

# The DNA of Big Integrity

## (and EYL Exercises for Session 2)

by Michael Dowd

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"There is indeed a force devoted to enticing us into various pleasures that are (or once were) in our genetic interests but do not bring long-term happiness to us and may bring great suffering to others. . . . If it will help to actually use the word evil, there's no reason not to."

— ROBERT WRIGHT, *The Moral Animal: Why We Are the Way We Are*  
(*The New Science of Evolutionary Psychology*)

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Millions of people around the world can personally attest to having found freedom from their "addictive nature" (or freedom from the desperate habit of trying to control others) by way of 12-step and other recovery programs. Twelve steps are difficult for anyone to remember, but the aim of this approach is easy to describe. It is to move individuals to a habitual place of what I'm calling "big integrity."

The four "letters" (chemical bases) in what I see as the genetic code of evolutionary integrity (or, DNA of big integrity) not only express the essence of recovery programs; they also comprise the heart of all forms of morality—religious and secular alike. This, of course, should not be surprising. Much that we are now learning scientifically was intuited long ago and has been rediscovered time and again, as the same process of testing and selection at work in nature also shapes culture.

*Here is what I call the DNA of big integrity:*

- 1. Trust / Humility / Faith:** Surrendering to the wisdom of Nature—that undeniable physical and nonphysical Reality beyond thought, belief, or denial, which is at work in the world and to which each of us is ultimately accountable.
- 2. Authenticity / Honesty / Sincerity:** Getting real with oneself and others, owning the painful truths about one's life, and grasping the comforting truth that millions of years have gone into making us exactly the way we are. When we *get* that our struggles and foibles make sense evolutionarily, cultivating healthy habits and supports for living in integrity become effortless.
- 3. Responsibility / Accountability / Compassion:** Stepping into the shoes of those we have harmed, and then making amends—while cultivating compassion for ourselves and others. Enlisting the support of others, too, as integrity is a team sport.

**4. Service / Generosity / Purpose:** Supporting others in maintaining integrity and providing lifegiving service in additional ways. In so doing, we not only bless the world; we support our own growth and fulfillment, while boosting our chances for long-term integrous living.

Genuine self-interest is thus served by cultivating evolutionary integrity in a four-fold way: growing in trust, authenticity, responsibility, and grateful service. To the extent we are guided in ways that fulfill this standard, Reality guides us.

## Growing in Big Integrity

"Reality is that which, when we stop believing in it, doesn't go away."

—PHILIP K. DICK

To live life fully and love the life you live you must be committed to growing in integrity. If you want to experience real joy, true peace, and lasting fulfillment, there's really no other way. To grow in evolutionary integrity means **getting right with Reality** (God/the Universe) by growing in humility, authenticity, responsibility, and service to the Whole.

**Why humility?** Because what's undeniably so is that the Universe is primary and you are derivative. Said another way, you are not the center of the Universe and your ego does not run the show. We were not thrust into the Universe, we were born out of it. You couldn't exist without it, and the Universe would do just fine without you. Humility and its twin sister, trust, are thus essential because only when you're coming from a place of humility are you in touch with Reality as it actually is.

**Why authenticity?** Because only by being authentic are you aligned with Reality. Honesty, transparency, and authenticity enable the feedback necessary for individuals and groups to evolve in healthy ways. We may sometimes be tempted to lie or present ourselves in false ways because of the promise of a cheap thrill. Deception never, however, provides lasting joy.

**Why responsibility?** Because what's really *real* is that there is only one person responsible for the quality of your life, and that person is you. As Jack Canfield advises in his book *The Success Principles*,

"If you want to be successful, you have to take 100 percent responsibility for everything that you experience in your life. This includes the level of your achievements, the results you produce, the quality of your relationships, the state of your health and physical fitness, your income, your debts, your feelings—everything! This is not easy. In fact, most of us have been conditioned to blame something outside of ourselves for the parts of our life we don't like. We blame our parents, our bosses, our friends, the media, our co-workers, our clients, our spouse, the weather, the economy, our astrological chart, our lack of money—anyone or anything we can pin the blame on. We never want to look at where the real problem is—ourselves."

Only by taking full responsibility for our lives, and the wake we've left, can we know heaven on Earth. Righteous indignation may feel good in the moment but blame never yields true happiness.

**Why service to the Whole?** Because it is *everything* to us: our source and sustenance, our Alpha and Omega, beginning and end. Whatever we may choose to call the Whole, and whatever metaphors or analogies we use to describe it, the undeniable fact is that Ultimate Reality is creator of all things, reveals all things, is present everywhere, transcends and includes all things, expresses all forms of power, holds everything together, suffers all things, and transforms all things.

## STAR Clusters

"The most dangerous aspect of our modern diet arises from our ability to refine food. This is the link to drug, alcohol, and tobacco addictions. *Coca* doesn't give South American Indians health problems when they brew or chew it. No one's ruined her life eating poppy seeds. When grapes and grains were fermented lightly and occasionally, they presented a healthy pleasure, not a hazard.

"Salt, fat, sugar, and starch are not harmful in their natural contexts. It's our modern ability to concentrate things like cocaine, heroin, alcohol—and food components—that turns them into a menace that the body is hardwired to crave."

