

Positive Disintegration Podcast
Episode 1: Welcome to Positive Disintegration!

Chris Wells & Emma Nicholson
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Emma: Welcome to positive disintegration podcast, a framework for becoming your authentic self. I am your host, Emma Nicholson. I'm a business analyst who uses business tools and techniques to explain the Dąbrowski theory on my YouTube channel, Adults with Overexcitabilities. I write the Tragic Gift blog and I'm the technical director of the Potteriversity podcast. Joining me today is my co-host and our resident expert on positive disintegration, Chris Wells. A Dąbrowski scholar, researcher, and therapist in private practice. Welcome, Chris.

Chris: Thank you.

Emma: So Chris, you've been on podcasts before, but this is your first shot at doing your own. How do you feel?

Chris: I have been on a couple of podcasts and I'm excited about finally doing one myself with you and having the opportunity to really dive deep into Dąbrowski's theory.

Emma: I'm also excited about this, not only to talk about Dąbrowski's theory, but this is the first time I've been really front of house, I guess for a podcast. I spent a lot of time doing editing and it's exciting to be in front of the mic, I reckon.

Chris: Well, I'm very grateful for your technical expertise and yeah it should be very exciting to be in the front of house, finally.

Emma: Also on this podcast, I think one of the exciting things is it's, I guess not your mama's psychology podcast, we're hoping to do something a little bit different.

Chris: Yeah, I agree, that's a good way to put it—that it's not going to be your typical psychology podcast because we're just going to take a different approach. I think it'll be a little more informal than people expect.

Emma: Yeah. I think informal is a good way to put it. And if people hadn't noticed by the explicit rating, I think it will be different to some of the content out there.

Chris: It will.

Emma: I'm excited to talk about Dąbrowski's theories and simplify something which has been kind of complicated.

Chris: It's very complicated. There's so much to this theory. I've been studying it for several years now and I haven't come to the end of it, and I don't expect to come to the end of it, to be honest. I think that I could spend the next 40 years of my life studying the theory and still be surprised every day and still be learning.

Emma: So Chris, tell us a little about Dąbrowski's theory for people out there who are new to it, and maybe don't know what positive disintegration is.

Chris: Dąbrowski's theory is a theory of inner transformation and it's a theory of personality development or human development. And it is quite extensive and deep.

Emma: Yeah, it does seem quite deep from some of the reading that I've done, and I don't have any background or education in psychology. It's a lot of material out there and some of it's quite hard to follow.

Chris: Yes, it's not easy to follow Dąbrowski's work because, well, there are a couple reasons, but for one thing, he was writing in a very different time. Let me introduce who Dąbrowski was a little bit. Kazimierz Dąbrowski. He was born in Poland in 1902. He was a psychiatrist and a psychologist. And there's a lot to say about who he was as a person, because so much of his early experiences in Poland, growing up during World War I, living through World War II. Doing all of this work that he did without political stability, just really intense circumstances. All of that shaped the theory and it shaped who he was and his thinking.

Emma: Because he would've seen some stuff. I mean living through World War I and World War II. He would've seen some pretty horrific crap in his time.

Chris: He definitely saw some stuff and there's actually the foreword that he wrote to a monograph that Michael Piechowski wrote in 1975, or it was published in 1975. But in this foreword, Dąbrowski talks about some of these things that he went through, and he talks about what it was like. He describes a battlefield from World War I and the expressions on the faces of the soldiers and how when they died—some of them, they were calm and peaceful and others not

so much and kind of showed the agony of the experience. And you can just see how deeply that affected him. And so the theory really came from his work on suffering and making sense of suffering, but also, he was trying to understand the whole range of humanity.

And so his dissertation, his medical degree dissertation or thesis from 1929, was about the psychological conditions of suicide. And then his doctoral thesis for his PhD in psychology was about the psychological bases of self-mutilation. This is where the theory came from—from his attempts to understand nervousness and what he would call positive disintegration.

