

The Core Emotions of the Centers: An Evolutionary Perspective

By Dave Hall

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In the last issue of the *Nine Points Bulletin*, several students of the Enneagram, myself included, weighed in with possible candidates for the core emotion of the Heart Center. In my response, I also suggested a more general criterion for indentifying the core emotion of *any* given center. My suggestion was that we should be looking for a certain kind of *motivating* emotion – a feeling-state that would tend to kick-start our ego-personalities into action in a certain Center- and Type-specific way.

In this essay, I want to propose an evolutionary history for three such motivating emotions. I will address some of the ways that my understanding of this history differs from that of Jack Killen and David Daniels, who have likewise proposed an evolutionary model to explain the core emotions. (I will admit to feeling some trepidation about this. I had the good fortune to discuss some of these ideas briefly with David at a workshop he led in Minnesota a couple of years ago, and I am acutely aware that both he and Jack Killen have studied evolutionary biology more intensively than I. But I also have a deep faith in the capacity of the Enneagram symbol itself to help us perceive the structural underpinnings of personality.)

In his *Enneagram Journal* article (2009), Killen aligns the “fight/flight/freeze” arousal responses with Fear and the Head Center (p. 45). I want to explore how this tri-partite response cluster functioned in an evolutionary perspective long before animals had developed anything like what we now think of as the Head Center – or the Heart Center for that matter – and how it may have formed the template out of which the more complex emotions of the three Centers later developed. Essentially, I am suggesting that the three core emotions developed out of biological arousal responses related to survival. We can see how these arousal responses originate in the reptilian brain, how they become more complex with the advent of the mammalian brain, and how they become yet more complex – and in some ways maladaptive – with the advent of the neo-cortex and the human brain. A provocative question arises from this perspective: in human beings, just what kind of “survival” do these emotions seek to ensure?

My premise is that when an organism detects a threat in the environment, it has three fundamental response options:

- It can respond with a display of strength, size, and ferocity, seeking to overcome or intimidate the source of the threat. (The “fight” response.)

- It can remove itself quickly to a safer place. (The “flight” response.)
- It can somehow manipulate the way it appears so that the source of threat no longer perceives it as something to harm. (The “freeze” response.)

The short-hand terms *fight*, *flight*, and *freeze* need to be unpacked a bit – they were obviously chosen partly for reasons of rhyme and alliteration – but they are the seed-responses, I am suggesting, for the core emotions of *anger* (Body/Instinctive Center), *fear* (Head Center), and *shame* (Heart Center). How we get from fight/flight/freeze to anger/fear/shame is the evolutionary part of this story.

At the level of the *reptilian* brain, the three arousal responses manifest in fairly simple behaviors:

- A lizard (for example) can attack a perceived threat – or telegraph its intention to attack by baring its teeth, hissing, and inflating some part of its body – in a classic *fight* response.
- It can scurry under a nearby rock – an obvious *flight* response.
- It can become immobile – essentially *imitating* an inanimate object – or it may use some kind of camouflage, in either case *manipulating its appearance* to keep it from harm. These behaviors are lumped under the term *freeze*.

As simple and as survival-based as these behaviors are, however, we can see in them the crude prototypes of the human emotions and preoccupations of the three Centers:

- If I perceive an impingement on what I sense as my physical boundaries or integrity, I may respond by mobilizing my life-force energy in a way that keeps you at bay or somehow renders you less of a threat. This is the evolutionary underpinning of what we call *anger* in the Body/Instinctive Center.
- If I feel unsafe or insecure in my environment, I can use my intelligence to come up with alternative places or structures where I will feel safer and more supported. This is the evolutionary underpinning of what we call *fear* in the Head Center.
- If I feel like I am seen in a problematic way by something in my environment, I concentrate on how I appear – manipulating my appearance in subtle ways – to ensure my well-being. This is the evolutionary underpinning of what we call *shame* in the Heart Center: an abiding preoccupation with how I am seen by others.

With the advent of the *limbic* or *mammalian* brain, a development that enables a full-blown Social Instinct to emerge, the forms of behavior related to the arousal responses become more complex, especially as regards the *fight* and *freeze* behaviors. In animal species that live in herds or packs, we see social roles developing in relation to these

responses. The alpha male in a wolf pack, by definition, is always going to display the *fight* response. As a corollary, the other males in the pack exhibit a range of submissive behaviors, signaling by their *appearance* that they are not challenging the alpha male. These behaviors, such as holding the tail low or between the legs, or rolling over to expose the belly, can be added to the expanding repertoire of *freeze* responses that work by manipulating how the animal is seen by others.

