather than scarcity (the foundation of all previous prominent economic theories), which has the potential to transform the world’s approach to economics and organizations of all sorts. There is paradoxically always a scarcity of things, but at the same time an endless abundance of possibilities. For collective flourishing, everyone must tap into their inner source of vibrancy (i.e., the high vibrational energy sensibility of abundance, purpose, and possibility) in the context of relationships with self, other, group, nature, and spirit. Those relationships must be grounded in trust and love and supported by clear agreements about how we can live and work together.

This is an example of the important integration of the dimensions of flourishing that is addressed in Part 3. We can combine the simplicity of caring, high-vibrancy relationships and clear agreements (strong “agreement fields”) to create possibilities for ongoing transformation and regenerative flourishing, both individually and across our interconnected relationships and ecosystemic connections.

In any case, we need people with at least mature integral capacities to lead in as many of the significant leadership roles in society, even as visionary work originating from people at later stages of adult development may eventually lead the way in developing profound and brilliant reframings for achieving solutions for the challenges of the twenty-first century.

A prominent example of a Democrat in America who reflects mature integral capacities is Pete Buttageg, a former presidential candidate, who had a strong record of being inclusive and collaborative as mayor of South Bend, Indiana, and who served as the U.S. Secretary of Transportation in the Biden Administration. He once received a standing ovation at a conservative Fox News-sponsored town hall meeting. John Huntsman is a prominent American Republican and former presidential candidate who began his political career by directing Envision Utah, an inclusive and collaborative process which enabled Utah cities to envision their futures. As a two-term Utah governor he received an unprecedented approval rating of over 90% and was chosen by President Obama to be the U.S. Ambassador to China.

We desperately need leaders of this caliber and maturity. However, established political leaders with such mature leadership track records and capacities in the public sector are extremely rare. There are greater numbers of such mature integral leadership in the business⁵ and higher education sectors. They need to be identified and recruited to engage in leadership in and transformation of the public sector. Just a few percent of the adult population have grown into mature integral capacities or later. We desperately need many more mature integral political leaders on both the right and the left who could play a significant role in weaving together effective solutions.

While mature integral capacities or later are rare, it is estimated that perhaps up to about twenty percent of adults in Western democratic societies have attained an early integral developmental center of gravity. Under the right conditions of support and training many of them could rapidly transition into mature integral sensibilities, capacities and skills. Since dominant early integral narratives reject the concept of hierarchies—even developmental hierarchies—there is a deep cultural barrier for many people at an early integral stage of development to even be open to engage in the training and practices to make the transition to the extraordinary gifts of mature integral. Nevertheless, we urgently need to identify large numbers of early integral leaders who are close to leaning into mature integral sensibilities and capacities. We should educate them about the importance of the mature integral stage of development and support them in growing into mature integral capacities and developing related skills. People and organizations involved in approaches, programs, and initiatives that are working on training mature integral and later capacities and leadership should be linking together in collaborative ways to optimize these possibilities. Perhaps AI training and support tools could be developed to rapidly increase the capacity to bring online mature integral leaders, which could change everything.

PART THREE

A Way Forward Through Adopting Principles of Flourishing Leadership

As much as we desperately need major societal leaders with at least mature integral capacities and skills, their performance will not amount to what we would hope unless they are applying principles of Flourishing Leadership and becoming Mature Flourishing Leaders. For that matter, all of us should be doing our best to learn about and integrate Flourishing Leadership principles in our lives. As principles of Flourishing Leadership begin to create more flourishing dynamics in every dimension and level of society, from local to global, the promise of universal flourishing for all will begin to unfold.

In recent years there has been a great deal of research regarding what constitutes human flourishing and interrelated individual, collective, and ecosystemic flourishing. Early in 2025, a landmark five-year study on human flourishing was completed, involving over 200,000 people in

more than 20 countries and over 100 scholars and researchers.⁶ The primary flourishing lenses for the research are these:

- Happiness and life satisfaction
- Mental and physical health
- Meaning and purpose
- Character and virtue
- Close social relationships
- Financial and material security
- Religion and spirituality

The results are being evaluated by scholars and researchers in a large number of fields and are generating hundreds of papers. All this will lay the groundwork for additional iterations of this project.

