

# T H E F U L L S P E C T R U M

BY TONY SCHWARTZ

*For 20 years, author and theoretician Ken Wilber  
has been charting the development of human consciousness.  
In the process, he found his own heart.*



By the time I met Ken Wilber, I'd spent nearly two years crisscrossing the country, interviewing people for the book I was writing about my search for wisdom in America. I'd devoted hundreds of hours to talking with psychologists, philosophers, physicians, mystics, teachers, and scientists, and experimenting with their practices. But as moved as I was by much of what I'd learned, I still found it difficult to reconcile their often contradictory views about the nature of a complete life. Wilber, more than anyone else, helped convince me that there is emerging a uniquely American wisdom tradition that unites the best of East and West, psychology and spirit, in integrated, comprehensive practices.

No one has described this path to wisdom more systematically and comprehensively than Wilber. Almost completely self-educated, he wrote his first book, *The Spectrum of Consciousness*, at the age of 23. In the two decades since, he has meticulously mapped the stages of human development in a dozen books aimed at synthesizing psychology and various spiritual traditions—most ambitiously of all in his latest book *Sex, Ecology, Spirituality* (see box, page 41).

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Wilber's "full-spectrum" model is based on the premise that human development unfolds in predictable stages. Only by moving successfully through each stage, he argues, is it possible first to develop a healthy sense of individuality and ultimately to experience a broader identity that both transcends and includes the separate self.

Because he is not tied to any particular dogma, Wilber functions as both a theoretician of consciousness and a critic of the individual strengths, myths, pretensions, shortcomings, and outright falsehoods contained in any given approach to wisdom. He makes his personal preferences clear: He is more passionately interested in the higher stages of consciousness than in the personal levels of ego development, and he is more drawn to the intellectual and spiritual realms than to those of the heart and body. But the choices are practical ones. He leads, he says, with his strongest suit—the capacity to absorb, synthesize, categorize, and make sense of vast amounts of information from disparate fields.

Acknowledged by most of his colleagues as the leading theoretician in his field, Wilber is known to them mostly through his writing. Now 45, he lives alone in Boulder, Colorado, spends most of his waking hours writing and meditating, declines all offers to speak and teach, rarely gives interviews, and limits himself

to a small circle of close friends. No one I sought out in the course of my project was harder to get to than Wilber. Once he agreed to talk, however, no one gave more generously of his time.

For a long time, Wilber and I had a somewhat formal relationship, in which he served as teacher and I willingly played the role of student. He had an enormous store of knowledge, and I had a huge appetite to learn. In response to my questions, he was invariably logical and intellectually persuasive. Eventually, however, I discovered that Wilber can also be warm, charming, patient, generous, and funny. Because he lives such a solitary life and has written in mostly theoretical terms, he has been mistakenly pigeonholed as a remote intellectual. In fact, he has many other interests, from weight lifting to cooking. Over time, we began to talk nearly as much about relationships, movies, and mutual acquaintances as we did about wisdom. While we communicated mostly by phone and fax, I came to understand that Wilber has a heart that is nearly as big and embracing as his mind.

If Wilber is now widely seen as transpersonal psychology's leading theorist, he views himself in a broader perspective. His intellectual influences come as much from Western psychology as from the Eastern contemplative traditions, as much from Freud as from the Buddha. Perhaps equally important, his earliest in-

# T H E F U L L

terest and training were in the hard sciences, and his ambitions could scarcely have been more conventional and all-American.

Wilber's father was a career officer in the Air Force, and the family moved to a new town nearly every year, but Wilber managed to adapt quickly and easily. He was elected student-body president at two different schools, was captain of the football team in junior high, graduated at the top of his high-school class, and gave the valedictory speech. He also ran with the older jocks, drinking beer, smoking cigarettes, and making trouble. "I was very attuned to the outer world, very outgoing, and very eager to be liked," he says. Moving so frequently was painful—Wilber still remembers sobbing for several days when he had to leave one town—but it had its compensations. "I learned to get involved with people very quickly and intimately," he explains, "but also to hold everything lightly. It was a real Buddhist education: to be open and yet to know that everything comes and goes."

