



***On Becoming:***  
*A Metaphysics of Human Evolution*

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## Introduction

What is meaningful? What moves you to grow and learn? Who are you? Who are we to each other? What are you to do with your life?

The coaching profession has come to the foreground amongst questions like these. It is flourishing in a time of rapid innovation and experimentation. It is also quite amorphous, wide ranging, confusing, and increasingly noisy. New approaches emerge constantly. Yet for all this creativity, many practitioners sense something unsatisfying about how we talk about our work - as if the language available doesn't quite capture what we're actually up to with clients. There is also a proliferation of techniques, anti-techniques, maps for development, anti-maps for development, and so on. These point to a vitality and a clamoring. A vitality or aliveness within the field of helping others, and a clamoring to be distinct.

Threaded through this, there is a strong and growing lineage of practitioners, mystics, contemplatives, philosophers, theologians and scientists who are naming in distinct but aligned ways something essential about this aliveness, about humanity's motion. It is one that moves beyond deeply embedded Greek thought and opens a fresh, generative and liberating pathway. It is at once speculative, in the spirit in which the 20th century philosopher Alfred North Whitehead used the word, cosmological and metaphysical. I call it *becoming*.

### **On Becoming**

*Becoming* invites three fundamental shifts addressing 1) our understanding of the locus of energy animating life, 2) what it is to be human (our dynamic ontology), and 3) the nature of our participation. On the first, the overarching dynamic of reality is *ab ante* rather than *a priori*<sup>1</sup>. That is, we are more called from ahead than propelled from behind. Second, metaphysically, our particular essence emerges in conjunction with our existence - not the other way around. Becoming is being. This inverts the Greek inheritance that shapes Western thought. Third, the highest human participation is

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<sup>1</sup> The timebound opposite of *ab ante* would technically be a retro, I am intentionally using *a priori* to invoke both time and inherited qualities of beingness

fundamentally *kenotic*<sup>2</sup> and creative - we contribute, through active surrender, to what-is-in-the-moment.

These shifts describe a non-mechanistic, purpose-infused, and fundamentally creative understanding of evolution and life itself. As we all experience, life can be chaotic and unpredictable. This is not a problem to be solved but a very necessary condition for creative emergence.

### **Motion toward**

In becoming, evolution proceeds more by attraction, than propulsion—drawn toward rather than pushed from behind.

Well established are the ways in which our genetic expression, familial and cultural dynamics, and early experiences beginning in-utero (and even before) shape our beliefs and behaviors. Clients often encounter this and it often is what brings them to coaching. On their own they tried with varying effectiveness to shift their conditioned tendencies, eventually seeking more effective means. This conditioning is an important aspect of being human, and the good news – it is only one dimension of what moves us.

Our habitual mode corresponds to what came before and it doesn't account for the surprising. For example, the sudden forgiveness a family member extends to someone where holding a grudge had been in-place for years. The energy ahead of us that motions us forward is of primary importance. It is this locus of energy, always available, which allows for spontaneous forgiveness.

In the long arc of time all is flowing toward a beacon of love-saturated individuation and unity. This evolutionary understanding found one of its most powerful expressions in Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, a Jesuit priest and paleontologist who illuminated the evolutionary primacy of becoming and being. This gravitational force of love imbued in the cosmos beckoning all of us forward, Teilhard names the *Omega* point. He writes:

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<sup>2</sup> Kenosis is an inner move of surrendering whatever we are in contact with in order to open ourselves.. Cynthia Bourgeault writes about this elegantly in her books *Centering Prayer* and *Inner Awakening, The Heart of Centering Prayer*

God is not the eternal cause but the eternal effect... God makes himself<sup>3</sup>, he completes himself through the world.<sup>4</sup>

Omega... is present and operative at the core of the thinking mass... drawing it towards himself and, in some way, making it one.<sup>5</sup>

Teilhard introduces this gravitational force as being *ab ante*, a future creating the present. Not a seed unfolding its inherent design, but love as a creative force calling from ahead without prescribed forms. In this view life is ongoingly imbued with love and it doesn't need to progress or unfold in any particular way because love can be infused in anything. In moments love can emerge as more densely constellated, more palpable. Love becomes more visible, demonstrable, such as a time when an ego-centric leader suddenly and mysteriously champions the team.