Emma: So this theory was really brought out of some pretty tough circumstances and from some deep places. So when we talk about the term positive disintegration, what does that actually mean?

Chris: Positive disintegration means that you go through a time when everything kind of turns upside down. Disintegration for Dąbrowski, there was more than one way to look at it. You could go through unilevel disintegration, and you would go through that first or you could go through multilevel disintegration. But the gist I guess is that it's like a breakdown of who you are. Positive disintegration is basically a dismantling in your present self, and it's a replacement of that set of psychic structures or functions. And it's replaced with a new set [of structures].

Emma: So when I hear you talk about disintegration of your existing structures, that means to me, everything that you have learnt to be and who you are needs to kind of fall away and break down in some manner.

Chris: Yes, Dąbrowski didn't think that just anybody—he didn't think that all people went through positive disintegration necessarily. He felt that the people who were most likely to go through positive disintegration were those who had a strong developmental potential. So there are two concepts that are at the foundation of the theory. One of them is developmental potential. The other is multilevelness. Developmental potential is the overexcitabilities, dynamisms, your special talents and abilities. It could mean intelligence. It's kind of an amalgam of these things. Their interactions with each other. And so if you have a strong developmental potential, you're much more likely to experience positive disintegration, it's going to be transformative or it's going to have the potential to be transformative. If you don't have a strong developmental potential in his terms, well, you could still go through positive disintegration, but you may not ever reach multilevel.

Emma: In Dąbrowski's case, I guess when you were talking about trauma, initiating this sort of stuff, when he saw what was happening in the war. I suppose that trauma can either just sort of sit with you and stay with you, or it can be a way to open your eyes and view the world a bit differently. And for me, what I've been reading about disintegration, there's a potential to shake

off the way you've previously seen the world and see it in a new light. And I suppose for him going through those major world episodes would have shaken up the way he viewed the world.

Chris: Yes, definitely. That's probably the best way to put it actually—the shaking up. I mean, he talked about disintegration as a loosening and a fragmentation and that's because when we're growing up, we take in the values from the people around us. And so from our parents, or at school, or from church, or wherever. The adults and the culture that we grow up in, we take in those values, and we internalize them. And so the first shake up for most people is when they first start to question those values and question the people in their lives. And they start to see things from themselves, like you said, I mean, it is kind of a process of waking up.

Emma: You talked before about unilevel and multilevel in that sort of shaking up process. What's the difference between those two terms because that's something I've come across a fair bit in reading Dąbrowski's stuff.

Chris: Unilevel and multilevel are directly related to values. Unilevel means that everything is on one plane. And so there's no clear sense of higher or lower. It's a time of not having a clear better or worse, or you don't have the values that dictate what *should be* compared to *what is*, and so it's horizontal, whereas multilevel means it's a vertical split. There is a clear higher and lower, and that's when there's a hierarchy of values. And so the hierarchy of values is a critical piece to what makes a process multilevel compared to unilevel.

When he first described unilevel and multilevel in his Polish work, in 1949, he talked about unilevel as fan-like. Like a [handheld] fan that you open up and spread out, but it's just on one level or one layer. And so for multilevel, it's really like there's a sense of depth to it that you don't get with unilevel, which is interesting because I think that depth is a really excellent way to think of that difference. The more advanced you are in this theory in terms of levels, which we'll get to, the more deep you are. More [depth] in terms of consciousness, you have an emotional depth, an intellectual depth, an imaginal depth. You think about how all of the overexcitabilities kind of play into your developing personality. All of these elements come together. So he talked about multilevel and multidimensional as your experience of life compared to a unilevel experience of life or reality, which is really on the surface of things. And that's where most people are.

Emma: I think a lot of people can kind of relate to what you were talking about in seeing a better or worse choice. Because I think particularly for adults, as you go along your life path, you start to realize that some of the choices that you've made probably aren't for the best and when you're sort of sorting out your own values, I think people could relate to that. And knowing that sometimes they see that there's a better way that they should be behaving, but we don't always do it. We don't always act that out.