After graduating from high school in Lincoln, Nebraska, Wilber went off to Duke University in the fall of 1967, intending to become a doctor. Throughout high school, he'd been passionate about science, building chemistry laboratories in his basement and winning prizes at science fairs. But no sooner did Wilber arrive at Duke than he realized he had no desire to be there. "I wanted knowledge about interior, psychological, spiritual questions, although I didn't yet formulate it that way. I just knew from the very first day that there was nothing the university was teaching that I wanted to know. It was a classic global existential crisis. I was looking for meaning—for God—and I'd run through all of the outer places you can find it."

In search of other answers, one day Wilber happened to pick up a small classic work by the Chinese philosopher Lao Tzu. The opening lines of the *Tao Te Ching* include these:

*Truly, only he that rids himself forever of desire  
can see the Secret Essences;  
He that has never rid himself of desire can  
only  
see the Outcomes.  
These two things issue from the same source,*

*but nevertheless are different in form.  
This source we can but call the Mystery.  
The doorway whence issue all secret  
essences.*

Here was an entirely different way of looking at the world: a focus not on external goals but on an exploration of deeper meaning beyond logic, beyond science, even beyond the ordinary definitions of self.

Wilber began reading voraciously in the mystical literature. He devoured the Bhagavad Gita and the kabbalah, the

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writings of East-West synthesizers such as Aldous Huxley and of the Zen-inflected Beat poets such as Gary Snyder. He studied Sufism, Hinduism, and Buddhism. Reading Alan Watts led him to the Indian mystic Krishnamurti and the Western philosopher Norman O. Brown, who in turn pointed him to Freud. Mesmerized by Freud's insights about the early stages of development and the role of the unconscious, Wilber devoured his entire collected works. "Suddenly, I wasn't just tinkering with chemistry," Wilber says. "I was on to something that had to do with my own happiness, my own salvation, what life was really about."

Wilber quit Duke after his sophomore year and returned to Nebraska, where his family was still living. In order to get a deferment from the draft—and because he was still conventional enough to want a college degree—he enrolled at the University of Nebraska, majoring in chemistry and physics because they came so easily to him. Dispensing with

his required assignments in short order, he spent the rest of each day—5, 7, even 10 hours—reading his own syllabus of Eastern philosophy and Western psychology. He ordered books by mail, a dozen at a time, from the Shambhala Bookstore in Berkeley, California, which specialized in books on Eastern and Western philosophy.

At the same time, Wilber continued on a traditional academic track. After graduating from college, he got a master's degree in chemistry and began working toward his Ph.D. To support himself, he tutored undergraduates on the side. One day a brash, attractive young woman named Amy Wagner arrived at his house for her first lesson—and never left. A year later, in 1972, she and Wilber were married.

In time, Wilber realized that while he felt better about his life, he was now suffering from what he termed "a severe case of cognitive dissonance." On the one hand, his academic work was yielding fewer and fewer rewards. At the same time, he found himself struggling with how to reconcile the brilliant but seemingly contradictory ideas espoused by people as diverse as Freud, Fritz Perls, and the Buddha.

"Most of these thinkers were trying to disprove what everyone else had to say," Wilber explains. "My problem was that I felt that they were all saying something true, but that none of them had it entirely figured out." As Wilber read more deeply and eclectically, the pieces started to fall together. "It slowly dawned on me that these people weren't all addressing the same level of consciousness," he says. The question was no longer "Who is right and who is wrong?" but "How do all these truths fit together?" Somewhat fittingly, the answer came to Wilber one day in a biology laboratory where he was cutting the eyes out of cows, in order to study the mechanism of vision. "I finished in the lab that day, cleaned up, went home, walked into my kitchen, and told Amy, 'I'm quitting graduate school and I'm going to write a book.'"