During the same five-year period of the Global Flourishing Study, a global Flourishing Network sponsored by Harvard University (“HFN”) and led by Matthew Lee began to emerge.⁷ It has developed into a global network of hundreds of researchers, scholars and practitioners in many fields, including over a dozen interest groups, working groups, and communities of practice, each pursuing flourishing research, study and practice in their respective areas of interest and expertise. The author is involved in multiple dimensions of the Flourishing Network⁸.

A primary project of HFN is to get the United Nations to substitute Global Flourishing Goals (GFGs) as the primary theme of the UN in place of the Global Sustainability Goals. The GFGs are: life satisfaction, holistic health and wellbeing, fulfilling social relationships, meaning and purpose, and contributing to the flourishing of life forms. The leadership of the HFN has assigned the NGO, YOUNify of which the author is chair, to develop and implement a strategy to socialize the GFGs globally and work towards getting buy-in of the UN – to weave alignment around GFGs and scale the results globally to that level of impact.

In its collaborations, conferences, and offerings, the Leadership for Flourishing working group of the HFN chaired from Oxford University⁹ has drawn on a vast range of resources relating to flourishing and leadership that generate ecosystem-wide flourishing grounded in love and assumes that everyone can be a flourishing leader. You don’t flourish alone; that is, if you are practicing evidence-based principles of flourishing, you are practicing Flourishing Leadership. The most foundational principles (“Foundational Principles”) of evidence based Flourishing Leadership are well researched and not at all surprising. It is just that they are not significantly integrated into most approaches to leadership.

For the vast majority of us, learning and practicing principles of Flourishing Leadership undergirded by strong and virtuous character are all that we need for flourishing and productive outcomes in our lives. This will be transformational in our families, associations, neighborhoods, communities, churches, organizations, etc. Following principles of Flourishing Leadership will also be critical to those who take on significant societal stewardships, also necessarily grounded in strong and virtuous character, in addition to having at least mature integral capacities and skills for effective Mature Flourishing Leadership.

This Part 3 concentrates on introducing the seven most Foundational Principles of Flourishing Leadership.¹⁰ These Foundational Principles—which are also traditional virtues—are trust, courage, agency, community, purpose, hope, and love (which includes empathy, compassion and the fruits of joy).

A comprehensive meta-study of research relating to attachment theory is a significant source of corroborative support of the Foundational Principles of Flourishing Leadership.¹¹ Based on this study the following five principles are deemed the highest leverage principles for optimal parenting:

1. Provide your children safety and protection (trust). This enables children to feel secure in venturing out, exploring, and knowing that they can return to the safety of their parents' embrace.
2. Be attuned to and empathize with the feelings and concerns of your children (empathy). Listen to your children and help them feel understood and loved.
3. Soothe and comfort your children when they are hurt or in distress (compassion). Be a source of unlimited and unqualified compassion.
4. Express delight and joy in your children's very existence (joy). Make them feel that they are loved and celebrated without limitation or condition.
5. Support your children in developing their capacities consistent with their interests and creative inclinations rather than insisting that they pursue your preferences and expectations (agency).

In summary, these principles provide a framework for supporting healthy patterns of attachment, growth, and development, and are key for loving our children into happiness, wholeness and flourishing.

Another example of the alignment of these Foundational Principles with another lens of principles of human resilience derived from a meta-study of several research studies on human resilience.¹² which concluded that another combination of five elements of these Foundational Principles of Flourishing Leadership collectively yield the highest leverage principles supporting human resilience. Those five principles are as follows:

- Having deeply connected and vibrant relationships (community).
- Having an “internal locus of control” while maintaining the capacity of choice and being true to the integrity of one's deepest wisdom and values, regardless of circumstances (agency).
- Having a sense of purpose and meaning based on contribution to the greater good (i.e., communion-in-agency when these two polar qualities interpenetrate).
- Having a profound sense of hopefulness, not in terms of hoping for specific outcomes but rather having an attitude of being able to respond to whatever arises in each moment with wisdom, integrity, compassion, and courage (hope).
- Having a deep experience of love, the virtue that penetrates and lubricates all these other virtues. Love, empathy, and compassion, both for self and others, are at the very heart of much research for creating personal, family, and community flourishing (Love).