Furthermore, the more complex mammalian social formations encourage a range of important new behaviors and responses that are designed to care for and protect the young. Here is where I would evolutionarily align the Panic/Distress response that Killen and Daniels discuss – not with the Heart Center but with the Social Instinct. Killen, in fact, refers to Panic as a “social” emotion, and notes that the Panic/Distress system is “quintessentially mammalian,” appearing only with the advent of the limbic brain (p. 42, 46).

Now, what do these survival-based arousal responses look like when they become the human emotions of *anger*, *fear*, and *shame*? Who – or what – is trying to survive when these emotions kick in? Are the core emotions mostly adaptive, or are they mostly *maladaptive*, in terms of human life and possibility? Finally, does locating the genesis of the core emotions in these age-old biological arousal responses mean that they are *merely* the most recent form of these primitive mechanisms, or have we as humans evolved to the point where we are able to form wholly new relationships to these emotional energies?

To meaningfully address these questions, we need to bring in a new dimension of emotional experience that is, as far as we know, unique to human beings: the vast psycho-spiritual continuum describing the levels of health and development in the human personality. For along with the greater capacities for self-awareness and understanding that came with the advent of the more complex human brain came also a greater range of expression, running from *healthy* and *adaptive* manifestations of these capacities down to remarkably *unhealthy* and *maladaptive* manifestations. I think this is particularly and poignantly true of the primary emotions.

In a short article like this, I can only touch briefly upon this very complex subject, but even a quick look at the type descriptors from different Levels of the Riso-Hudson Core Dynamics model can be illustrative. Here are three examples, one from each Center:

- At Level 5, in the middle of the Average range, Type Eight is noted to be “sparring” and “territorial.” Down into the Unhealthy range, at Level 7, Eights can become “violent” and “rage-aholic.” The resonance with the *fight* response is explicit.

- At Level 5, Type Three is described as “chameleonic.” At Level 7, the Three is described as an “imposter.” These terms clearly resonate with the defensive responses of *freeze/camouflage*.
- At Level 5, Type Six is described as “evasive” and “pulling back.” At Level 7, the Six is described as “hiding out.” Here the terms evoke the classic *flight* response. (The “Core Dynamics” can be found in the Riso-Hudson *Part I Training Manual*.)

If we look honestly at the levels of health at which most of us operate most of the time, we can see that much of our core emotional reactivity continues to function as a largely outmoded and maladaptive survival response – and that the entity which is trying to survive at this point in our evolution is not our organism but rather our ego-structured personality.

But we have also evolved to the point where we are capable of transforming the expression of these core emotional energies. When, as a Six, I am present enough to my experience in the moment to act from a healthier Level, I feel the core emotion of *fear* more as an *alertness* and a *clarity*, a *quickness* and *agility* of mind – though still with the organismic feeling of arousal behind my sternum that I usually associate with fear – and I sense that this emotional energy can help me to *transform* the ego-structures that in my less conscious moments I am generally trying to preserve and protect.

I would be interested to hear if Body Center and Heart Center types have a similar experience around their core emotions. My sense is that the Instinctive/Body-Center energy of *anger*, at healthier levels, is very close to the pure energy and potency of the *vital life-force* itself, and that what we call *shame* in the Heart Center is an energy that enables *attunement*, *appreciation*, and a *nurturing validation*.

Toward the end of his very rich and thought-provoking article, Killen introduces some questions about how the three emotional systems he has addressed might interact with the other basic biological systems formulated by Jaak Panksepp. (The full list is Fear, Rage, Panic, Care, Seeking, Play, and Lust.)

This is a heterogeneous list, made up of what sound like emotions, drives, and behaviors. I think the most basic answer might be that we are looking at interactions between Center/Type on one hand and Instinct on the other. The Panic-Care dyad (with the possible addition of Play) looks to me like the Social Instinct, and Lust (with the possible addition of Seeking) looks a lot like the Sexual/Attraction Instinct.

It may prove that the structural precision of the Enneagram holds the key to sorting out these seven categories in a different and clearer way. It may be the case that what Killen and Daniels call Panic/Distress contains elements of *both* the Social Instinct *and* the

core emotion of *shame*, which similarly entails reactions around lack of connection, mirroring, and attunement in our environment.

There is a danger of emotional and instinctual issues being jumbled together when the Instincts are demoted to mere “subtypes” of the nine personality types. This is one of the reasons why Don and Russ always treat the Instincts as a separate, autonomous realm that intersects with – but is never completely subsumed by – the Centers and the Types. The different ways that the Instincts are understood and taught by different Enneagram teachers might, in fact, be a fruitful subject for a future conversation in these same pages.

David Hall is a certified Riso-Hudson teacher. He welcomes feedback and dialogue at davidhall1144@comcast.net.