Wilber wrote *The Spectrum of Consciousness* in longhand in 3 months, working 12 hours a day and rarely revising. The process, he felt, was sufficient reward. "When I was writing,

# S P E C T R U M

I was expressing my own higher self; I had no doubt about that at all," he remembers. "Two paragraphs into the writing. . . I knew I had come home, found myself, found my purpose, found my God. I have since never doubted it once." Wilber's faith was truly tested. It took him more than 3 years to get the book published, and it was rejected by 20 publishers before it finally found a home.

Although he was just 27 when *The Spectrum of Consciousness* came out in 1978—and while he boasted no formal credentials in psychology or philosophy—the book attracted immediate attention. James Fadiman, a founding board member of the Association for Transpersonal Psychology, concluded that "Wilber has written the most sensible, comprehensive book about consciousness since William James." In a systematic way, Wilber synthesized the thinking of dozens of Western psychologists and Eastern mystics to lay out a model of human development from infancy to enlightenment. Less than two years later, he followed up with *No Boundary*, a leaner, more accessible description of his full-spectrum model of consciousness. Over the next 10 years, he produced an average of one book a year, each relating his developmental theories about consciousness to a different field.

Wilber makes a powerful case that the stages of human development unfold in a predictable, consistent sequence. Even after one reaches the highest stage of personality development—the fully integrated ego described by Freud and others—Wilber argues that it is possible to cultivate equally well-delineated stages of transpersonal development. At the same time, he says, no stage replaces or negates an earlier one. "The higher stage always has access to those below it," Wilber says. "What's negated is not the previous stage but its limitations."

This theory explains how it is possible simultaneously to experience both a separate self and a sense of unity with a larger whole. One way to conceive of the

idea, Wilber said, is to think of each stage as a broadening of identity. "To be part of a larger whole doesn't mean that the part evaporates," he has written. "You are an individual, yet you also feel that you are part of the larger unit of a family, which is a larger part of a society. Mysticism is just the even larger identity of also feeling part of the cosmos at large, and thus finding even greater meaning and value."

For Wilber, this insight lay at the heart of his developmental approach. "If

around age six or seven. Stage five is marked by the capacity for rational understanding, introspective thinking, deductive reasoning, and socially acceptable behavior, and usually starts around adolescence. Stage six, Wilber concluded, represents the highest potential stage of personal development, characterized by a more integrated form of thinking, including the ability to synthesize concepts, connect ideas, and relate truths to one another. It is also the first stage at which a genuine mind-body integration occurs.

Wilber's main theoretical breakthrough was to suggest that development can continue beyond these first six levels to the transpersonal stages, which also unfold sequentially. None of these higher realms are generally recognized by Western psychologists or cultures; instead, the center of gravity in modern Western culture is what Wilber calls stage five. And while the higher transpersonal stages of consciousness have long been described in Eastern literature, Wilber was the first theoretician to map them as a continuation of ordinary ego development and to describe their qualities in accessible psycho-



logical terms. one philosophical system can embrace another but not vice versa, then the more encompassing is the more valid," he says. "I tried to look at all the Western developmental studies, as well as what's been written about the Eastern stages of growth, and then create a master template—a comprehensive psychology of matter, body, mind, soul, and spirit."

Wilber characterized 10 broad stages of the development of consciousness. Stage one, he said, is marked by the newborn's first capacities for sensation and perception. The development of impulses and emotions and the capacity of thinking in images emerge in stage two, between the ages of one and three. In stage three, usually from ages three to six, the child begins to use the symbols and concepts that form the heart of language. Taking on the role of others and performing rule-based tasks begins at stage four,

logical terms.

By Wilber's model, the seventh, or "psychic," stage—in which psychic capacities may indeed emerge—refers to the beginning of transpersonal awareness. At this level, one has the first direct apprehension of God or a Higher Spirit in the universe. Stage eight is called the "subtle" level, referring to the notion that there are processes of consciousness more subtle than everyday, outer-directed experience. "This stage is one in which you touch divinity, even unite with divinity, in an all-encompassing love," Wilber explains. In this system, seven and eight represent the two stages of "soul" development—what Wilber describes as "a halfway house between the personal ego-mind and the impersonal or transpersonal Spirit. It is also the home of the Witness or, more specifically, the capacity to observe one's

# T H E F U L L S

thoughts and emotions without attachment or identification."

