

WHAT THE HECK IS ADULT DEVELOPMENT?

An illustrated primer

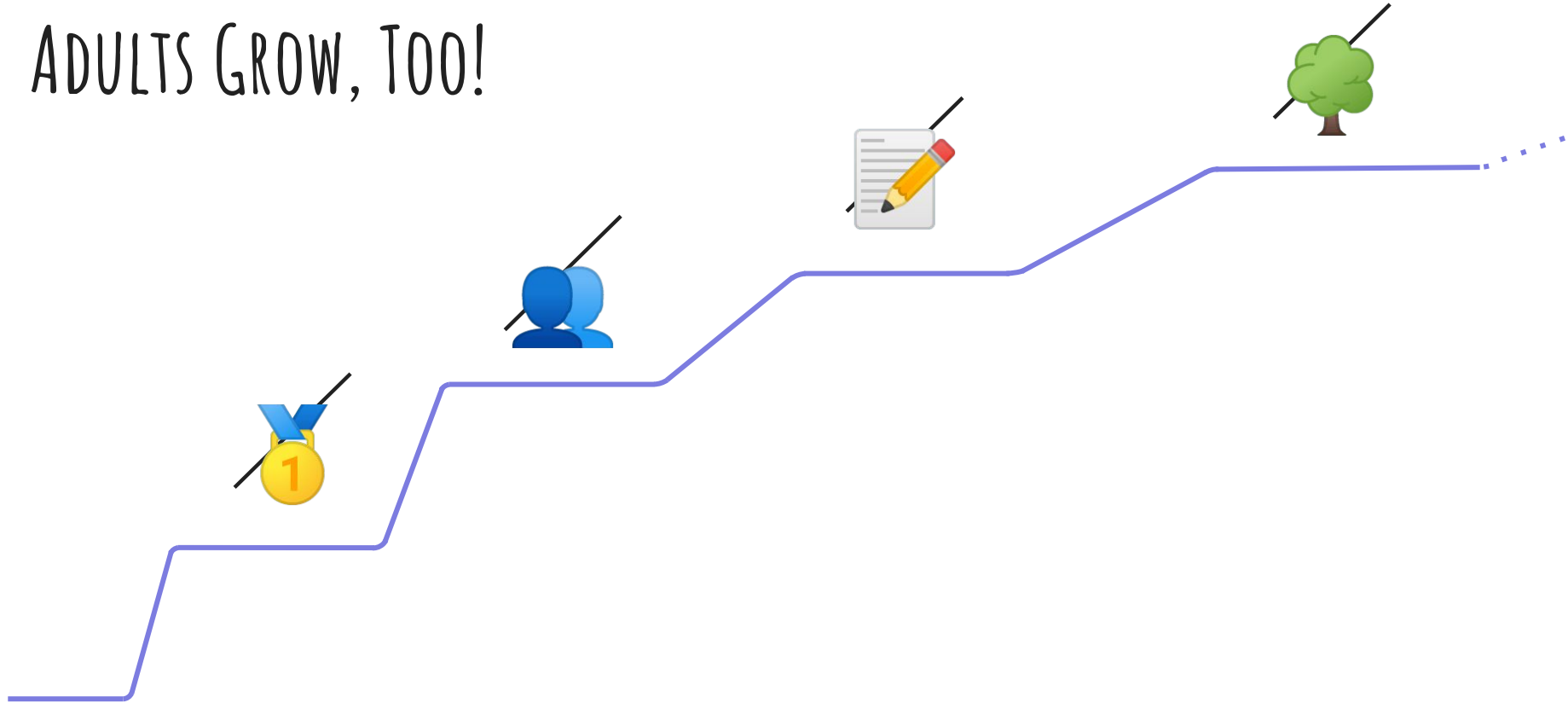
EVERYONE KNOWS: CHILDREN GROW



Peekaboo!!!

From object permanence to magical thinking, it is easy to see how children rapidly evolve their sense-making abilities and their growth is not just a physical phenomenon.

ADULTS GROW, TOO!

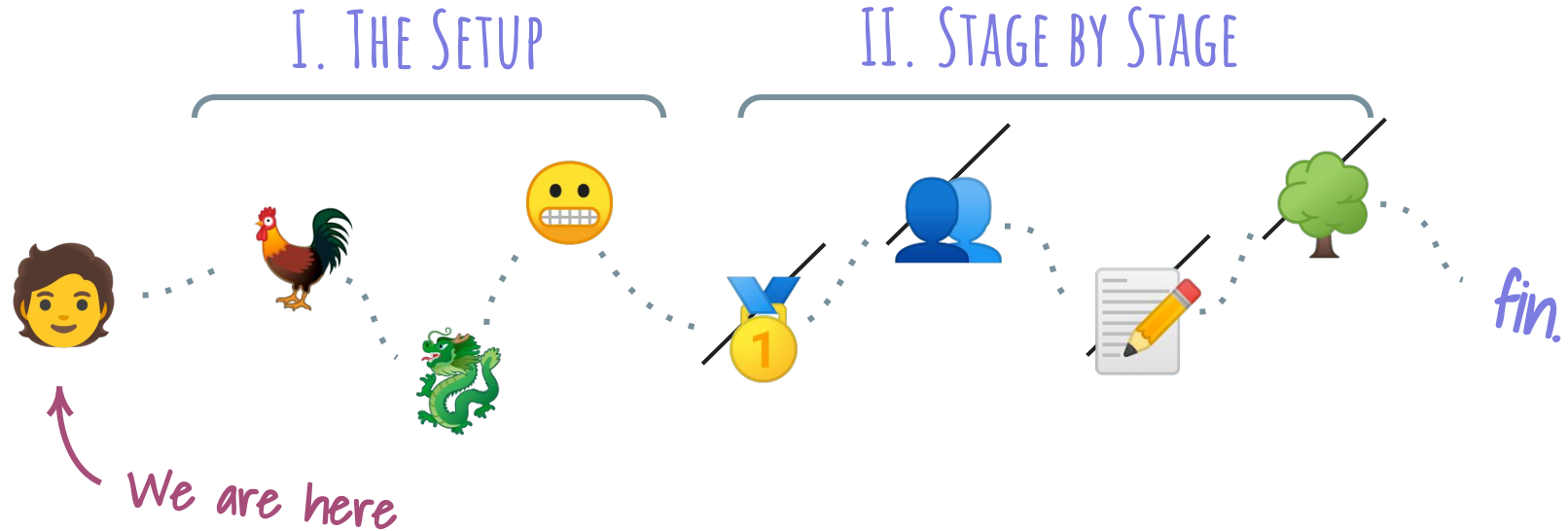


A more exciting claim is that adults aren't fully formed once they reach their physical maturity. Rather, they continue to grow, developing their sense-making abilities.

ADULT DEVELOPMENT THEORY

This is the realm of the adult development theory. There are several folks working in this area, and here's my attempt to coalesce their work into a coherent story.

STORY STRUCTURE

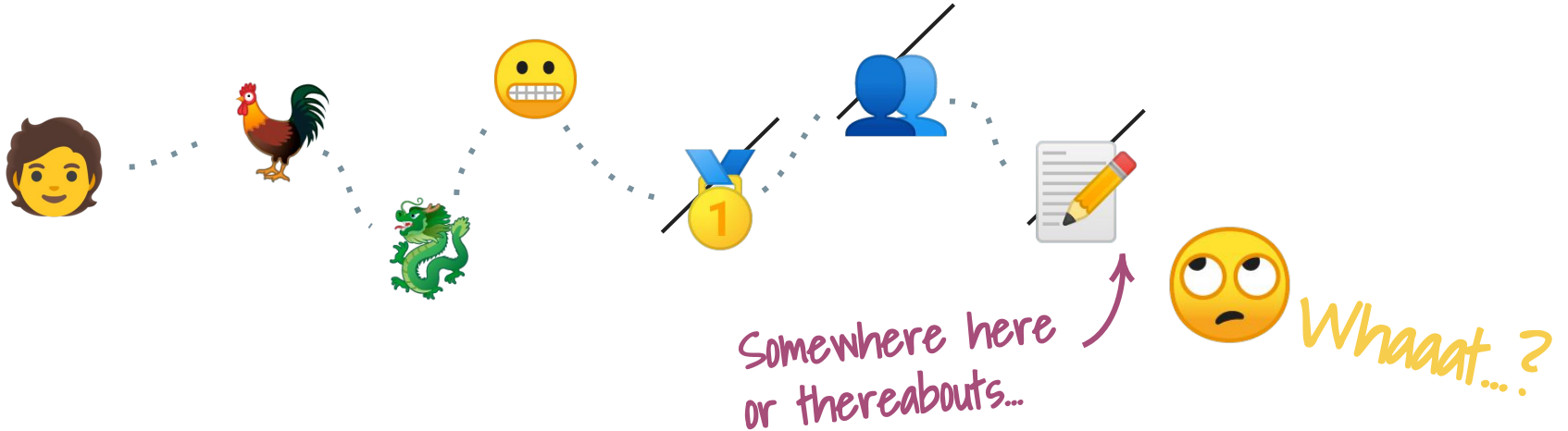


It will unfold in two parts: first, I will set things up with a few big ideas, and then we will examine the stages of adult development using what we learned from the setup.

WARNING: SOME SENSE-MAKING TURBULENCE AHEAD

I. THE SETUP

II. STAGE BY STAGE



As we walk through stages, you might feel that suddenly, a stage description makes less sense, feels more fuzzy and unclear than the previous. This is normal. After all..

TURBULENCE WILL FEEL LIKE ...

"...uh-huh, got it.

...Yup, with you.

...Ah, I get it.



...
uhhh... What is this?"

... we all are somewhere along this developmental journey, and the later the stage, the more likely it will appear to us as “lands unknown”, a territory we are yet to discover.

PART I. THE SETUP

Ready to jump in? Some of the concepts in the setup might be a bit too hefty to fully convey in a flip-through slide deck, but fingers crossed – I hope you will stick with me.