Chris: That's right. There's actually a Latin phrase that Michael has used in his work [*Video meliora proboque deteriora sequor*. —Marcus Tullius Cicero]. And that's exactly what it means basically—that I can see the higher, but I'm not living it yet. But it's so true that once you reach that first multilevel phase, you're able to identify the higher and you can see what should be, but you're kind of trapped in what is, and you don't yet have what you need in order to get to that next place. And it's true that I'm sure a lot of people can relate to that. And I think that that can go on for quite a long time before you finally are able to take the steps that you need to take.

Really, I think hierarchization is probably one of the first dynamisms that you reach in that first multilevel phase, but the third factor is an advanced version of hierarchization. If hierarchization is the sorting out process, then the third factor is the dynamism where you're not only making a conscious choice, but you're acting on it. It's not only intellectual. It's also your actions and who you are in the world.

Emma: When you were talking about the things that you learn, from when you're a small child, from religion society, your parents. Those things are pretty well ingrained and it's not always easy to follow, even when you see that there's probably a better way of doing things. It's not always easy to follow that particular path and come to act on it, particularly if it's against what you've previously been taught. But I suppose that's sort of the essence of disintegration isn't it, is you've got to kind of shake that stuff off. So in order to follow those better paths.

Chris: That's right. And what you just described is really also his dynamism of positive maladjustment. Dąbrowski looked at adjustment in multiple ways. He saw positive adjustment, positive maladjustment, negative adjustment, negative maladjustment. But positive maladjustment is really when you are taking a stand, and that's when you're saying, “Hey, I don't agree with what I see here, or I can't go along with this.” And it's when you're finally able to move away from what the crowd is doing and do what is right to you and act authentically.

Emma: So is that where the positive in positive disintegration comes from? Because for all intents and purposes, disintegration doesn't sound very positive. But we're talking about the direction of movement when we talk about positive, is that right?

Chris: Right. Because disintegration can be either positive or negative and it's really the outcome that dictates which way it goes. So yeah, positive disintegration means that at the end of the process, you've come out at a higher level. If it's a negative disintegration, that's not good. It could mean mental illness or even death. Just because you've gone into the process of disintegration doesn't mean that it's necessarily going to be positive, but the way that Dąbrowski looked at it, if you have a strong developmental potential, then the possibility of the positive disintegration is stronger. It's more likely. If you don't, then it's less clear and it's more uncertain.

Emma: And you were saying before that people sort of go through this in different ways. One thing that stood out to me with this framework is that not everybody's going to make it to the end. And in fact, there's no sort of time limit of when this is going to happen. Like you don't just grow through it as you age or anything. Can you tell us a little bit about how those levels are kind of different from other theories?

Chris: Well, what distinguishes Dąbrowski's theory from other theories that are stage theories, is that his *isn't* a stage theory and it's not a natural progression from one stage to another, that goes along with the lifespan. So, it's non-ontogenetic, meaning that it's not unfolding as natural development. And so that means it's very individual, and not everyone goes through it. And even the people who do go through it have pretty different experiences of it, well very different experiences. I mean, there's parts of it that are very similar, of course, the dynamisms.

The dynamisms help us see where people are in terms of levels. Dąbrowski outlined five levels of development. Primary integration is Level I. Unilevel disintegration is Level II. Spontaneous multilevel disintegration is Level III. Organized or directed multilevel disintegration is Level IV and then secondary integration is Level V. And so you have two levels that are integrations, and you have three levels of disintegration in between. There's absolutely no guarantee that a person is ever even going to go through unilevel disintegration. Most people accept the external values around them and they remain in an integrated state for their whole lives. And they never have the shake-up. Statistically, the majority of people don't ever reach multilevel disintegration.