The "causal" level—stage nine—is not just a union of soul and God but also of a "supreme identity" or pure Spirit. This stage occurs, Wilber concluded, when union is so complete that there is no sense of self at all, a state of consciousness akin to deep, dreamless sleep or pure emptiness. The tenth and highest stage—nonduality, or the absence of any split between subject and object—is both the easiest and the hardest to explain. "The tenth really isn't a separate stage," Wilber explains, "but the ground and reality of all stages, high or low, sacred and profane. It is simply the reality, or the 'is-ness,' of everything."

Both stage nine and stage ten reflect the level of Spirit. "Once you push through the soul level, then the Witness itself collapses into everything witnessed," Wilber says. "You don't witness the clouds; you are the clouds. You're the sum total of everything that arises from moment to moment. This radically simple and nondual awareness is, as Zen would put it, the 'Original Face'—the one you had even before your parents were born. It's your timeless and primordial state. You are not entering this state, because you never left it. You are simply recognizing it." Distinguishing between these stages is critical, Wilber argues: "What you get at each of these four transpersonal levels are four different types of mystical experiences that have usually been lumped together. In reality, each one is reached by different techniques and leads to radically different understanding and experience."

As Wilber sees it, nearly all theorists and wisdom traditions, both Western and Eastern, have promoted the value of certain stages while repudiating or neglecting others. Western psychology, most profoundly through Freud, has evolved a highly sophisticated understanding of the development of a healthy ego, as well as the disruptions and pathologies that may occur at each stage along the way. At the same time, Freud considered any so-called mystical experiences to be primitive, infantile, and even pathological. The Eastern meditative traditions, by contrast, have focused with great subtlety on techniques for developing the transpersonal stages of consciousness. However, they have almost

uniformly overlooked the issues of personal development, contending that any such attention only reinforces the illusion of a truly separate self.

In contrast, Wilber maintains that only after one successfully negotiates a given stage is it possible to fully inhabit the next one. "Just as sitting precedes standing in physical development and letters are always learned before words in intellectual development," he says, "so the stages of consciousness unfold in sequential fashion. You can't bypass any of them. Until you work out unresolved issues lodged in the unconscious, they stand in the way of higher development."

In practice, even the higher stages have limitations. It is possible, Wilber

*Wilber wrote of his wife Treya, who died of cancer, "I shut the window so I could hear Bach; she turned off Bach so she could hear the birds."*

argues, to cultivate a very high degree of consciousness and understanding at a transpersonal level, yet to be very unconscious and primitive at another. Likewise, it is not uncommon to act with selflessness, sophistication, and compassion under conditions of security and to regress to a lower stage under more stressful circumstances. The path to wisdom, in Wilber's model, is built around progressively broadening one's boundaries and thus enlarging one's sense of self.

From the moment that *The Spectrum of Consciousness* was published, Wilber found himself besieged with offers to teach, lecture, give interviews, and appear at conferences. After accepting several speaking dates, he quickly pulled back. "It was completely unbalancing," he recalls. "What you get are a lot of people telling you how great you are. Within a short time, you start believing them, and then you're headed for disaster. I simply didn't feel competent to appear in public

as a teacher." Instead, Wilber stayed home in Lincoln and focused on his writing, publishing 10 books and writing dozens of articles for academic journals over the following decade.

In fact, Wilber's greatest practical contribution may be as a critic of teachers and systems that promise routes to encompassing truth but are in fact incomplete or misguided. One of his most useful insights is into what he terms the "pre-trans fallacy." "Pre" refers to the early stages of development that precede language and the capacity for logical thinking. "Trans" refers to the transrational or transpersonal stages in which one acquires a broader perspective beyond personal concerns without sacrificing rational capacities. In the pre-trans fallacy, Wilber argues, these two totally different stages of development are seen as one and the same.