We will now review the nature of the seven Foundational Principles of Flourishing Leadership, along with various related principles.

Trust

Being trustworthy, grounded in strong and virtuous character, is perhaps the cornerstone of Flourishing Leadership. When a leader is trustworthy, it gives people a sense of safety. If a leader has significant character flaws and is not basically virtuous, the fruits of that person's leadership will inevitably be skewed, and she cannot be trusted. An important example of trustworthiness is when a leader protects others in their scope of leadership from exploitation or abuse, or tolerating those who witness abuse but do nothing about it.¹³ Serious abuse is more pervasive in organizations of all sorts than most of us imagine. We don't hear about such abuse as often as it occurs because irrespective of policies to the contrary, many organizations and leaders go into protective mode to protect themselves from reputational damage and liability. A leader who embodies and shares such qualities of trust engenders great confidence in a collective.

With regard to mature manifestations of trustworthiness, when a leader is deeply centered in trust in the Divine, the Absolute—however that is framed—it makes a significant difference in how they show up in as a person and as a leader. There is a peaceful centeredness and stability that one can sense, and such people tend to rely on a deeper intuitive access to non-egoic transcendent qualities, such as wisdom or intuition, expansive love, and a motivation to be deeply life-affirming in all ways. Holding such deep trust gives rise to a centeredness in “no fear.”

Courage

Courage is essential for effective Flourishing Leadership. This is not a courage of recklessness that can put a leader and others needlessly in danger. It is the courage to stand by one's

convictions and shared purpose, to keep moving forward even in challenging circumstances. At the same time, a mature manifestation of Flourishing Leadership carries the wisdom of prudence, of not taking risks that are not warranted by the overall circumstances. It includes being deeply “present” to what is arising in the moment so that a leader is not stuck in assumptions that may not be accurate. It draws on a deeper wisdom grounded in love and commitment to that which is life affirming.

Agency

Flourishing Leaders honor people’s agency, including but not limited to the following: Honor each person’s conscience and values (including your own) and encourage feedback in this regard rather than silence. Recognize and honor each person’s strengths and take account of and adjust for weaknesses. Create opportunities for fostering personal stewardship and leadership as well as followership, and when appropriate be willing to follow the leadership of those you lead. Encourage and create opportunities for individual creativity to emerge and the fruits to be harvested and applied as appropriate. Encourage and create opportunities for personal development and growth in ways that align with people’s interests and passions.

Mature qualities of agency in Flourishing Leadership will reflect “exemplar leadership,” with the leader modeling the character-based transformative presence that she expects others to grow into. This is also the arena of “servant leadership,” where you support others in learning to be leaders.

Community

Even as Flourishing Leadership supports individual agency, it should create a strong sense of community. This has to be understood and held in a both/and way. It is important to support those you lead in developing social skills and emotional intelligence, and to provide leadership training that includes working with diversity. The Flourishing Leader supports collaborative work and strong teamwork. She creates opportunities for collective creativity to emerge and the fruits to be harvested and applied as appropriate.

A sense of community includes everyone, including first all those for whom you have stewardship, but a mature sense of community also extends a sense of connection and care for the broader community and ultimately everyone everywhere. Mature caring community includes a sense of communion that ultimately extends to the ecosystems within which we live and work, including all life. A mature Flourishing Leader is deeply aware of the intimate interconnections among individual, collective, and ecosystemic flourishing, and feels a stewardship to tend to all of these interrelated dimensions.

Purpose

Flourishing Leadership holds fulfilling the purpose of a group in an expansive manner and consistently inspires the group. There is a progression in this regard:

- Align and connect individual assumptions to shared assumptions.
- Align and connect individual values to shared values.
- Align and connect shared values to collective agreements.
- Align and connect collective agreements to the purpose of the group.
- Note the spirit and expansive direction of such alignment and connection and further align and connect the purpose of the group to be of service to the greater good in an ecosystemic context.