2 ½ BIG IDEAS

1. UNDER CONSTRUCTION: REALITY
2. WE GROW IN SPURTS
- 2 ½. GROWTH INCLUDES AND TRANSCENDS

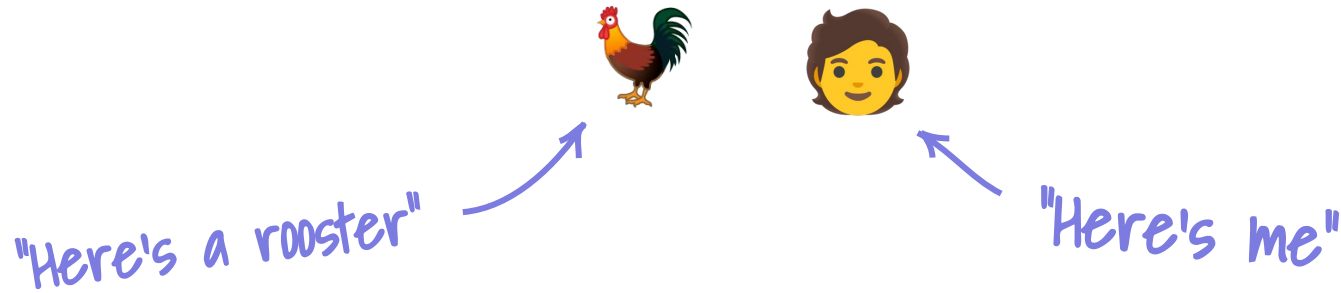
The whole story is held together by three big ideas. The third one is kind of a follow-on to the second one, so I'll dub this bunch the "2 ½ big ideas".

1. WE CONSTRUCT OUR REALITY

The first big idea is truly massive and will not get the full attention it deserves in this deck: the notion that my reality—including myself in it!—is constructed by me.

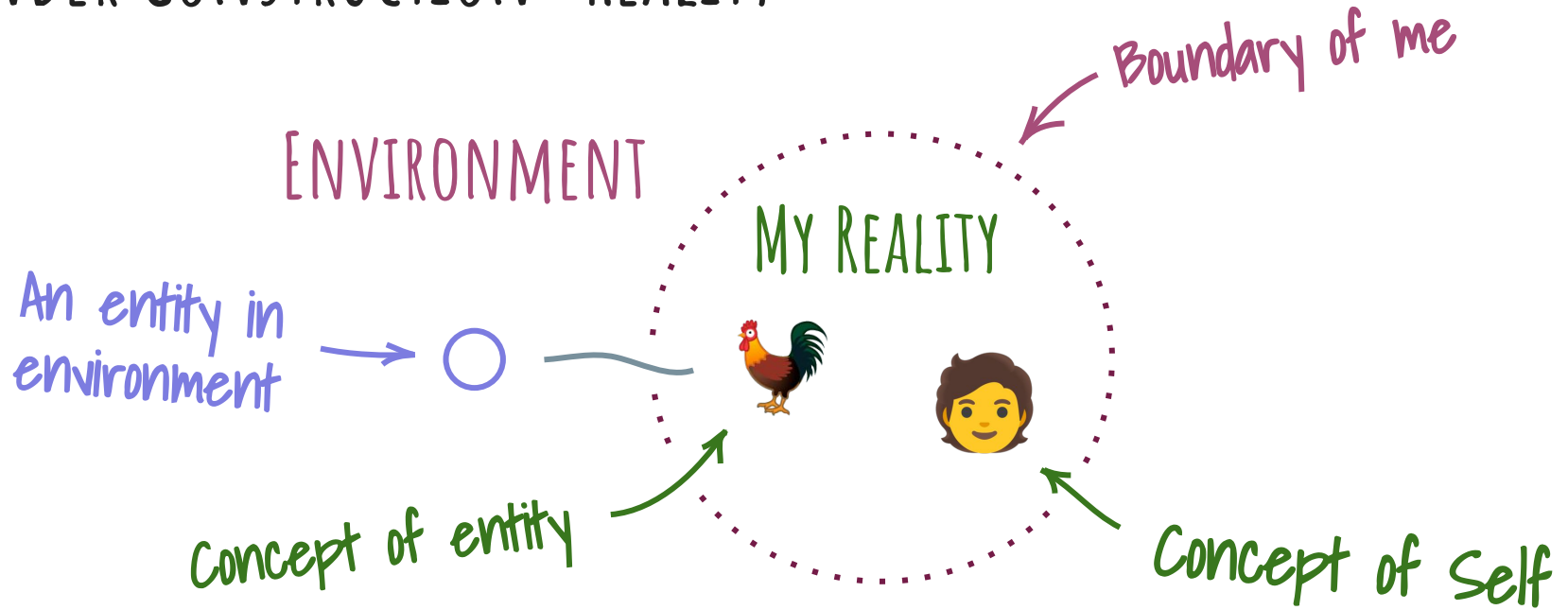
UNDER CONSTRUCTION: REALITY

"OBJECTIVE REALITY"



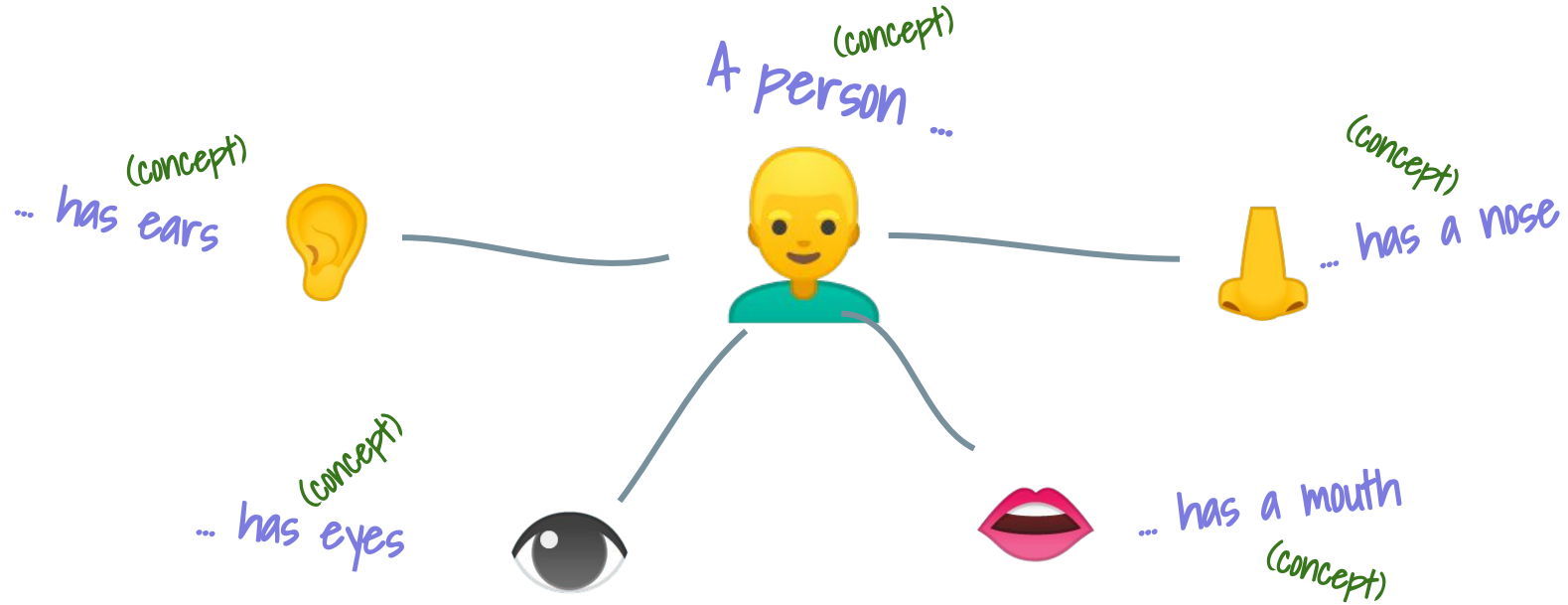
As opposed to the notion of "objective reality" in which what we perceive actually exists as it appears to us, the constructed reality is literally "what we make of it".

UNDER CONSTRUCTION: REALITY



In this world, the reality is unique to me, and is populated by concepts that I acquire through experience. One of these concepts is Self, or how I perceive "me" in my reality.

ORGANIZING CONCEPTS



In addition to acquiring these concepts, my mind constantly optimizes organization of these concepts, merging, splitting, grouping and regrouping them.