Emma: So, when you're talking about those levels—I'm going to try and play this back to you and see if I can get my own head around it. So, on Level I, in primary integration, that means you're not having any sort of shake up. You're just kind of accepting what it is that you've been taught by the world. And you could pretty much live out your entire life, happily going on with following the rules and following the other values. At the second level where you said unilevel is kind of like that fan, you're starting to go through that disintegration process of shaking things up and everything's coming loose, but there's really no clear values. And like you said, multilevel better or worse starts to sort of appear, better choices and values of who to be.

Chris: Those are the things that separate them, but I would also add that conscious awareness is a part of it. And so, the unilevel disintegration [might be] taking place more somatically, meaning in the body, but not necessarily in your awareness, whereas multilevel disintegration is more conscious. It's more of an inner conflict. The hallmark of Level III is inner conflict, whereas at Level II—a complete shakeup or a fragmentation of the self—compared to the conflict, because at Level III, of course, you have that vertical split. And so, you see the higher versus lower, but you're not getting that experience at Level II. And that's part of what's so hard about unilevel disintegration, is that because you can't quite get your finger on what it is that's going wrong, you're less equipped to solve the problem.

Emma: It's almost like the difference between having a stress headache and understand why you're stressed and having that headache.

Chris: That's right. Or like ulcers, when I was younger. I mean I had an ulcer and it never occurred to me that the experience of what I was going through at the time was the cause of that physical problem. I remember really struggling with the pain and the physical issue and just not putting together that the way I was living was the problem. And so, I think that is probably a good way to think about the difference between unilevel and multilevel when it comes to disintegration because unilevel—it's not in your awareness.

Emma: So then when we are talking about spontaneous multilevel and organized, you were saying that there's a third factor involved, which pushes you to, I guess, sort of claim ownership over your process.

Chris: Yeah. The third factor comes in before you are solidly at Level IV. It's not that you're necessarily at one level and that's it, there's no parts from other levels involved. Because the research on positive disintegration has shown that a person can be mostly at Level III, but also have the residue of Level II still operating, and some elements of Level IV are operating, too. And that's what is going to help the person get out of Level III and be more solidly in organized multilevel disintegration. They're not mutually exclusive—there's overlap between the levels. But yes, the third factor is a very important dynamism that is technically part of the Level IV dynamisms, but it certainly comes into play earlier than that. And I would say that yeah, without it, you have no hope of truly developing in Dąbrowski's sense.

Emma: And that third factor is really your drive to sort of pursue your own authentic personality. And authentic personality is a term I've come across. And it seems to me like I guess that's the end game. This whole podcast is about a framework for becoming your authentic self. So what does Dąbrowski actually mean when he talks about authentic personality? Because I think everybody assumes that they've got of personality and most people think that they're pretty authentic. So what did Dąbrowski mean by authentic personality?

Chris: Well, for one thing, he certainly didn't think that everybody just naturally had a personality, like his use of the term personality is so different than what we're used to now—in the 21st century—where everybody has a personality. Not for Dąbrowski. This was something that was conscious. It was created. The third factor really is a dynamism of conscious choice. It directs your development. And so for him, authentic personality is very high level. Somebody going through unilevel disintegration doesn't have a personality in this theory. It's not a given that you're ever going to have a personality. It's something that you create and it's your

personality ideal. For Dąbrowski, authentic is basically deliberate. It's conscious. You're moving away from egocentric.

In Dąbrowski's theory, the lower levels are more egocentric and that's what marks them. You're not thinking about other people. You're thinking about yourself. In this theory, as you grow and develop and reach higher levels, you're working and living beyond worrying about yourself.

You're caring about other people. You're making a difference in the lives of other people. It can't only be about you. If it's only about you, you are not a higher level person.

Emma: And I guess personality not being a given is something to be earned through that process of disintegrating out what you've been taught and what you've learned. A lot of people would find that a hard concept to get their head round and probably a little bit of a slap to the face. If they're listening to this, they're probably sitting there thinking, "I have an authentic personality. I know who I am." So, to hear Dąbrowski's difference in how he describes that is going to be quite confronting for some people.