—DEIRDRE BARRETT, *Supernormal Stimuli: How Primal Urges Overran Their Evolutionary Purpose*

**Trust, Authenticity, Responsibility, Service . . .** Trust, Authenticity, Responsibility, Service . . . each letter in the genetic code of evolutionary integrity that we make the effort to practice feeds into the next, round upon round, spiraling our character in positive ways. For some, the process begins with trust, with the recovery movement's first step of surrendering to the wisdom of a beneficent Higher Power or to one's community of support. For others, the spiral may begin with stepping up to a life of service, for which trust, authenticity, and responsibility are vital supports. But of course, who of us would trust or serve if we did not believe that it was in our self-interest to do so? So let's start there.

**Self-interest is a powerful biological instinct, and it can dance with service if we develop and expand our sense of who we are and why we're here.** What looks like service to some may actually feel like self-interest to those who have an expanded sense of self (or, Self). The mother who defends her child is identifying (consciously or not) with her family and her instinctual drive to care for her legacy. The activist who supports environmental action may be identifying with the larger body of Life of which he or she is part.

The person handing out sandwiches in a soup kitchen may be identifying with all of humanity. Whether prompted by self-interest (perhaps by a desire to reduce personal suffering or by a desire to grow) or whether sensing into a greater Self-interest and thus acquiring an urgency to

serve, or to serve in an enlarged capacity, the way of evolutionary integrity offers a viable and flexible path to the fulfillment of our evolutionary mission.

I've come to think of the acronym STAR as summarizing this work to increase and deepen our evolutionary integrity . . .

S elf-interest /Service (and their dance)  
T rust  
A uthenticity  
R esponsibility

**I envision people coming together in groups, locally or online, to support one another's growth in evolutionary integrity. We might call these groups "STAR clusters."** And as we develop connections among such groups—email lists, conference calls, websites—for community-building, information-sharing, networking, support, action, we can imagine bridging the distances between the STARS, reaching through "interStellar space."

When I mentioned this idea to my friend Tom Atlee, he joked, "Right now, we humans are like the Big Bang early in its career: a lot of hot air. In the case of the Big Bang, the hot air was hydrogen gas; in our case it's mostly egoic gab. Out of the hydrogen gas eventually coalesced stars and everything that stars, in turn, make possible. Now, in our case, by coalescing into STAR clusters we can assist our evolution, and to the benefit of the whole planet."

## Taming Our Lizard Legacy: Integrity Circles

"Many of our impulses are, by design, very strong, so any force that is to stifle them will have to be pretty harsh or, even better, communal. It is grossly misleading to talk as if self-restraint is as easy as punching a channel on the remote control."

—ROBERT WRIGHT, *The Moral Animal*

Given the pull of instincts, I have found it helpful to write out and share with my STAR cluster, my deep integrity group, a three-fold list: my integrity circles. These identify which behaviors are to be avoided and which are to be encouraged. Each circle is represented in two ways. First, the colors of a traffic signal: Stop! Try to stop (or proceed with caution if I can't). And Go! The second label is a spatial referent: all the good and nurturing actions and habits in my outer circle are intended to wrap around and contain, or hold in check, the circles within.

**RED / INNER CIRCLE:** Behaviors that qualify as a violation of my integrity. Doing anything in my red circle means I must reset my "date of integrity". My commitment is to say "No!" to everything listed in my red circle of behaviors, and to keep doing so one day at a time.

**YELLOW / MIDDLE CIRCLE:** Behaviors that may set me on a dangerous path. Acting in such ways do not constitute violations of my integrity, but I must proceed with caution because they

may lead to something that clearly is. These behaviors I liken to a baseball field's warning track. If I am an outfielder running back to catch a long fly ball, when I detect a change in footing, I know that pain and possible injury could result if I keep going and hit the wall. My commitment is to report any yellow circle occurrence to someone in my STAR cluster or accountability team within 48 hours.

**GREEN / OUTER CIRCLE:** Behaviors that promote my integrity and the fullness of life by blessing me and those around me. These are actions that are therapeutic or that deepen my "spiritual" practice or enrich my relationships and bliss-quotient in life. They are to be encouraged, enjoyed, and celebrated. Sustained deep integrity depends on my spending as much time as possible in this domain. Within this realm is my salvation, transformation, victory over temptation, and success in life. It is here, too, that I nurture my sense of purpose and cultivate a positive evolutionary legacy.

## **"Evolutionize Your Life" Exercises**

### **Exercise 2a. EYL Journal: Your Survival and Reproductive Instincts**

Create an "Evolutionize Your Life" Journal, which you will ongoingly be writing or typing into during this and all the remaining sessions. Then reflect and write on these questions:

- ***What do your reptilian instincts want that helped your ancient ancestors survive and reproduce but that now have negative consequences if you act on them indiscriminately, habitually, or in ways that are out of integrity?*** (List everything related to food, substances, and sex that occasionally cause you problems or challenge one or more of your relationships.)
- ***What do you appreciate about your reptilian instincts? How do they serve your life and your relations?***

### **Exercise 2b. Integrity Circles**

In your EYL Journal, **inventory your own behaviors** pertinent to each of the circles: RED (violations of your commitments to integrity re your physical instincts); YELLOW (behaviors that are dangerous in that they may lead you into Red Circle actions); GREEN (behaviors that promote integrity and the fullness of life.) Note: Whether or not you are challenged by addictions or codependence, everyone can benefit from taking the time to envision, and then commit to pursuing, "Green Circle" behaviors.

Ideally, you would then **recite your 3 lists** to someone in your private sphere (not this online community) whom you trust. **In the months and years ahead**, consider it a spiritual or therapeutic practice to regularly revisit your list, to recommit to integrous and restorative behaviors, and to revise the lists if necessary.