LEARNING =

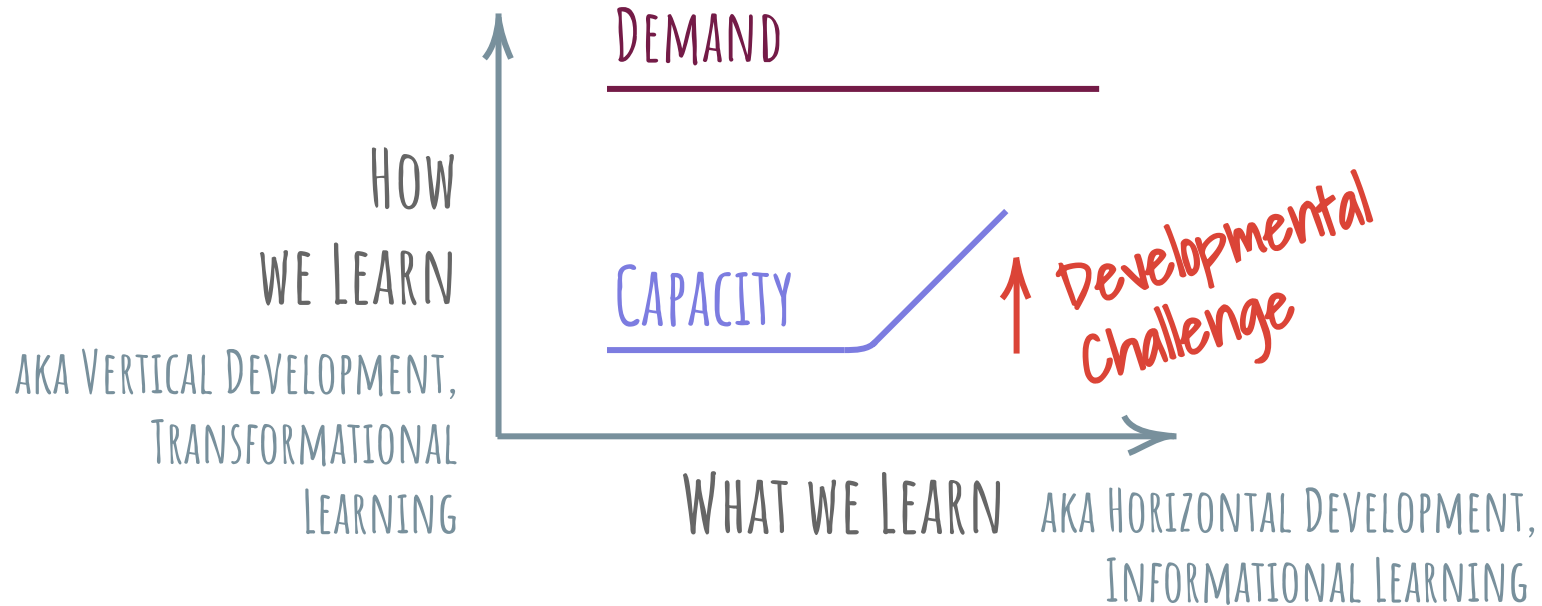
THROUGH EXPERIENCE

ACQUIRING AND ORGANIZING

CONCEPTS

So when I say “I am learning,” I am probably talking about the continuous experiential process of acquiring and organizing concepts that comprise my constructed reality.

LEARNING HORIZONTALLY AND VERTICALLY



As concepts grow in numbers, they start overlapping/conflicting with each other, making organizing more and more challenging, demanding change in how we learn.

DEVELOPMENTAL CHALLENGE FEELS LIKE ...

"This is chaos! It doesn't make any sense!"

"I am so confused right now. What is happening?"

"How could you?! I can't believe you did this"

"The world is so VUCA (volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous) and nothing seems to matter"

The *developmental challenge* is an upward force that tells us that our current methods of learning are reaching their limit and new, different methods are needed.

VERTICAL DEVELOPMENT =

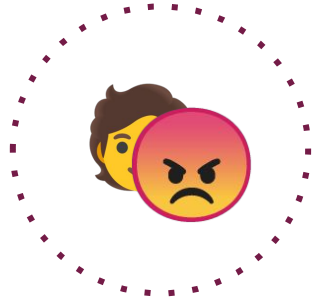
ACQUIRING AND ORGANIZING CONCEPTS

...OF HOW I ACQUIRE AND

ORGANIZE CONCEPTS

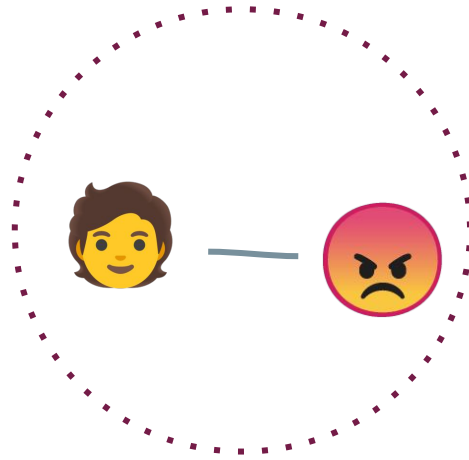
So we intuitively turn the learning inward, onto concept of Self. Since it's just a concept, it's a fair game to reorganize, to find new ways for it to fit with other concepts.

SUBJECT-OBJECT SHIFT



"I am angry"

IS SUBJECT TO EMOTION



"I feel anger"

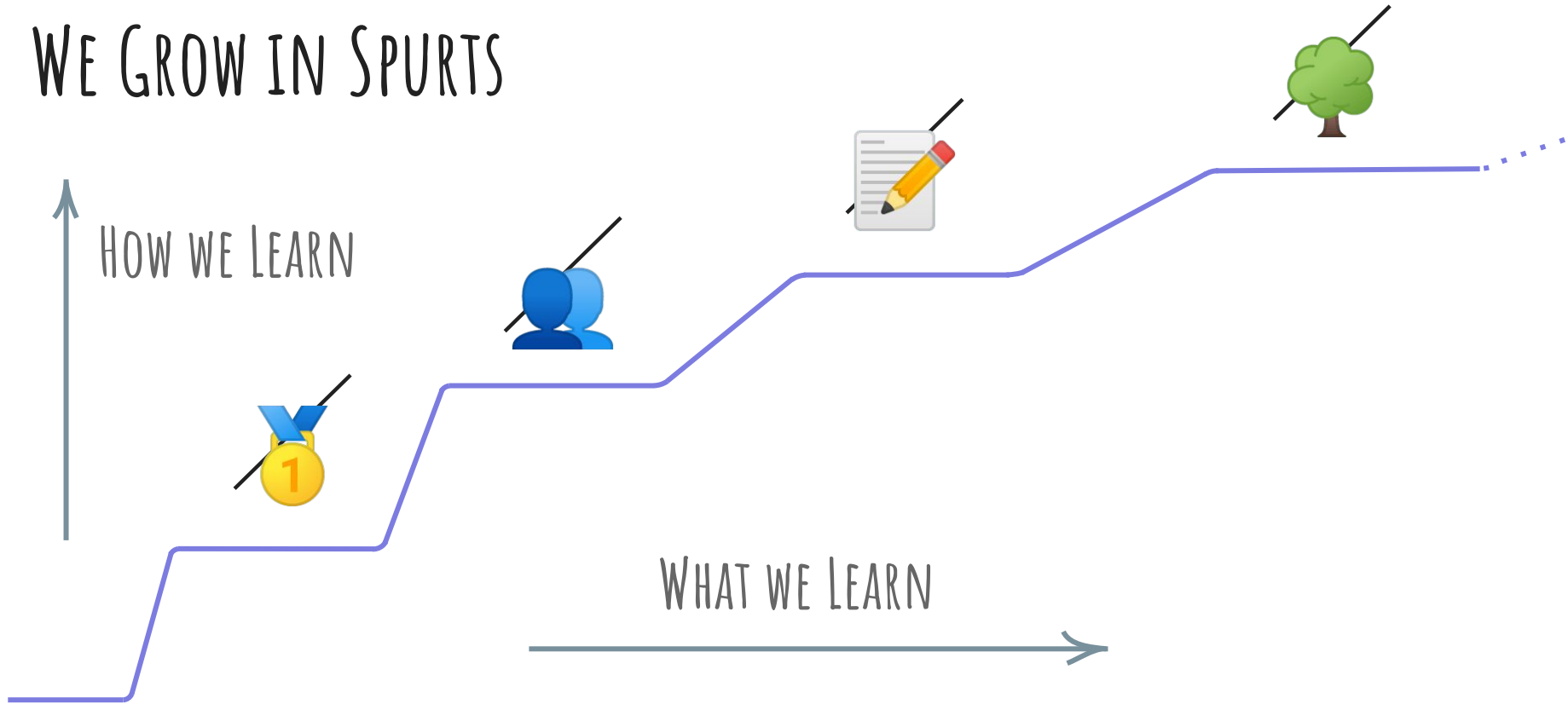
HAS EMOTION AS OBJECT

The go-to tool here is the *subject-object shift*: moving concepts I previously thought to be "me" to something I can hold, reflect on, engage, and relate with other concepts.

2. VERTICAL DEVELOPMENT HAPPENS IN STAGES

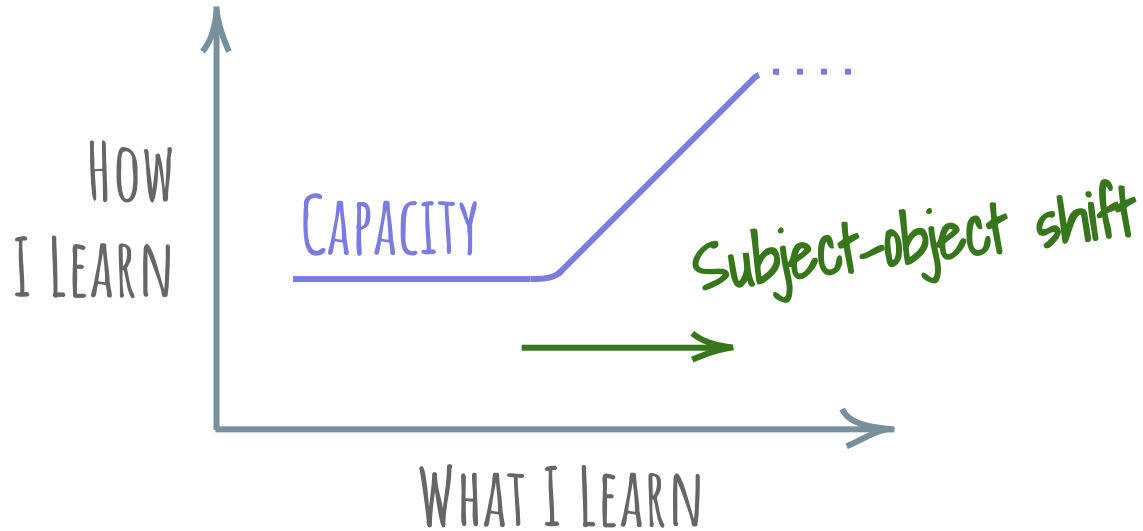
The second big idea presents the notion of staircase-like, rather than linear progression of vertical development. How we learn seems to fit a punctuated equilibrium pattern.