Chris: It will. A lot of people come to the theory and see themselves at a higher level than they really are. It's pretty natural. And it's good to continue challenging yourself as you're learning about this theory to think, "Am I at a higher level?" Like, Hmm, who are the exemplars of this level? Am I up there with them in the lives that they were leading? It's definitely something that challenges you to reconsider what you've always thought of. It's hard to talk about this. I mean, honestly, Emma, I do want us to have this conversation with our listeners of—you have to challenge yourself. When you start to think, "Oh my gosh, I am totally at Level IV." Are you? I mean, Eleanor Roosevelt was Level IV. Go listen to the three volumes of her biography, and then come back to me and let's talk about what you're doing to change the world.

Emma: Because once you start down that rabbit hole of how much of yourself has been constructed by other people, it's pretty frightening to get a grip on how much of you has actually been taught to you and isn't of your own making. And if people reflect on their actions out there in society, there's honestly not a lot of people that can say that every waking minute that they're dedicating to the betterment of humanity, it's actually quite rare.

Chris: It is quite rare.

Emma: In fact, I'd go one step further to say that what we are taught to do is keep our head down, do our job, think about you and yours and protect your family and your own self-interest.

Chris: Yes, absolutely. And especially—and I'm saying this as an American—that in our society here in the United States, we're basically encouraged to worry about ourselves. Everybody thinks about individualism, and it's not even a given that you're going to take care of your parents and your family, let alone other people in society. It's a travesty.

Emma: I don't think it's limited to the US somehow.

Chris: No, it's not. But I do feel like it's very bad here. We don't even have socialized medicine or anything. I think the hardest part for people to face about themselves is how naturally selfish we are until we make an effort not to be. This is something that doesn't happen overnight—moving away from being egocentric or self-centered takes time. You have to do it little by little. It takes effort. And that's one of the things about this theory that I think often is lost on people, is how much effort it takes to move through the levels of development that Dąbrowski set forth. There's nothing automatic about it. If it is automatic, it's not multilevel. I can tell you that.

Emma: Because you're really not consciously sorting through your own stuff.

Chris: Right.

Emma: One thing I'm interested in this whole theory, and not just because it's the topic of my blog and my YouTube channel, but overexcitability. Can you talk a little bit about what overexcitabilities are and how they fit into this particular framework in this big picture?

Chris: Overexcitability predated Dąbrowski's theory. He is not the one who coined the term, but he saw it more positively than his contemporaries. Overexcitability is a heightened responsiveness, and a lowered threshold to stimuli. And so, people who are overexcitable react more strongly to stimuli—from both the inner and external realities—more strongly than other people, than typical people who don't have overexcitability. And so, Dąbrowski looked at it in five ways: psychomotor, sensual, intellectual, imaginal, and emotional.

And within each of these five types, he of course saw them as having different levels. And so, there are levels of overexcitability. You can have them in combinations and strengths that vary, but basically, it's this experience of overexcitability that keeps you from being able to adapt to your surroundings or adapt to reality. People who have overexcitability find it very difficult to, for instance, sit in a classroom and learn the way that other kids in a classroom learn. If you have overexcitability, it's harder to be in the world. And so, this creates conflict. It creates conflict externally and internally, and this is what causes disintegration.

It's this experience of having a heightened responsiveness to stimuli. It's very difficult to live with. That's why he called it a tragic gift. It's a blessing and a curse. It presents challenges, but it also presents the way out of the challenges. And it's part of the growth process. Overexcitabilities are actually the raw material that can become the dynamisms.

Emma: I've always sort of seen overexcitabilities as living life with the amp cracked up to volume 11. So, everything sort of coming in from the outside world is extremely loud and everything going on inside your own head is extremely loud. And personally, I can see how that causes a bit of inner conflict. And when you're talking about kids in a classroom, I guess that heightened sense of nervousness and always sort of taking in things from the world and taking in stimuli, it could be confused for other things.