In addition to paying attention to collective purpose and alignment, a Flourishing Leader sees to it that attention is paid to the unique needs, conscience, and talents of each person. This not only identifies individual concerns but taps into the possibility of harnessing the unique capacities of each person and the significant additional synergy, creativity, collective productivity, and flourishing that results.

Hope

Flourishing Leadership engenders a culture of hope. Hope derives significantly from trust in a leader of good character, capacity, and stewardship. Hope is also related to developing and supporting the important qualities of perseverance and grit in service of shared purpose. It helps create a sense of abundance and creative possibility and being grateful and dealing generously with the opportunities and challenges that arise.

Hope in its most mature and profound manifestation is the confidence that we can deal well and lovingly with whatever arises. It emerges particularly from being centered in transcendent trust and coming from abundance and gratitude.

Love

If the foundation of Flourishing Leadership is trust, the first principle of Flourishing Leadership that embraces and connects all principles of Flourishing Leadership is love, along with the related qualities as appropriately expressed in any given setting, such as care, empathy, and compassion. Flourishing Leadership involves truly listening to those you lead, both regarding their own personal circumstances, and appreciatively receiving feedback relating to their experience of you as a leader and the organization you may lead. It includes being helpfully responsive in terms of personal issues and gratefully responsive regarding organizational feedback.

There are many other important principles of Flourishing Leadership, but these seven Foundational Principles are central and essential for flourishing outcomes.

PART FOUR

A Way Forward by Doing the Inner Work in Support of Flourishing Leadership and Mature Flourishing Leadership

The Foundational Principles of Flourishing Leadership and their relationship to one another can be understood in the context of an ecosystem of flourishing through the framework of the individual and group practice of integral polarity practice (“IPP”) developed by the author. IPP is designed to support interrelated individual, collective, and ecosystemic flourishing through the full spectrum of human development. Of the twenty-one primary polarities in the IPP system, the relational polarity is the dynamic that specifically encompasses, interrelates, and supports all of the Foundational Principles of Flourishing Leadership, and includes the poles of “agency” and “community,” or “communion.”

Trust

In the IPP practice, one meditatively brings the two poles together where there is no separation, which results in the experience of a profound stillness. That place of stillness is called the “Still Point.” It is a transcendent experience of Beingness. The Still Point of each polarity has a name, and in the case of the polar qualities of agency and communion, the Still Point that brings them together into stillness is transcendent “trust.” This is ultimate trust in something transcendent, however you frame that, such as trust in beingness, the ultimate, God, spirit, absolute, higher self, etc. As with every IPP Still Point, the trust Still Point of the relational polarity is initially meditative, but over time can be stabilized and brought into one's moment-to-moment daily experience. Having a practice to access and stabilize such trust deeply enhances one's trustworthiness, including giving people a sense of calm and safety in your presence. Trust—especially transcendent trust—underpins the Foundational Principles of Flourishing Leadership.

Courage

From our infancy, fear naturally arises when there is something “other” than self. It is a normal protective function. Yet we note how important courage is as a Foundational Principle of Flourishing Leadership. The Still Point of transcendent trust by its very nature is an experience of transcendent “no fear,” a place where in a sense all is One. The quality of courage naturally arises from someone who is centered in such trust. Yet the paradox is that when you come from a place of transcendent trust and no fear, you can be more present in the moment to see what is present that appropriately engenders fear.

We learn and practice in IPP that fear is what we call a “polar activator” of the relational dimension of ourselves, and along with courage these two form their own polarity: courage/fear. So someone who is courageous and uses courage in an appropriate manner has a seed of fear embedded within it so that it doesn't become an imprudent and foolish courage, just as fear in this polar relationship has a seed of courage within it. When fear is doing its job

appropriately, it is being courageous in warning the self of real danger to the self and perhaps others. So through an IPP practice, we learn to come from a place of transcendent trust and no fear that gives rise to character-based courage with a wisdom that assesses the appropriateness in the moment of how and when to assert courageousness.