WE GROW IN SPURTS



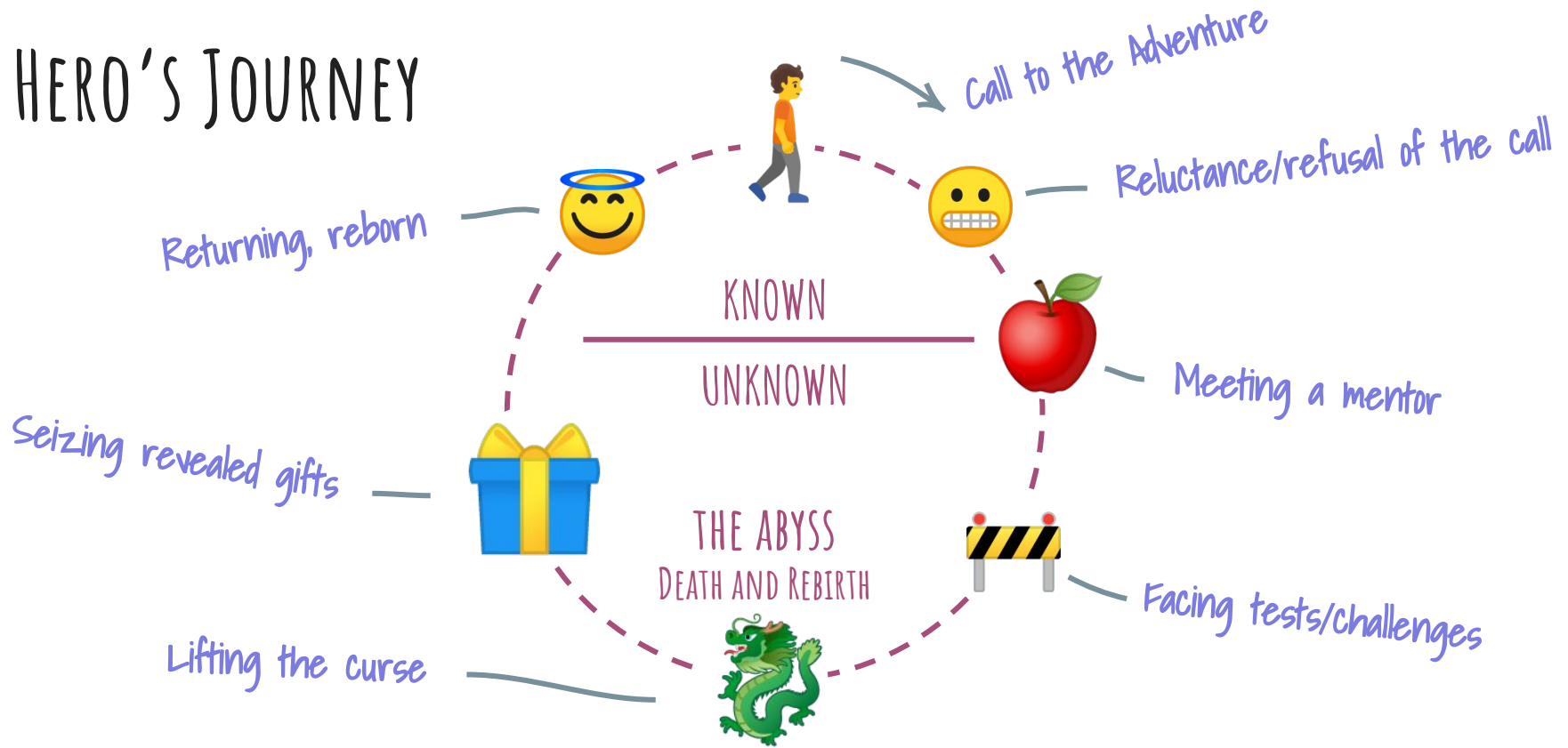
According to adult development research, our growth process is arranged as a series of plateaus and transitions, one followed by another in an ever-repeating sequence.

A CHANGE IN "HOW I LEARN"



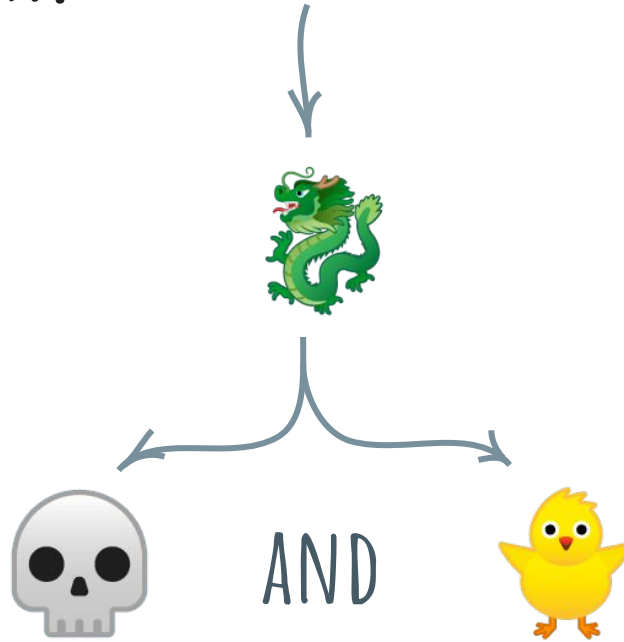
Transitions are the effects of subject-object shifts, resulting in a reorganization of all concepts surrounding Self. A new "me" emerges through a transformative change.

HERO'S JOURNEY



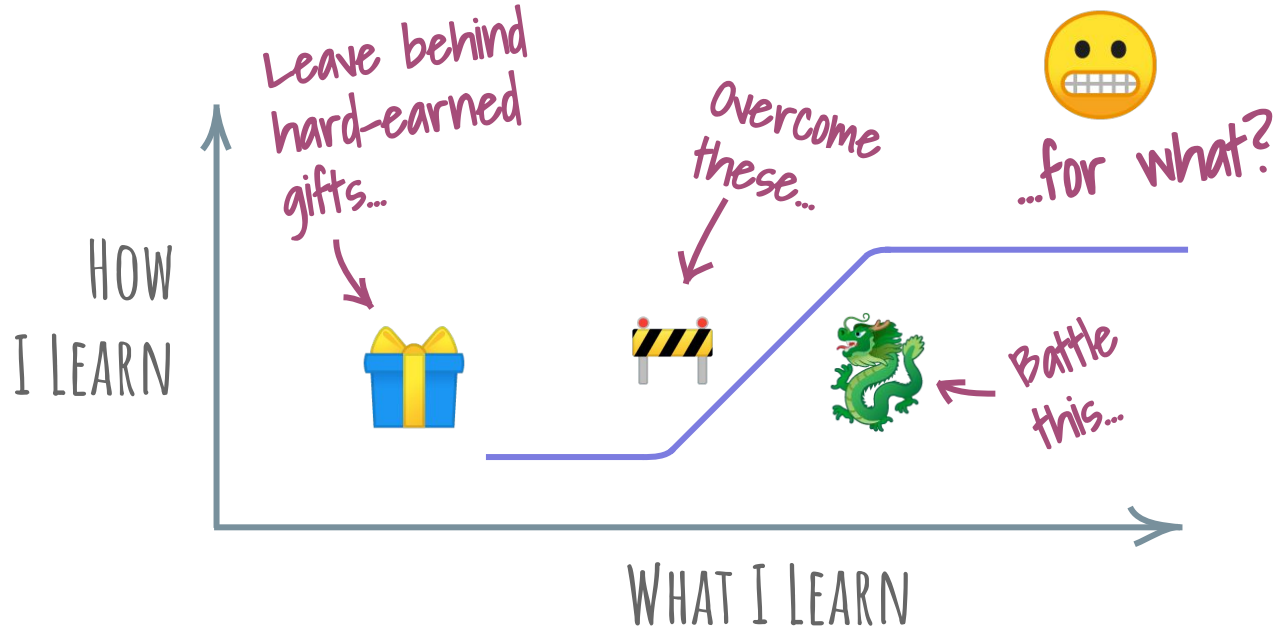
Joseph Campbell's concept of a *Hero's Journey* might be a useful way to imagine such a transformation: an adventure with trials, tribulations, and a lowest point (a "death").

WAIT... A "DEATH?!"



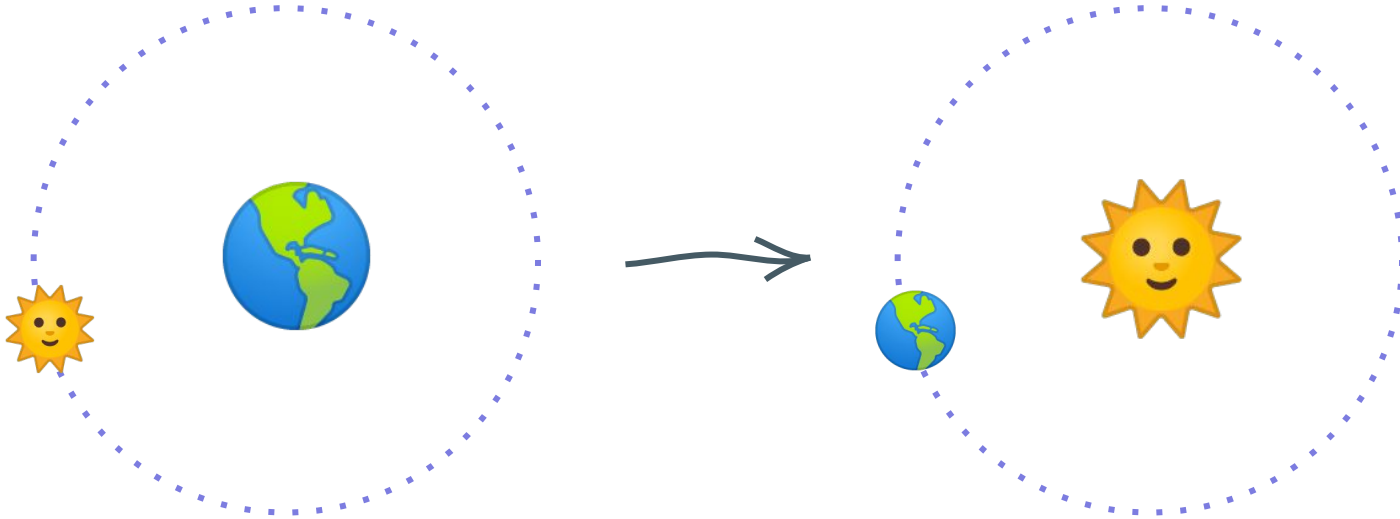
The crux of the journey narrative is that gaining something new necessarily means letting go of something that, despite limiting me, is familiar and well-understood.