In his magnum opus, Ian McGilchrist speaks to this same phenomenon from a few different perspectives. One of them being the purposefulness or the embedded teleology of life. He writes:

Such a tendency is a sign that things are better thought of as being attracted towards certain goals, rather than pushed blindly forwards by a mechanism from behind. Blind processes can't see ahead to let a future aim guide a present development. James makes the point thus:

*Romeo wants Juliet as the filings want the magnet; and if no obstacles intervene he moves towards her by a straight line as they... with the lover it is the end which is fixed, the path may be modified indefinitely.*

I am reminded and not for the first time, of Dupree's analogy of asking a friend to buy a loaf of bread; specifying the goal is vastly more likely to produce the desired result than specifying the individual actions to be taken to get to the

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<sup>3</sup> Teilhard uses masculine pronouns for God throughout his writings, a convention of his era and religious tradition. His theology, however, positions God as the ground and horizon of all being – a reality that necessarily exceeds any human category, including gender.

<sup>4</sup> Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *Christianity and Evolution*

<sup>5</sup> Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *The Phenomenon of Man*

shop. Consciousness is, in its essence, always disposed *towards something*; its nature is to be reaching out.<sup>6</sup>

This fundamental shift liberates us from any sense of determinism or mere unfolding of what currently exists. The ingredient of love transmutes all others *in addition to being one of its own*. This latter aspect holds great significance – there exists in front of us, as it were, an endless energetic resource. As such, what is currently present in our sense of self, our genetics, our conditioned patterns are but a few of the ingredients that give rise to who we are becoming. It is worth repeating, the everpresence of love changes everything.

### **No there, there**

We can all put our shovels, headlamps, compasses and maps away. There isn't a purpose, true self, or authentic self to find or discover. As Bob Dylan famously quipped, "Life isn't about finding yourself, or finding anything. Life is about creating yourself and creating things." I don't mean to imply life is rudderless or that we in some way completely self-author our sense of self or our becoming. I do wish to highlight our modern language (which has ancient roots) and self-development culture very often indicate there is an authentic self to discover. I respect the intention behind authentic-self language, and I think the consequences of staying within that framework are worth examining. Pause for a moment and reflect on the energy someone you know or perhaps even you yourself have spent engaging with discovering or in some way connecting to an essential self.

In the pursuit of finding we are attempting to satisfy a hidden desire – it could be for direction, stability, meaning, belonging, or contribution. Worthy pursuits. The mode of discovering them has its roots far back into Greek thought, in part encapsulated by Plato's *anamnesis* and the dialogues of *Meno*, *Phaedo*, and *Phaedrus*. This view holds that our soul descends into form and an important dimension of living is reconnecting to or giving life to the pre-formed soul. That seed of thought sprouted thousands of years ago and continues to infuse the story we live under when it comes to authenticity, purpose, and the idea of a specific true-self.

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<sup>6</sup> Ian McGilchrist, *The Matter with Things* p1190

In the lineage of others, I'm proposing there isn't a blueprint to discover and give life to. Our essence emerges in concert with our existing. They are inseparable and in intimate relationship with each other. Alfred North Whitehead brilliantly and divergently expressed a different cosmology altogether. In his magnum opus, *Process and Reality*, he writes:

That how an actual entity becomes constitutes what that actual entity is; so that the two descriptions of an actual entity are not independent. Its 'being' is constituted by its 'becoming.' This is the principle of process.