"Since prerational and transrational are both, in their own ways, nonrational, they appear quite similar or even identical to the untutored eye," Wilber has explained. Put simply, genuine transcendental awareness sometimes gets dismissed as primitive, while more childlike, prerational experiences are often mislabeled transcendental. The fallacy, Wilber argues, "exists to this day in both the attempts to champion mysticism and the attempts to deny it."

Wilber cites the human-potential movement and the psychedelic drug culture that sprang up in the 1960s and '70s as hotbeds of the pre-trans fallacy. He argues, for example, that when Fritz Perls urged his students to "lose your mind and come to your senses," Perls was promoting a prerational approach in the name of higher personal growth. A transrational approach, argues Wilber, would have meant integrating the mind and the senses, thinking and feeling.

Wilber doesn't discount the possibility that people can break through temporarily to higher levels of development. "A peak experience—whether it's in meditation or on a drug or watching a sunset—is like a transfusion," he says. "What you get is a miniature *satori*, a little hit of a higher stage." But only a tiny percentage of people, Wilber believes, finally transform to the higher stages. "It's a fundamental error," he says, "to assume that moving into the higher stages of spiritual development is easy—some-

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# S P E C T R U M

thing you can do in a weekend workshop or by reading a book or by taking LSD. Only through long-term disciplines can you make these experiences stable, permanent structures of consciousness."

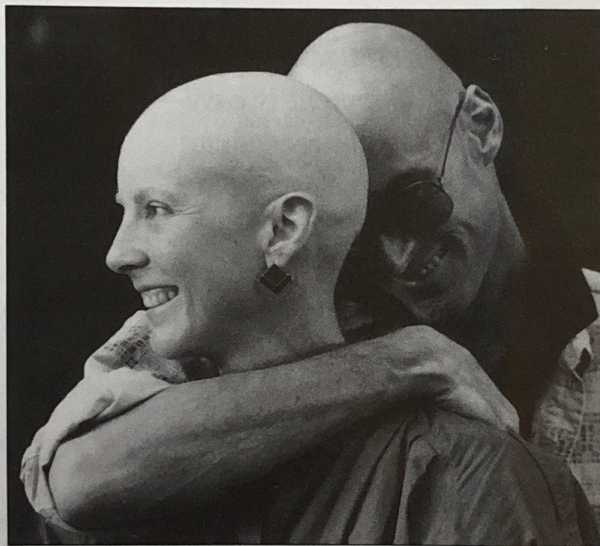
Peak experiences can also be profoundly misleading. "It's easy to see what an unbalancing effect they can have," Wilber says. "Say you get a real glimpse—perhaps through meditation or even LSD—of the fact that you are not merely this individual bodymind, that some part of you is one with the universal being. You're ushered into new realms, and it's thrilling. But then inevitably, the experience fades. This is truly what is meant by the dark night of the soul. The fading is often an agony greater than the ego can accommodate. What happens is that many people end up wanting to shun all the lower levels—when in fact they've still got a lot of work to do there."

Wilber argues that two antagonistic movements have dominated the historical search for enlightenment, East and West. One is "ascending," the other "descending." The ascending movement—puritanical, monastic, ascetic—has shunned embodiment in favor of transcendence and discounted the possibility of finding happiness in the material world. The descending movement has done just the opposite, celebrating the senses, the body, sexuality, and self-expression, while rejecting the possibility of any higher or transcendental truth.

"The point is to bring these two currents into some sort of balance and harmony," Wilber says, "so that both wisdom and compassion can join hands in finding a Spirit that both transcends and includes the world. It is in the union of the ascending and the descending that harmony is found, not in any brutal war between the two."

The practical challenge for most people, Wilber concludes, is not so much to transcend their boundaries as to make them more permeable. This process requires acknowledging and accommodat-

ing the play of opposites that characterizes everyday life. Most notable is the tension between individual concerns and more universal or transpersonal ones. A person's healthy sense of self, for example, ideally coexists with a capacity to act selflessly in the service of others. "The question is not just what floor of the building you're living on," Wilber says, "but how many floors you have ready access to as you negotiate your way through life."