IMMUNITY TO CHANGE



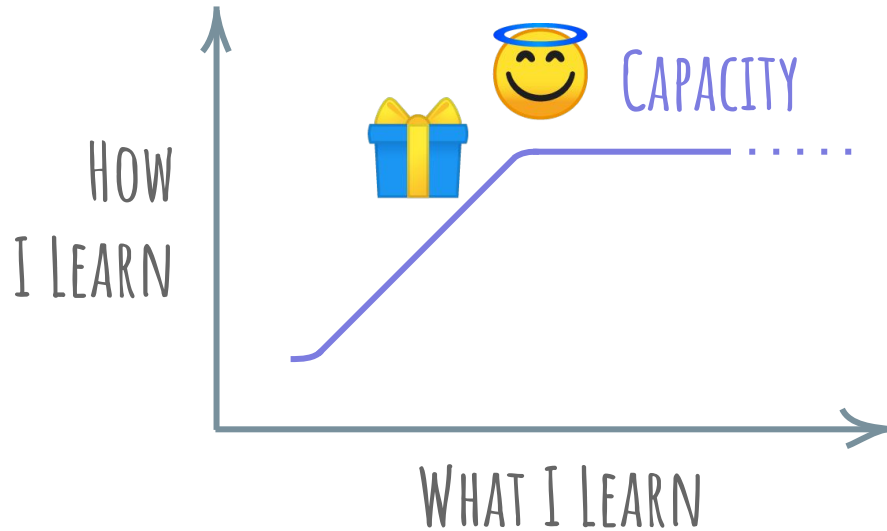
This framing may hint at why development happens in stages: the uncomfortable prospect of venturing into the abyss creates reluctance to leave the stage I am on.

A PERSONAL COPERNICAN SHIFT



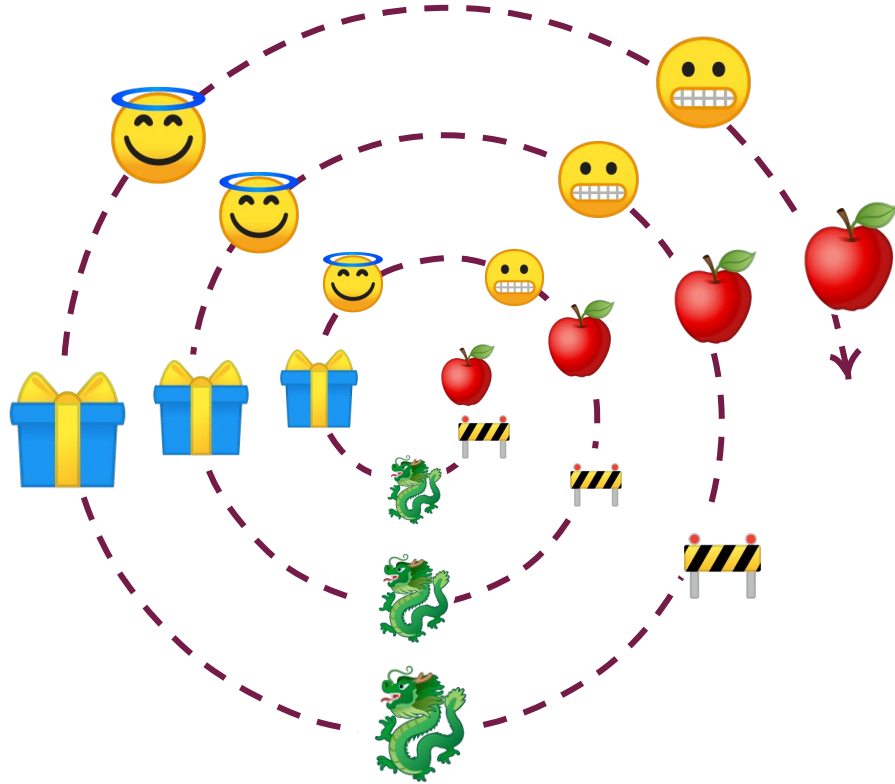
The internal shift in how we construct reality feels like a change in the world around us: new horizons open up, new possibilities become unlocked, new frontiers visible.

A NEW PLATEAU TO INHABIT



We explore these new horizons and enjoy the new-found ground of our sense-making: the world feels larger, more vibrant, with more possibilities and hope...

RINSE, REPEAT

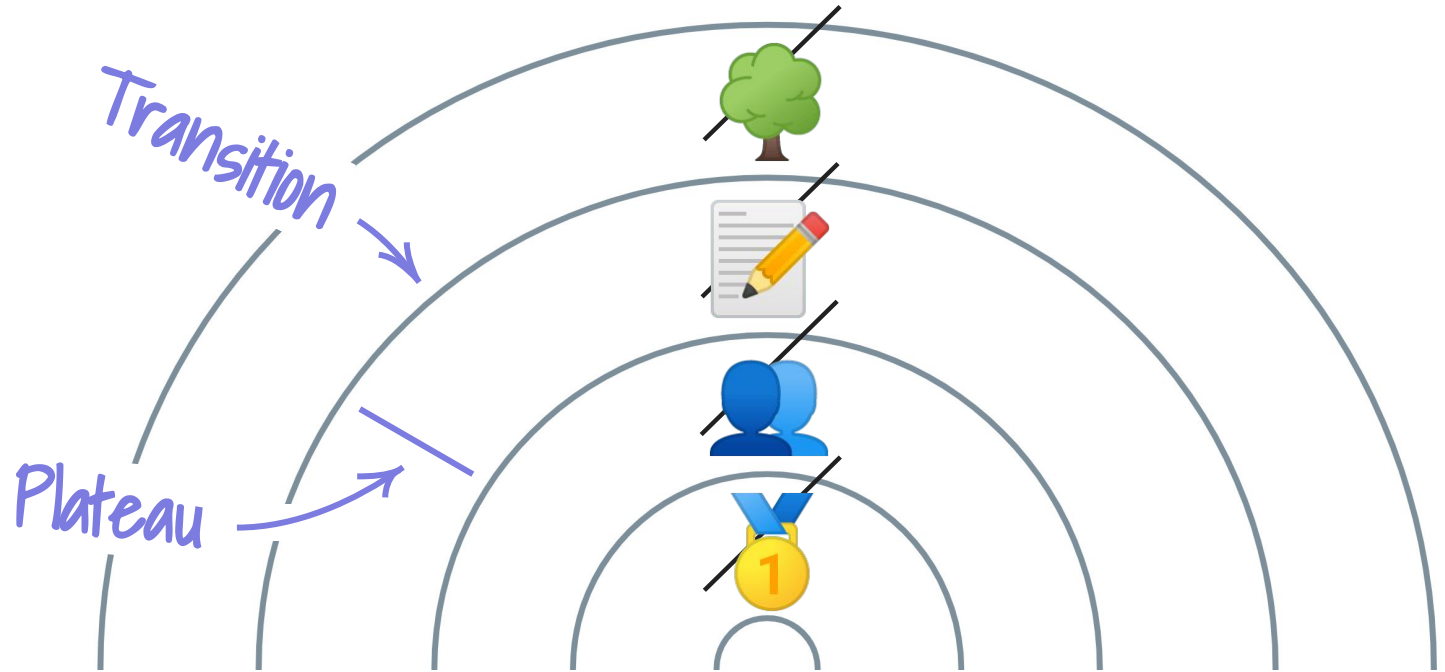


... until we reach the limits of this stage of sense-making and the next adventure begins to beckon, the next transformative journey -- dragons and all.

2 1/2. STAGES INCLUDE AND TRANSCEND

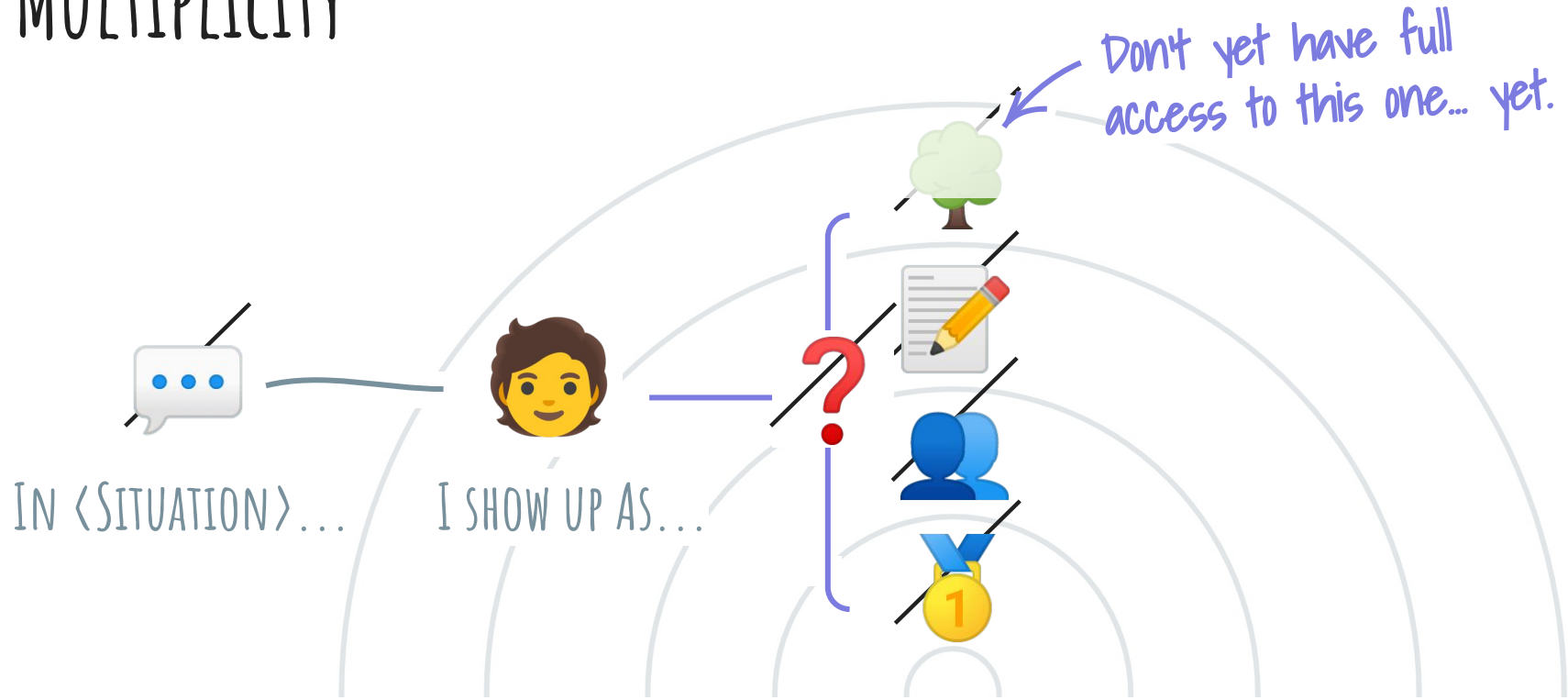
Finally, the adult development theory posits that stages are both incremental and cumulative. I can't reach the next stage without first reaching the one before it.