This isn't hidden essence waiting to unfold but genuine formlessness, humming with creative potential. This is a flip of the script - being only exists in becoming, not vice versa. What this opens can feel unsettling as it challenges a deeply embedded narrative we hold - the real self is hidden beneath the material. Bernadette Roberts, a contemplative whose experience dissolved that very picture, puts it plainly:

In fact, consciousness generally regards the body as a temporary shell that houses an inner, immaterial spirit, a spirit that pops out when the body dies. But this whole scenario is consciousness' view of things based on its own limited experiences and way of knowing; ultimately there is no truth to it. The resurrection reveals that there is no distinction, as we had thought, between matter and spirit, body and soul, and so on.<sup>7</sup>

She goes on to illuminate that matter or the material is the essential, not a container for something else:

This Form, however, is not what the ordinary senses see as form, or what the mind knows as form (including Platonic form or an idea in the divine mind), or what consciousness experiences as form. Rather, Eternal Form is concrete, material, physical, the underlying substance of all matter. Without it there would be no universe and no one to see it.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Bernadette Roberts, *What is Self?* p160

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, p184

This might feel like the removal of a grounding force – an answer. Answers can provide a sense of stability. On the flip side it also offers a unique possibility – being stabilized by being alive without needing to discover anything in particular. We'll return to how the longings of belonging, meaning, contribution are met in becoming and other tangible applications of this principle in a later section.

### **Now what?**

The most straightforward answer to "Now what?" is, we participate. This participation has different modes. I named earlier that we are biological beings and this biology is conditioned. This conditioning shapes our sense of self, emotional patterns, and behaviors. Another manner in which we participate is developing particular competencies (eg. communication, relationships) and capacities (eg. ability to be-with conflict, subtle perceptual abilities). Attending to these is two modes of participation worthy of fuller exploration which we will do in a later chapter.

The critical mode of participation in becoming is kenotic. A term that intimates a surrendering, making room, and a posture of release. At its core it is a mode of *intention* and *relationship*. The intention is an endless welcome and in this endless welcome we are able to welcome without reservation because we are holding no-thing. There is only room. In *The Matter with Things*, polymath Ian McGilchrist quotes Meister Eckhart in a passage that captures what kenosis is:

'I can only call it a loving and open receptiveness, which however in no way lacks being: it is a receptive potential by means of which all is accomplished.' This suggests the fertility of union between a creative principle and a receptive womb-like space (female principle) in which something is to grow. In other words the darkness is not merely negative, but the active opening of a field of potential, what I have called *active receptivity*: the mode of the right hemisphere's attention.<sup>9</sup>

Kenosis is relationship because becoming is fundamentally relational. There is an *I* because there is a *We* and there is a *We* because there is an *I*. What allows for one *I* to be more present is the other *I* emptying, calling forth the other. The dance goes on

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<sup>9</sup> McGilchrist, *The Matter with Things* p1224

endlessly. Ilija Delio, a Franciscan scientist and theologian, articulates the foundation of relational primacy

... "to be" is to be with. Reality is "being with another" in a way open to more union and more being. Since being is existence towards another, being is relational and exists for the sake of giving. I do not exist in order that I may possess; rather I exist in order that I may give of myself, for it is in giving that I am myself.... True identity does not fuse the elements it brings together: union differentiates.<sup>10</sup>

What this looks like practically is more about a *Who* than a *How*. Living kenosis is not a technique – it is a way of being. This is not an attempt to sidestep being pragmatic or helpful. In our world today we are so concerned with the *How* that we leave out the *Who*. The *Who* is the embodied presence animating the action and creating a field for something to come forth. Here's an example: a moment when you contact a feeling and, by grace, have the wherewithal to let it go, and in so doing the person across from you says something they've been holding onto for quite some time. Not a move to love the other but to empty and allow, allow for the source of all to bring forth what is love in that moment. We can support this occurrence of grace by becoming grace-prone. We'll explore this at depth in a future chapter.

Becoming is our horizon.

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Author note:

This is an introductory chapter to *On Becoming*. Future chapters will engage:

- Further implications for living
- Applications for coaching
- Connections to Three Dimensional & Integral Coaching

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<sup>10</sup> Ilija Delio, *The Unbearable Wholeness of Being* p45-46