Agency and Communion

In IPP practice you embrace each polar quality and explore their relationship to one another. The polar qualities of the relational polarity are agency/communion. Are they in conflict? Do they try to balance one another? Have they learned to co-exist, and even learned to work together? Have they begun to deeply “dance together” and jointly sense in the moment what is needed? Have they grown so close that they are deeply integrated, where they immediately align in what they do in service of a shared purpose? This progression is a trajectory of maturity of the relational polarity, as it is of the other twenty-one IPP polarities.

The mature integrative experience of agency/communion is sensing that there is communion deeply embedded in your agency (for instance, you have a deep sense of purpose greater than yourself) and a deep sense of agency embedded in your communion (for instance, as a leader you are always deeply aware of and tending to the needs, concerns, and gifts of others in the collective). In IPP practice you become aware of the trajectory of maturity of this and all polarities, and you can sense into exactly where you personally are in this regard on the spectrum of maturity. *When such polar integration is realized for several designated IPP polarities, you are stabilized in a mature integral developmental center of gravity in support of mature integral leadership. There are also several polarities and elements of IPP practice that support you in growing into later stages of development.*

Based on over two decades of professional involvement in scoring and coaching adult development, as well as coaching mature integral and later leadership, the author has concluded that most adults have the capacity to grow not only into the mature integral stage of development but into even later stages of development. It is simply a matter of having the inner practices over time, together with appropriate guidance, to support such growth.

Purpose

As already suggested, when the poles of the agency/communion polarity have become integrated, there is a mature sense of purpose that has been generated—such as having a sense of purpose beyond one’s self. There are other IPP polarities that are more specifically designed to hold purposeful activity, such as the lead/follow polarity. It is at the mature integral stage that the skillful approach to servant leadership arises as the leader understands that you can lead not only from in front but from behind, as you support others in learning how to lead. Wherever your position is on the organizational chart, for example, you can learn and grow into an intuitive sense as to when to lead and when to follow, even as both qualities are always present and available. It is at this maturity of leadership, where the poles are deeply embedded in each other,

that one sees the more flexible and even fluid leadership dynamic of facilitation/inquiry, where everyone is open and present to what is arising as you explore collaboratively together your deepening shared purpose and how to implement that in ways that are productive and that foster flourishing. IPP practice is designed to inform and support leadership development through multiple polarities into such interconnected synergy, collaboration, and flourishing.

Hope

The Still Point of trust generates a transcendent attitude of hope. This is not an everyday hope for specific things, but rather a deep dispositional hopefulness. It includes an inner assurance that whatever arises can be dealt with wisely and well, which can be an enormous gift to the self and others. In this way, for example, you might be the one who is helpful and uplifting others around you, even if you are the one who has suffered a loss or is experiencing a disability—or is even dying. Just as the Still Point of trust is the transcendent anchor—a deep quality of Beingness—to this relational polarity, the transcendent quality of hope is the deep inner disposition and quality of character that helps support the attitude that anything is possible, and that whatever happens we can deal with.

This quality of hope is buoyed by a deep sense of abundance and gratitude that arise in the immediately preceding IPP polarity, and hope supports the related virtues of patience, perseverance, grit and courage.

Love

When trust is deeply inhabited and hope is present, the dominant quality that flows through a person is unqualified and unlimited love. This quality of love and the related transcendent qualities of profound and unlimited empathy and compassion are not limited to humanity but extend also to the entire life world and the planet.

Trust, hope, and love form a transcendent tripolar dynamic, which demonstrates that it is no coincidence that variations of these three principles of trust, hope, and love are clustered together so frequently, such as in faith, hope, and charity. It is also no surprise that this quality of love is encountered in most of our lives so infrequently outside of our closest family and friend relations (if even there), given the human proclivity to allow egoic qualities and fears to remain so central in our lives. However, IPP provides a practice framework for working with and growing into the realizations of love and other transcendent qualities—all of which are defined as virtues.