GROWTH INCLUDES AND TRANSCENDS



Like with the rings of a tree, each later stage includes the earlier. The next stage is incorporates all the learnings of the previous, transcending rather than discarding.

MULTIPLICITY



This means that all of the earlier stages remain accessible to me. Depending on a situation, I may show up embodying any of them.

FLEXING = INTENTIONAL

When my team decides on a direction I still have concerns about...



IN <SITUATION>...

I SHOW UP AS...

... I "disagree and commit," recognizing that moving forward is more productive at this point.



When I do it intentionally matching a situation to the level of sense-making that would be most effective in it, I am said to be *flexing*...

FALLBACK = UNINTENTIONAL

When a driver cuts me off in traffic...



...I yell, flip them off, and proceed to chase them down the highway in a fit of rage.

IN <SITUATION>...

I SHOW UP AS...



...and when I am doing this unintentionally--usually leading to unproductive outcomes--I am said to be experiencing *fallback*.

RECOGNIZING EARLIER SELF

JOURNEY VANTAGE POINT:  HARD-EARNED WISDOM

SENSE OF: *regression, atavism*

REACTION: *contempt, disdain*

"... behaving like a toddler!"

When seeing myself or others showing up at earlier stages, I will tend to sense these stages' limitations, echoing experiences of developmental journeys I once travelled.

ENCOUNTERING YET-UNDISCOVERED SELF

JOURNEY VANTAGE POINT:  FOREBODING OF THE ABYSS

SENSE OF: *incongruity, incomprehension*

REACTION: *dismissal, tuning out*

*"... that was some weird
woo-woo stuff"*

Conversely, seeing others showing up at later stages will have this weird feel of fuzziness and nonsense, like straining to see a picture through TV static.

PART II. STAGE BY STAGE

With these big ideas in hand, let's embark on the exploration of developmental stages, with an eye on subject-object shifts and elements of the hero's journey in each.



EARLIER DEVELOPMENTAL STAGES

SUBJECT (IS): *impulses, feelings,
perceptions*

OBJECT (HAS): *movement,
sensation*



*Where do I
begin?
Where do I end?*

We begin in early childhood, when the concept of Self has not yet been established and I am subject to my impulses, and only have moving/sensing to play with.



SELF-SOVEREIGN STAGE

AKA OPPORTUNIST, SELF-CENTRIC

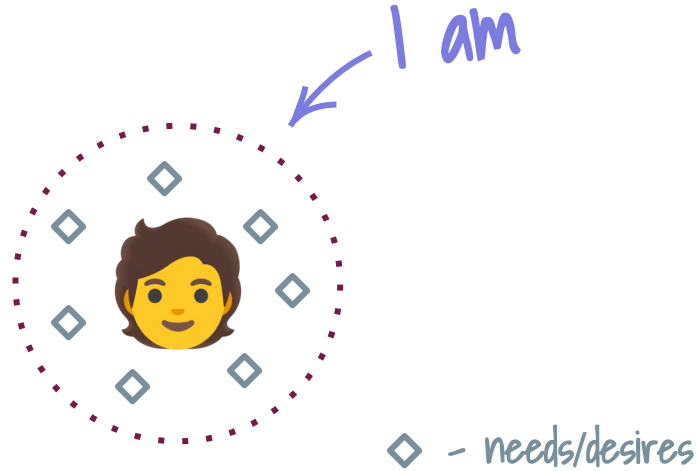
Through that play, the next stage emerges, where I recognize my Self and become aware of being separate from others. We marvel at this transformation in children.



SELF-SOVEREIGN STAGE

SUBJECT (IS): *interests, needs,
desires, perspective*

OBJECT (HAS): *impulses, feelings,
perceptions*



A sense of boundary forms around me, and I recognize that I can feel, perceive, and have impulses -- though I am very much embedded in my needs/desires. I *am* them.



SELF-SOVEREIGN STAGE AT A GLANCE

"You're either with me or
against me"
"eye for an eye"
"You hurt me, I hurt you"
"Trust no one"

REACHED BY: *nearly everyone*

RIGHT IS: *what benefits me*

POWER IS: *coercion (hard power)*

FEEDBACK IS: *an attack*

This stage should be familiar to all of us, because we all travel through it, and it is a simpler, more primitive stage that we all tend to fall back into in the times of crisis.



SELF-SOVEREIGN STAGE GIFTS AND CURSES



GIFTS:

gut instinct, survival mode,
highly effective in chaotic
situations like natural disasters,
workplace emergencies,
warzone, civil unrests, etc.



CURSES:

leans into chaos as the
familiar space,
undermines trust, creates
toxic environments,
no capacity for empathy or
perspective-taking

However, getting stuck embodying this stage quickly results in less-than-optimal outcomes that are polarizing, actually producing crises rather than resolving them.



SELF-SOVEREIGN STAGE HERO'S JOURNEY



CHALLENGES:

understand impact of actions on others, how they feel, imagine another's perspective



SCAFFOLDING TO NEXT STAGE:

BROAD AND HARD TO MISS

basic societal norms and culture, k-9 education, religion

Thanks to the society around us, it is difficult to avoid getting past that stage. I am asked to learn to see the larger picture, to recognize that "I am" is part of "we."



SOCIALIZED STAGE

AKA GROUP-CENTRIC, DIPLOMAT

This recognition triggers the next transformation: I am suddenly awash in awareness of others' perspectives and I realize that me and my actions are part the story of "us."

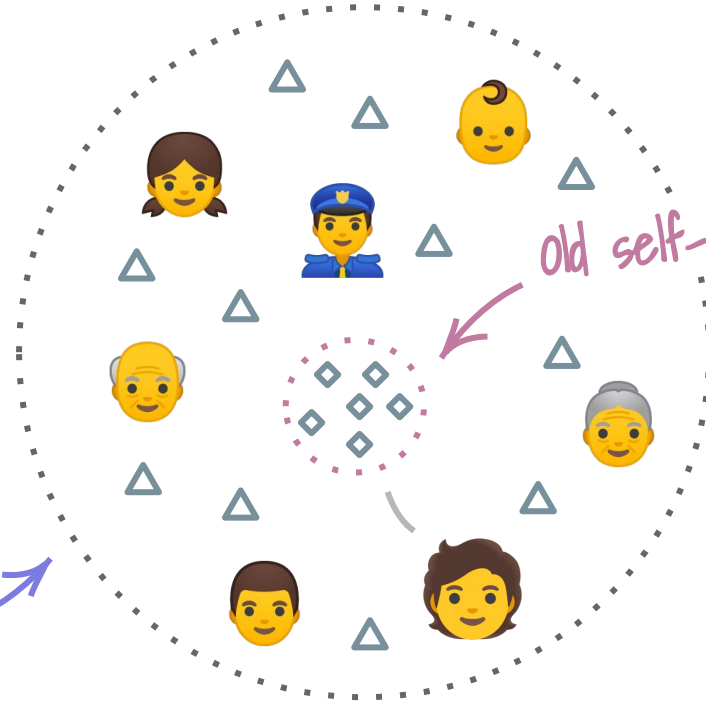


SOCIALIZED STAGE

SUBJECT (IS): mutuality,
abstractions,
perspectives

OBJECT (HAS): interests, needs,
desires

New socialized me →



old self-sovereign me

👤 - person

△ - abstraction

I embed in my relationships, *becoming* them. I now hold my interests and needs and compare them against people around me, identifying them as “us” vs. “not us”.



SOCIALIZED STAGE AT A GLANCE

"I am a good person, because
I do things that good people do"
"Why can't we all just get along?"
"I was just following orders"
"It's us against them"

REACHED BY: most adults (>90%)
RIGHT IS: what my group believes
POWER IS: charm (soft power)
FEEDBACK IS: painful loss of face

I see my value relative to others, intuitively seek a tribe and a leader to orient my Self in relation to the environment. Belonging feels existential: I am my relationships.



SOCIALIZED STAGE GIFTS AND CURSES



GIFTS:

empathy and goodwill
teamwork, reliability
society's glue: loyalty,
following rules, upholding
society values



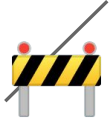
CURSES:

avoids conflict, masks true
feelings to keep peace
holds tightly onto
traditions/norms/rules
easily stuck when faced with
multiple conflicting perspectives

This stage enables functional communities and societies. Over-relying on it leads to stagnation and exclusion in pursuit of having everyone align on “one true” perspective.