Chris: It's true, but we are going to have to do a whole episode on that because I think that overexcitability is a very broad construct in that within it, there are a lot of different phenomena that we would now label using diagnostic criteria. So, what I'm trying to say is I think that the experience of hyperactivity that you would see in ADHD is the same thing as psychomotor overexcitability, but psychomotor overexcitability is much broader than simply hyperactivity. It's more than that. It's not that you would be misdiagnosed with ADHD. I would say that if you have ADHD, you probably have overexcitability and you will do well to learn about this theory because it's going to create these challenges that will lead to disintegration.

But I think it's going to be such a blessing to be able to talk about overexcitability and the theory and share it with people outside of the gifted community. Because right now the only people, on the whole, who've been exposed to overexcitability are those who came to it from the world of gifted education. But it's so much bigger than that.

Emma: It sounds like this is a huge framework and we'll clearly be going over this in future episodes in a lot more detail for people. It kind of gives us a good segue into, how did you actually come across this theory? And what was your personal interest in it? You're talking about people in gifted education. How did you yourself come across Dąbrowski's theories and what's your personal interest in it?

Chris: I came to Dąbrowski's theory when I was doing a personal research project and trying to understand my past. I was in my early forties. And I was trying to understand my history as someone who had been identified gifted when I was a child, but I had been given different diagnoses in adulthood. I saw myself as mentally ill. And that's really the crux of what I was trying to understand, because I had learned the term twice exceptional, and twice exceptional means that a person is gifted and there's another exceptionality that is a disability.

Well, until I learned about twice exceptionality, I thought that I wasn't gifted anymore. I saw myself as mentally ill. And when I came to Dąbrowski's theory, it was very clear to me that he was saying that I had completely misunderstood myself. And the things that I thought were mental illness were not actually mental illness.

Emma: That's got to be a big revelation.

Chris: Yeah, exactly. It was pretty earth shattering for me. And at first, I rejected it. I mean, when I first came to it, I started reading about it and I was like, you know what? I am not going to rethink being mentally ill. I had finally accepted it. I was doing this project because I wanted to fight stigma and help people embrace themselves as kind of, I don't know, like, it almost feels ridiculous to talk about it now because what was I trying to do? Help them embrace being defective or broken? I think that's part of the problem, is like we get diagnosed with, well, a variety of things.

I was diagnosed with bipolar disorder, ADHD, panic disorder, all sorts of things, really. Too much to talk about now, but no one ever gave me the impression that these things were going to get better. I expected to have to take medication my whole life. I assumed that I would always be in the care of a psychiatrist. Well, Dąbrowski's theory changed my whole life because, well, I don't take medication anymore and I don't have a psychiatrist and I don't consider myself mentally ill. But if you had told me in 2014, when I first started reading about this stuff, that this would be my reality now, I would've laughed at you. I would've thought that you were crazy.

Emma: That's a big thing to get your head around, particularly right at the point where you've sort of gone, right, I've made peace with who I am. I'm okay with my lot. And then someone comes along and says, you know what, maybe there's nothing wrong with you at all.

Chris: Seriously. And Dąbrowski, his main thesis is that psychoneurosis is not an illness. So, he believed that it wasn't that you had a defect. It wasn't that there was a brain disease, it wasn't that you were going to need to treat this for the rest of your life. He saw these as disintegrations that were just periods of falling apart and then rebuilding. And it didn't mean that you were defective and broken, but unfortunately, in modern psychiatry, you end up feeling like you're broken.

Our system is broken. I'm excited to be able to bring these ideas to a wider audience. And that's why the idea of doing a podcast was so compelling because there are things that we can talk about in this format. And we can bring these ideas to an audience in ways that you just can't quite do when you're writing about it. Or I don't know, if I'm just a guest on a podcast, it's just not enough.

Emma: And I'm glad you're going to have this opportunity to bring this message to a lot of people. What resonates with me with your story is that idea of being defective. And when I first found out about Dąbrowski's theory, I immediately thought of the tale of the ugly duckling, who I rather than call ugly, like to call the aesthetically defective duck. Because you feel like you're defective and my experience was not as, I guess I didn't have the mental illness diagnosis that you did, but I'd sort of struggled through a lot of my adult life. When you're a child that does quite well at school, and then your life ends up going off the rails—you question whether or not you are gifted. And to be honest, the word gifted, and to Google it to look for solutions, would not have occurred to me whatsoever.