Ken Wilber with his second wife, Treya, during her treatment for cancer.

Wilber's own resiliency was never deeply tested during the first three decades of this life. He was successful at nearly everything he undertook. His marriage to Amy ended in 1981 after nine years, but the split was amicable and they remained friends. After a year on his own—during which he lived in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and edited *ReVision*, a journal devoted to consciousness—Wilber returned to California and moved in temporarily with Roger Walsh and his wife, Frances Vaughan, themselves both leaders in the field of transpersonal psychology. It was at their house in Mill Valley, California, that he met Treya Killam in August 1983.

Wilber was 33 years old, and from the first night he and Treya spent talking, he felt certain that he'd met the love of his life. "When I put my arm around her, I felt all separation and distance dissolve,"

he wrote much later. "It was as if Treya and I had been together for lifetimes." Ten days after their first meeting, Wilber proposed. They were married in November and made plans for a honeymoon in Hawaii. Almost immediately, however, their lives were turned upside down.

Treya was diagnosed with breast cancer one week after the wedding. Despite intensive radiation, the cancer recurred a year later. Treya had one breast removed, but the prognosis remained grim: The likelihood of a third and fatal recurrence within nine months was 50 percent. Both Treya and Ken were inclined to address the illness at every level—physical, mental, psychological, and spiritual. Given the perniciousness of her cancer, they decided first to make the most radical intervention possible: radiation and chemotherapy.

At the same time, Treya experimented with a variety of alternative treatments, including a low-fat diet, megavitamin therapy, daily meditation and visualization practice, and writing her thoughts and feelings in a journal. She was particularly concerned with how her own psychological conflicts might have contributed to her illness. "Was there some secret death wish here?" she wrote in her journal soon after her diagnosis. "Had I been too hard on myself, too judgmental, too nice, repressing my anger and my judgments, so they eventually manifested as a physical symptom?"

Wilber took a more spacious view, focusing simply on how best to nurture Treya's own healing capacity. He was inclined to believe that emotional and spiritual factors do play some role in illness but that guilt and self-recrimination serve no useful function. In particular, he dismissed the radical but increasingly popular New Age view that we literally create our own reality and thus our illnesses. This belief, he says, is another pre-trans fallacy: infantile grandiosity and narcissism masquerading as higher understanding.

In 1985, Ken and Treya moved from California to North Lake Tahoe, Nevada,

# S P E C T R U M

and entered a period that proved devastating for both of them. In an unfortunate coincidence, while Treya continued to undergo intense chemotherapy, a still-unexplained disease blew into North Lake Tahoe, prompting debilitating illness in more than 200 residents. Wilber was one of them. For the next two years, his symptoms included low-grade chronic fever, muscle dysfunction, night sweats, sore and swollen lymph nodes, and exhaustion. The combination of Treya's advancing cancer and the failure to have his own illness diagnosed caused Wilber to fall into a deep depression. He found that he could not write—even though he'd never before experienced any blocks. "As men often do," he later wrote in *Grace and Grit*, his book about the experience, "I defined myself by my doing, by my writing, and when that suddenly stopped I was suspended in midair without a net." Wilber also lost the motivation to meditate. He began to drink from the time he woke up until he went to sleep—vodka, beer, wine, and brandy—while sitting for hours in front of a television. "I felt I had lost all control of my life," he said. "Off and on for months I felt suicidal."

It was a terrible bind for both of them. The source of Treya's helplessness—her cancer—gave Wilber the feeling that he had no right to assert his own growing needs or to deal with the feeling that he had lost his own center. This, in turn, only undermined his capacity to be supportive to Treya. The relationship reached a nadir one day when Wilber got so angry that he hit Treya in frustration—the first and only time he has ever struck a woman.

The incident proved to be a turning point for both of them. Humiliated and at wit's end, Wilber left for San Francisco; Treya followed almost immediately. They went into therapy together in California, and their burden began to lift. Treya enjoyed a brief period of remission, Ken's illness finally resolved itself, and their closeness as a couple returned.