SOCIALIZED STAGE HERO'S JOURNEY



CHALLENGES:

develop own unique voice,
inner sense of competence and
strength, dare to go against the
grain, learn that dissent is not
catastrophic



SCAFFOLDING TO NEXT STAGE:

AVAILABLE, ASPIRATIONAL

high school and college
education, ideals of Western
democracy

To overcome these limits, I am asked to recognize the subtle pull of “what I want” as separate from what “what I should,” and am given quite a few pathways to get there.



LIMINAL STAGE: EXPERT



SOCIALIZED



SELF-AUTHORED

The introduction of the "Liminal stage" concept is my creative attempt to tell the ADT story coherently across several stage taxonomies.

This transformation takes more effort and tends to produce a sort of in-between stage: the one where I've established "what I do," but not quite separated it from "us."



EXPERT (AKA SKILL-CENTRIC) STAGE

NOT QUITE  SOCIALIZED

*provides firm opinions and guidance in their area of expertise
makes important/significant contributions in that area*

NOT QUITE  SELF-AUTHORED

*struggles with perfectionism, delegation, and prioritizing
reactive, dogmatic,
has difficulty collaborating
"being an expert" is still attached to approval*

This stage is the motive force of progress: I perfect my craft to create increasingly refined things, yet my aspirations are rooted in the old "one true perspective" thinking.



SELF-AUTHORED STAGE

AKA SELF-DETERMINING, ACHIEVER

The next breakthrough is no less dramatic: I recognize that I don't cease to exist when I have a different perspective, and in fact, perspectives are just that -- perspectives.

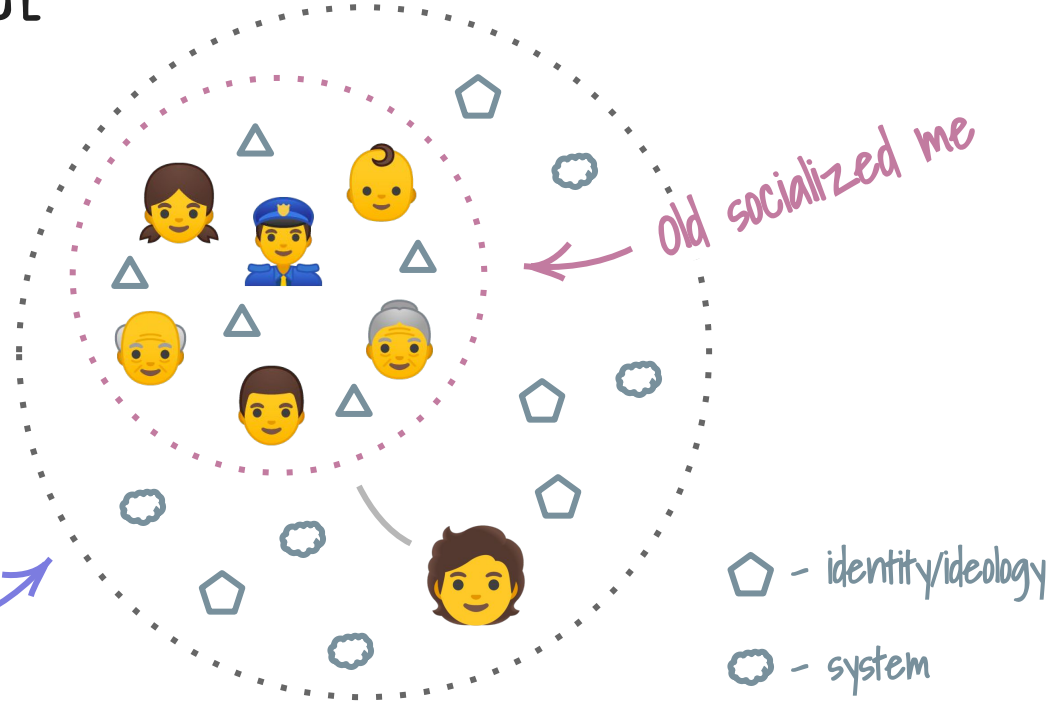


SELF-AUTHORED STAGE

SUBJECT (IS): *identity, ideology, systems*

OBJECT (HAS): *mutuality, abstractions, perspectives*

New self-authored me →



Able to hold relationships separate and reflect on abstractions, I've constructed my own way of thinking with supporting systems. And—for now—I am embedded in them.



SELF-AUTHORED STAGE AT A GLANCE

"I am the captain of
my own ship"
"My values, my principles,
my goals"
"I will make an impact and
change the world!"

REACHED BY: *some adults (<40%)*

RIGHT IS: *what I learned*

POWER IS: *producing valuable outcomes*

FEEDBACK IS: *sought and offered fearlessly*

This stage is idealized by the Western world. Many organizations seek out the traits indicative of it in aspiring leaders and foster cultures that attract those at this stage.



SELF-AUTHORED STAGE GIFTS AND CURSES



GIFTS:

brings contagious passion and drive, sees and values others' perspectives, directs self and others toward objectives through mutuality, prioritizes/delegates, sees past, present, and future



CURSES:

burnout. leans too heavily on drive/focus/achieving, hard on self and others, overcommitting and overextending high modernism: tends to treat complex challenges as complicated

The downsides stem from the limits imposed by being embedded in own ideology and systems view: I choose my own horizons, which means I also can't see past them.



SELF-AUTHORED STAGE HERO'S JOURNEY



CHALLENGES:

quieting the need to over-achieve
learning how to stop "doing" and
start "being," to pause,
question assumptions,
uncover deeply held beliefs



SCAFFOLDING TO NEXT STAGE:

LIMITED ACCESS

bits of postgraduate education,
executive/leadership coaching,
self-work methods/practices

And frustratingly, reaching beyond those horizons is ever more challenging: the pull of "knowing who I am" holds me tightly in place, and the path of next journey is unclear.



REDEFINING (AKA SELF-QUESTIONING) STAGE

NOT QUITE  SELF-AUTHORED

appreciation for complexity,
systems, individual differences,
and multiple perspectives.
can see long term impact of
decisions, and the complex
interplay of variables.

NOT QUITE  SELF-TRANSFORMING

can get lost in reflection,
tends to provide less certainty,
"truth," and firm leadership
over-values others' perspectives
to the point of difficulty bringing
closure

I start seeing complexity: an unnerving realization that some things aren't "solvable," and no amount of effort can make them coherent and neat. I feel both excited and lost.



SELF-TRANSFORMING STAGE

AKA SELF-ACTUALIZING, TRANSFORMING

I make it to the next plateau through another subject-object shift: the what I believe is “Self-made Self” is just one possibility, and trying it to cohere it is no longer existential.

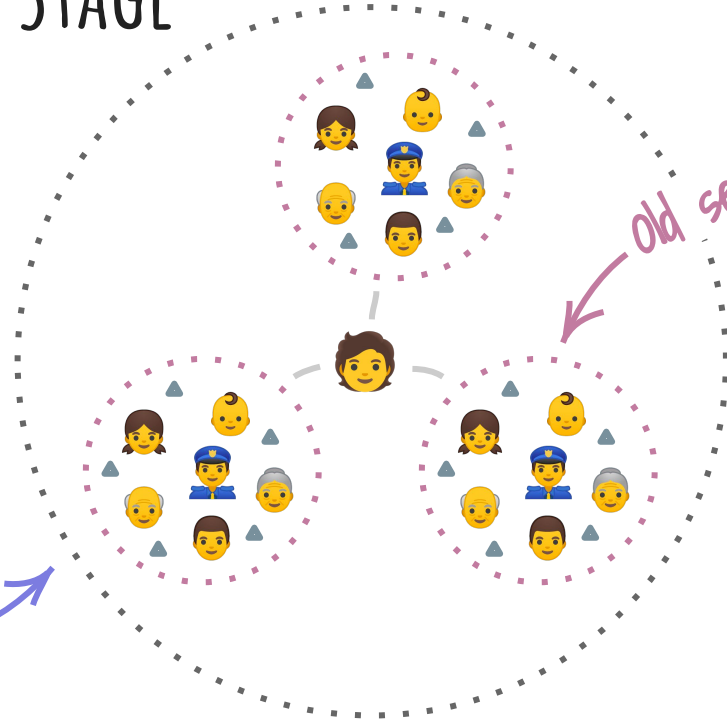


SELF-TRANSFORMING STAGE

SUBJECT (IS): *paradox of multiplicity, nonduality*

OBJECT (HAS): *identity, ideology, systems*

New self-transforming me →



old self-authoring me

I appreciate the richness and complexity around me, no longer beholden to an identity or ideology, moving fluidly back and forth across diverse roles and ways of thinking.



SELF-TRANSFORMING STAGE AT A GLANCE

"Hearing two different perspectives here, can we discern the insight behind their differences?"

"Are we at a point when we can delegate the decision details and get out of the way?"

REACHED BY: *very few (~1%)*

RIGHT IS: *a journey*

POWER IS: *action inquiry*

FEEDBACK IS: *absolutely necessary to function*

I am able to name my own shortcomings without attaching negative emotion to them, often acting as catalyst for organizational—and individual!—transformations.



SELF-TRANSFORMING STAGE GIFTS AND CURSES



GIFTS:

effective in leading transformational changes, values conflict as inevitable in relationships, comfortably holds conflicting/opposing ideas, able to flex across earlier stages



CURSES:

seen as too complex, impractical, always looking beyond immediate concerns, can appear as different person depending on context, firmly believes everyone should strive to develop/grow

Folks at this stage can be truly transformative leaders, yet they also tend to come across as too “out there,” not focused on “here and now,” and just weird.