Each successive emergent IPP polar dynamic transcends but includes the qualities and virtues of all prior emerging polarities. In one way or another all IPP polarities support leadership that generates flourishing that builds upon and/or is complementary to patterns and qualities of the Foundational Principles of Flourishing Leadership. In addition, IPP creates a practice framework over time to grow into mature integral capacities and beyond.

CONCLUSION

A Call to Action to Support This Way Forward

It is important for all of us to take seriously this message about the importance of Flourishing Leadership in our own lives and associations. It is equally important for those who are engaging or want to engage in major societal leadership stewardships to develop the additional mature integral capacities and skills that are so desperately needed—to become Mature Flourishing Leaders. Please consider formulating the approach that is unique to you and pursue *this way forward*.

Something everyone can do now is to learn about and begin integrating into their lives the Foundational Principles of Flourishing Leadership and over time expand that knowledge as to other principles and practices of Flourishing Leadership. This is the main point for the vast majority of us. These principles of Flourishing Leadership can transform our own lives, our families, our neighborhoods and communities, our churches and organizations. Implied in this as well is that Flourishing Leadership is grounded in strong and virtuous character, which takes inner work and a lifetime of ongoing inner and relational practice. IPP is a practice that is designed to support anyone in this regard as a complement to any belief or cultural orientation.

In order to preserve both civilization and the planet, it is vital that many people begin to do the work to grow into Mature Flourishing Leadership capacities, and to learn related skills that can competently address twenty-first-century complexities through the lens of flourishing. Following are summaries of the categories of advanced capacities and skills that the author deems necessary for Mature Flourishing Leadership. They are designated as the six “Mature Flourishing Leadership imperatives”:

- The local-global moral imperative: We need leaders who have a profound love and concern for all people on earth as beings of ultimate worth, who have a strong sense of caring stewardship for all life on the planet, and who are committed to encouraging humankind to live fully into the implications of this moral imperative.
- The local-global ecosystemic imperative: We need leaders who can appreciate and understand that we all live in local to global interconnected ecosystems, including the natural ecosystems of the earth that include land, water, and air. They need to develop the skills to evaluate ecosystemic realities in complex adaptive ways and demonstrate the ability to design and facilitate processes and institutions that guide us towards local to global interrelated individual, collective, and ecosystemic flourishing.
- The nested communities imperative: We need leaders who appreciate how important communities and institutions are to human flourishing in all dimensions and domains all over the world, beginning most importantly with the family and how they manifest and interconnect in virtually endless ways, locally to globally. They must also attend to protecting and supporting all the communities and institutions that are inevitably

interrelated and nested in one another, while at the same time allowing them to co-evolve.

- The developmental and cultural connection imperative: We need leaders who have learned to appreciate the worldview and concerns of all people, whatever their cultural background or developmental center of gravity, and who can truly hear them and understand them, and be willing to address their core concerns in a fully honoring way.
- The “integral weave” imperative: We need leaders who can hold all of this complexity and weave together solutions that fully take account of the vastly different perspectives and interests of all people in ways that honor everyone’s core concerns in the context of all of the above imperatives, and find solutions that bring people together in service of interrelated individual, collective, and ecosystemic flourishing locally to globally. The integral weave brings the alignment that is needed to obtain collective flourishing outcomes.
- The taking alignment to scale imperative: A key to making leadership effective is taking the alignment that has been achieved to the scale that is relevant for the results that are desired. Mature Flourishing Leadership will inevitably be dealing with significant diversity and complexity, and sizable scale. They will need to utilize all of the capacities and skills in the other five Mature Flourishing Leadership imperatives and with additional skills take the steps that are necessary to produce and sustain the scale of flourishing outcomes that are desired.

It will be an extraordinary development when Mature Flourishing Leaders begin moving into significant leadership positions in existing societal institutions. For the most part, however, such institutions are not designed to optimally accommodate the collaborative, inclusive and emergent processes which are inherent in Mature Flourishing Leadership. Mature Flourishing Leaders will need to be endlessly creative in finding ways to engage in integral weaving and bringing that weaving to scale in ways that are complementary to existing institutions and ultimately evolving or replacing existing institutions, which are in the process of failing.