But while their relationship remained strong, Treya's physical health did not. In early 1986, several months after they settled in San Francisco, she was diagnosed with diabetes, probably triggered by the chemotherapy. Then in June of that year, there was a recurrence of the cancer, just as Treya turned 40. Wilber found himself

slowly adjusting to the role of full-time support person.

In 1988 they moved to Boulder, Colorado, where Treya would spend the last months of her life. By this time, Ken's earlier complaining, his resentment, and even his deep sadness gave way to a sim-

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ple selfless desire to serve his wife. It was a phenomenon that he had often read and even written about but never before experienced. Effectively, his life became a meditation-in-action. Wilber felt prepared to continue in this role indefinitely—and indeed never believed that Treya was going to die until her last 48 hours.

By then he had come to see Treya almost literally as his other half. "In [her last] years," he wrote, "she had returned to her roots in the earth, to her love of nature, to the body, to making, to her femininity, to her grounded openness and trust and caring. I had remained where I wanted to be, where I myself am at home—in the Apollonian worlds of ideas, of logic, of concepts and symbols. Heaven is of the mind. Earth is of the body. I took feelings and related them to ideas; Treya took ideas and related them to feelings. I moved from the particular to the universal, constantly; Treya moved from the universal to the concrete, always. I loved thinking, she loved making. I loved culture, she loved nature. I shut the window so I could hear Bach; she turned off Bach so she could hear the birds."

Wilber is convinced that the highest stage of consciousness—what he calls Spirit—is found neither solely in heaven nor on earth. "Only the balance of the two, found in the Heart, could lead to the secret door beyond death and mortality and pain," he has concluded. It was this last realization—shortly before his wife's death—that Wilber found most bittersweet: "With Treya, I thought to myself, I am beginning, just beginning, to find my Heart."

Since Treya's death, Wilber has put his heart into developing and refining his full-spectrum model of human potentials. He not only has addressed the levels of the spectrum—matter, body, mind, soul, and spirit—but has attempted to integrate the interior and the exterior, the masculine and the feminine, the individual and the social. In early 1995, he published the first volume in what he calls his *Kosmos Trilogy*, titled *Sex, Ecology, Spirituality*. To take on this enormous challenge, Wilber has returned to a writing schedule that runs to 10 hours a day, 7 days a week, and to a relatively monastic life.

But if his work is largely theoretical, his ultimate intent is also worldly and practical. "I am attempting to draw as comprehensive a map of human potentials as possible, and a good one helps chart the way," Wilber says. "If you don't know the Bahamas are even there, you'll never try to reach them. Still, I don't suggest the mere study of maps. What I actually recommend is finding and engaging a practice that speaks to your potentials and shows you the actual territory. The more full-spectrum the practice is, in my opinion, the better. But the practice could be anything—art, community service, raising sane kids, writing novels, sports—so long as it also pulls you out of yourself and into a larger being. The point is that each of us has to take the actual journey, in our own way, in our own time, at our own pace."

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Tony Schwartz was a writer for *Newsweek* and a reporter for the *New York Times* before becoming a contributing editor at *New York* magazine, where he has written more than a dozen cover stories. The coauthor of Donald Trump's *The Art of the Deal*, he has also written for *Esquire*, *Vanity Fair*, *GQ*, the *Village Voice*, and other publications.

## Back to the Beginning

**Common Boundary:** Your new book, *Sex, Ecology, Spirituality*, is nearly 800 pages long, and it's the first volume in a trilogy. Why such a giant undertaking?

**Ken Wilber:** I basically stopped writing from 1983, after *Transformations of Consciousness*, to 1992, when I wrote *Grace and Grit* about Treya. What I found in that decade was that this whole field of transformational studies, or transpersonal psychology, had been hijacked by flatland theorists—people who recognize no hierarchical unfolding, no difference between deeper and shallower dimensions. It had also been hijacked by a politically correct mentality that disallows qualitative distinctions and makes understanding evolution impossible. There were dozens of misunderstandings, errors, and misconceptions that I felt had to be addressed. In this one volume I've tried to tie together my ideas about human development, taking into account the natural sciences, the social sciences, cultural analysis, developmental psychology, political theory, and various kinds of spiritual development in the East and West.