SELF-TRANSFORMING STAGE HERO'S JOURNEY



CHALLENGES:

balancing confidence with
humbleness, becoming a more
coherent whole self, gaining
deeper sense of shadow,
awareness of how body and mind
integrate/inform one another



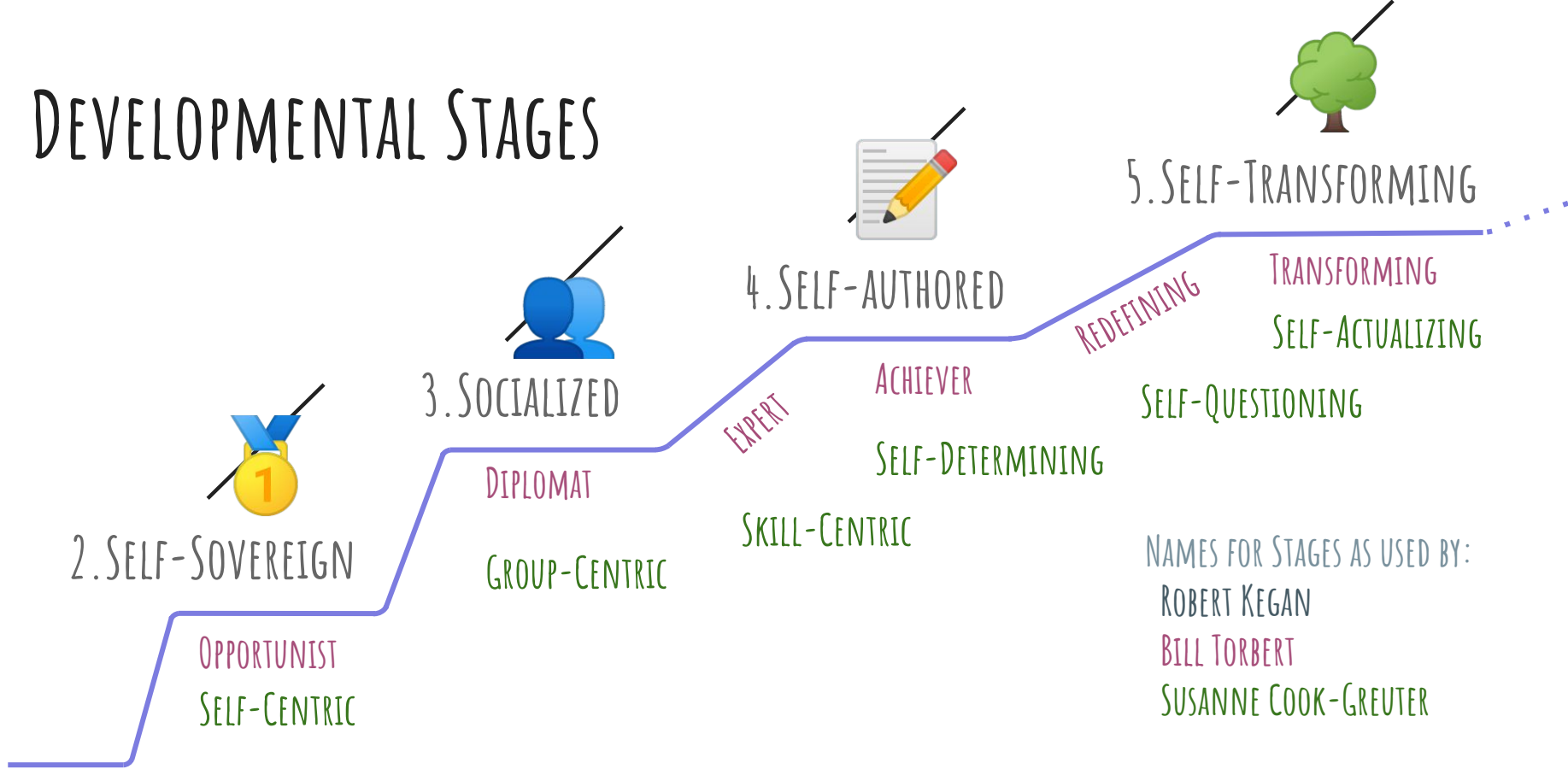
SCAFFOLDING TO NEXT STAGE:

COMES FROM WITHIN

self-awareness
and own intention

At this point in development, the motivation and the scaffolding for the next hero's journey comes almost entirely from within as part of continuous, intentional self-work.

DEVELOPMENTAL STAGES



Because folks at the self-transforming stage become aware of their developmental journeys and begin to pursue them intentionally, the question that comes to mind is ...



BEYOND SELF-TRANSFORMING

AKA ALCHEMIST, CONSTRUCT-AWARE, UNITIVE

... what is beyond that last stage we just covered? Does the journey continue? The adult development theory folks have some evidence that it does.



EXTREMELY RARE

It appears that individuals at these stages are extremely rare. Here are some bits of how someone at a this stage might show up, gathered through the studies.



ALCHEMICAL STAGE

RIGHT IS: *this (and every) moment*

POWER IS: *mutual transformation*

FEEDBACK IS: *interesting source of
perspective to play with and
build on*

Folks at this stage embrace the paradox and nondualism, their self-awareness evolving to in-the-moment awareness multiple levels (spiritual, ecological, social, ethical, etc.)



ALCHEMICAL STAGE



GIFTS:

disruptors of the paradigms,
deeply wise, spiritual, self-aware
can simultaneously and easily hold
many perspectives, see deep
interconnections and patterns
others can't



CURSES:

with endless appetite for complex
patterns/connections, make their
worldview increasingly difficult to
understand, appear odd, reclusive,
tend to gravitate to their solitary
inner world, away from others.

Perhaps one way to look for them is among the leaders who seem to be genuinely making the world a more harmonious place... or solitary monks and hermits.

THE ADT LAB: YOU

And for the Self-Authoring/Achievers in us, here is some take-home assignments for that extra credit. Now that you've learned about adult development theory...

TAKING THE ADT LENS FOR A SPIN

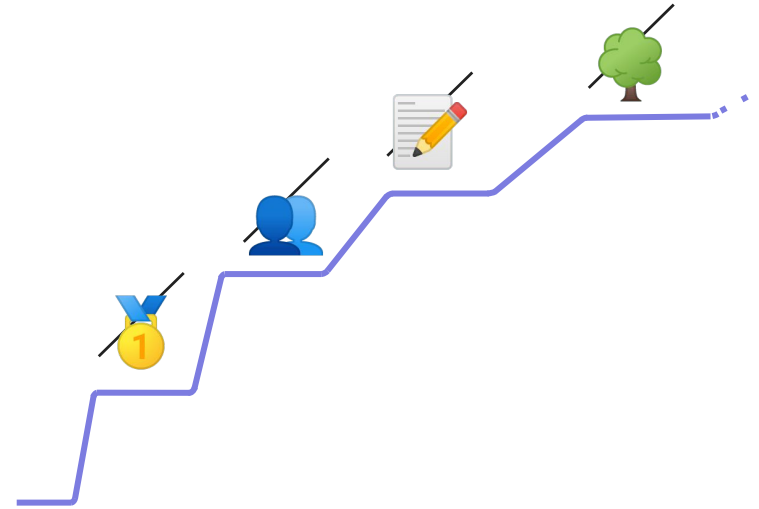
WHICH STAGES SEEM FAMILIAR TO YOU?

WHERE DOES IT START FEELING WEIRD?

WHERE CAN YOU FLEX? WHAT'S YOUR RANGE?

WHAT ARE YOUR FALLBACK HABITS?

WHERE ARE YOU ON YOUR HERO'S JOURNEY?



...see if you can spend a bit of time noticing ADT stages in how you show up in your daily life, and how this newly-acquired set of concepts might be applied. Have fun!

"Hey, can I get all those different names of stages in one nifty table?"

ROBERT KEGAN	SUSANNE COOK-GREUTER	BILL TORBERT
2. SELF-SOVEREIGN	SELF-CENTRIC	OPPORTUNIST
3. SOCIALIZED	GROUP-CENTRIC	DIPLOMAT
	SKILL-CENTRIC	EXPERT
4. SELF-AUTHORED	SELF-DETERMINING	ACHIEVER
	SELF-QUESTIONING	REDEFINING
5. SELF-TRANSFORMING	SELF-ACTUALIZING	TRANSFORMING
	CONSTRUCT-AWARE UNITIVE	ALCHEMICAL

REFERENCES / TO LEARN MORE

[UNDERSTANDING VERTICAL DEVELOPMENT](#) PAPER BY SANDRA ELLISON, ELLISON CONSULTING GROUP

[CHANGING ON THE JOB: DEVELOPING LEADERS FOR A COMPLEX WORLD](#) BOOK BY JENNIFER GARVEY BERGER

[LESSONS IN VERTICAL LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT](#) PAPER BY NICK PETRIE

[HOW TO BE AN ADULT](#) BLOG SERIES BY NATALI MORAD

[INVITING OUR FULL SELVES INTO THE LIGHT](#) PODCAST WITH VALERIE LIVESAY

[NINE LEVELS OF INCREASING EMBRACE IN EGO DEVELOPMENT: A FULL-SPECTRUM THEORY OF VERTICAL GROWTH AND MEANING MAKING](#) PAPER BY SUSANNE R. COOK-GREUTER

[ACTION INQUIRY: THE SECRET OF TIMELY AND TRANSFORMING LEADERSHIP](#) BOOK BY WILLIAM R. TORBERT

[IN OVER OUR HEADS: THE MENTAL DEMANDS OF MODERN LIFE](#) BOOK BY ROBERT KEGAN

[WARREN BUFFETT'S AND YOUR OWN SEVEN TRANSFORMATIONS OF LEADERSHIP](#) PAPER BY WILLIAM R. TORBERT

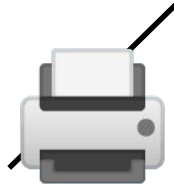
[IMMUNITY TO CHANGE: HOW TO OVERCOME IT AND UNLOCK THE POTENTIAL IN YOURSELF AND YOUR ORGANIZATION](#) BOOK BY LISA LASKOW LAHEY AND ROBERT KEGAN

Here are, in random order, the resources that I've used to create the story. All of these were insightful/meaningful to me. Each is a treasure trove of more references.

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WHO MADE THIS?

I made this deck to offer a developmental scaffolding to those who find themselves struggling to make sense of this challenging world around us, those who see that their current ways of meaning-making are lacking, but aren't quite sure what to do about it. I am hopeful that you'll find it useful in your journey to discover that next horizon of Self.



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