It will remain important to honor and build upon the inspired foundations of current constitutional democratic republics, which in short stand for the rule of law and liberty and justice for all, but to also take seriously the need for the applications of these principles not to be delimited by national boundaries, as is generally the case now.

The current dilemma is that there are virtually no Mature Flourishing Leaders in existing societal positions of significant responsibility, and there are few people who are trained as Mature Flourishing Leaders or with similar capacities and skills, however one might designate them. But that is also the opportunity and the possibility that we must work on now. Although a relatively small percentage of adults have grown into mature integral capacities, in the broader society, there are nevertheless millions of adults who already have mature integral capacities or

are close to having those capacities who with adequate support and training could in a fairly short period of time provide the Mature Flourishing Leadership that the world so desperately needs.

Over time we must educate the rising generations about the importance for all of us to integrate principles of Flourishing Leadership into our lives, and we must create the opportunities for growth and training of anyone who is interested in developing the capacities and skills of Mature Flourishing Leadership.

On the current trajectory of failing leadership and deteriorating institutions it will likely be only a matter of a few decades before civilization built on modernist principles will collapse and the continued uninterrupted exploitation of our natural resources in unsustainable ways will result in devastating consequences for human life and many other forms of life on earth.

© John T. Kesler 2025

NOTES

1. The two sub-stages for each stage are reflected in ego-development theory through scholars and researchers such as Susanne Cook-Greuter and Terri O’Fallon.
2. Two additional mature sub-stages—of two full stages—beyond the mature integral stage are reflected in the STAGES model of human ego development as well as in the integral polarity practice model developed by the author. There is no consensus in the field of ego development that this is the case, but there is significant research related to the STAGES model that supports that proposition. The author was part of the initial research group with Dr. O’Fallon and two others that took two years to score a large number of sentence completion inventories based on the STAGES scoring rules that were then statistically evaluated to establish initial credibility for the existence of these two additional stages of human development.
3. C. Otto Scharmer, *Theory U: Leading from the Future as it Emerges* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2009).
4. James Ritchie-Dunham with Bettye Pruitt, *Ecosynomics: The Science of Abundance* (Belchertown, MA: Vibrancy Publishing, 2014). Ritchie-Dunham’s work is summarized with about as much simplicity as is possible in a more recent book entitled *Agreements: Your Choice* (Belchertown MA: Vibrancy Publishing, 2024).
5. Wendy K. Smith and Marianne W. Lewis, *Both and Thinking: Embracing Creative Tensions to Solve Your Toughest Problems* (Boston Massachusetts: Harvard Business Review Press).
6. See an overview of the Global Flourishing Study together with multiple links and references at globalflourishingstudy.com.

7. See an overview of the Flourishing Network sponsored by Harvard University at hfn.fas.harvard.edu.

8. Please note the several roles of the author in the Flourishing Network in the Professional and Biographical Information at the end of this essay.

9. The Leadership for Flourishing working group is co-chaired by two Oxford University-affiliated scholars: Katie Granville-Chapman and Emmie Bidston. They are also co-authors of a book that highlights all the Foundational Principles of Flourishing Leadership, *Leader; know, love and inspire your people* (Crown House Publishing, 2020).

10. Based on the references in this essay and the alignment with the IPP relational polarity, the author has concluded that it is justifiable to set forth these seven principles as the Foundational Principles of Flourishing Leadership.

11. Daniel P. Brown and David S. Elliott, *Attachment Disturbance in Adults: Awakening the Power of Families and Neighborhoods* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2016).

12. Keith J. Karren, N. Lee Smith, and Kathryn J. Gordon, *Mind Body Health: The Effects of Attitudes, Emotions, and Relationships*, 5th ed. (San Francisco: Pearson Education 2014).

13. Note the important work being done by Professor Amos Guiora, *Armies of Enablers: Survivor Stories of Complicity and Betrayal in Sexual Assaults* (Chicago American Bar Association, 2020).

If you are interested in John Kesler speaking, training, consulting, or coaching on Flourishing Leadership or Mature Flourishing Leadership you may contact him directly at: john@theippinstitute.com.