**CB:** What do you cover in the first volume?

**KW:** It's a general overview of the spirit of evolution. Evolution is in part a wildly self-transcending process; it has the amazing capacity to go beyond what went before. The drive to self-transcendence is built into the very fabric of the universe.

**CB:** But you suggest that isn't all good news.

**KW:** No. People frequently have a hard time with the concept of evolution because they think it implies nothing but advancement and betterment across the board. Well, it doesn't. What it implies is a dialectic of progress. Every stage of evolution solves certain problems of the previous stage, and then introduces new and sometimes scarier problems of its own. What the retrogressive romantics do is take the problems of the new level and compare them with the positive components of the old, and thus claim everything has gone

downhill since their favorite epoch.

**CB:** What did you do to straighten things out?

**KW:** I wanted to isolate certain patterns of evolutionary development that are common in all fields of knowledge—beginning with the cosmos, or the physical domain, then the biosphere, or the domain of life, and then the emergence of human consciousness, which turns out to be five or six major stages. Along the way, I tried to deal with all the misconceptions about the various stages, whether physical, biological, cultural, social, or spiritual.

**CB:** What's the agenda for the next volume?

**KW:** Volume two is tentatively titled *The Ecology of Men and Women*. It will center specifically on human development and will look at the types of societies that have evolved over our roughly million-year history. It will also look at the status of men and women in each of these stages of cultural growth. Once again, you get the dialectic of progress. Some things got better; some got nastier.

**CB:** And the third volume?

**KW:** It's called *The Spirit of Post-Modernity*. It will focus on developments roughly from the Renaissance and the Enlightenment to today. The reason this gets a volume by itself is that most forms of spiritual endeavor have failed miserably to come to terms with the movement of modernity. Most scholars and laypeople think modernity killed the sacred. What forms of spirituality can exist in a modern and postmodern world without regressing to eulogizing pre-modern modes? This is what I'll try to answer.

**CB:** What do you hope to achieve with these three volumes?

**KW:** There seem to be a lot of people making the case that a world transformation is either occurring or should occur, and that this transformation should occur according to a new paradigm that they possess. The problem is that most of these paradigms are horribly partial and fragmented and narrow, even as they claim to be holis-

tic and all-embracing. So one of the things I'm saying in these volumes is that if you want to play that new-paradigm game, you ought to at least look at this bigger picture.

**CB:** Is this coming world transformation really in the offing?

**KW:** There is a transformation, but it's not particularly spiritual. The real transformation is into the information age, the so-called third wave, which is really the fourth or fifth age—from foraging to horticultural to agrarian to industrial to informational. We are now making the switch from industrial to informational. But this is not necessarily a spiritual move. It will make certain types of global spirituality more accessible. But the fact that you have a global informational exchange doesn't guarantee the quality or depth of the information you get. What good is it if the Nazis have the Net? The quality and depth of the information you get depends not just on exterior global connections but also on interior changes of consciousness.

**CB:** How much of this interior consciousness evolution do you believe is occurring?

**KW:** It's nothing to write home about. As I said, most of the new paradigms are rather flat and regressive. I know very few people who are actually waking up, and an enormous number who are talking about it.

**CB:** It doesn't sound very optimistic.

**KW:** Well, not against the backdrop of the supposed "greening of America/Aquarian conspiracy" transformation, in which everyone was supposed to be enlightened. Against that standard, we're doing pathetically. But if people wouldn't make those sorts of grandiose claims, and if you compare individual consciousness to a hundred years ago, then it's actually not bad. The gains in liberal democracies and liberation movements alone are impressive. Judged against history, we've made moderately impressive gains in consciousness. But no epoch is privileged. We are all tomorrow's food. The process continues. And Spirit is found in the process itself, not in any particular time or place.

— T.S.