And I actually came across the theory from Googling. I think the term was why is my brain falling apart? After I had this experience with creating writing and sort of started digging into to myself and I stumbled across Dąbrowski theory, and I stumbled across overexcitabilities. And I broke down into tears because finally I made sense of myself. And rather than thinking of myself

as that little defective duck who didn't know how to duck properly, I realized that I was something else. I was a little cygnet and a little swan, and there were other swans out there in the world who were like me, and it brought me a great deal of relief, but I think it's that sort of realization of who you are and like, Hey, there's nothing actually defective about you. You're just a bit different. That can make a big impact to people's lives.

And I think that's why I'm kind of interested in taking some of the more complex parts of Dąbrowski theory and making it a bit simpler and putting it out there for people to find, because I know there's probably a lot of people like me. You said you came across the theory in your forties, and I was the same, and there's a lot of people out there still waddling about their lives, thinking that they're a defective duck.

Chris: Yes. Too many, really. It's not easy to convince people who feel that way that they're wrong. I think that it's really, it's got to be a process of self-discovery and that's what's so powerful about coming across these ideas. It can't just be us telling someone—our listeners—that, well, you've made these mistakes about yourself. You have to come across it and see it. I don't know, see yourself in it, I guess. It's an interesting phenomenon. I mean, I say that as somebody who now—I've had years of watching people come across this theory and having similar revelations to what I had, and it's amazing to see it. It's really incredible. And it still feels incredible to me. I write a lot and I know that you write, too. We are journalers, and when you document your experiences and you can go back and read about them, and see the changes that you've been through, it's really quite incredible.

Emma: I think the more you do work on it, as you said, you have to do it little bit by little, but the more you come to grips with yourself and particularly breaking down those socializations of, I've always been taught that I was a defective duck. I am not a duck. The more you work through that, I think the easier the process does become. And then it sort of speeds up and you can make quite rapid progress in a reasonably short, well, couple years isn't all that short. But in the scheme of a lifetime, it's short. And if you're thinking about, you've gone through a couple of decades thinking that you've broken a couple of years' worth of works, like nothing in comparison.

Chris: Yeah. I think so much of it is like you're finally in the light after being in the dark for so long. And so, once you have the light, or once you have this illumination and you have this awareness that alluded you before, and you can make so much more rapid progress, I guess that's part of it.

Emma: Well, it's really hard to fix a problem that has no name and you've got no frame of reference for it. Part of what helps is having this information about the theory, having the information about what is positive disintegration, why am I going through this stuff? What are overexcitabilities and why do I kind of feel different? It goes a long way to helping you on that journey.

Chris: It's true. And so, yeah, I'm looking forward to getting an opportunity in our upcoming episodes to break it down and help people understand what disintegration looks like at different times in your life. How it looks in kids versus adults. How it looks in teenagers and also just bringing in other people will be fun and other ideas. Our first guest is going to be Bill Tiller. And Bill was a student of Dąbrowski's when he was at the University of Alberta. And so when Bill was young, in his twenties, he met Dąbrowski and his colleagues, Marlene Rankel, Michael Piechowski, and others. So, it'll be fun to have Bill on the show with us because he'll be able to talk about what is positive disintegration from his perspective. And he'll be able to talk about Dąbrowski's influences.

I really hope that we can have a conversation with Bill around the philosophical underpinnings of the theory, because that's very important. Dąbrowski was very much a phenomenologist and he was very deep. It'll be good to have Bill chat with us about all of these little aspects that he can shed light on. And Bill is an archivist. It's thanks to him that we have the Dąbrowski materials, the way that we do. And he has the positivedisintegration.com website. It'll be fun to have him join us.

Emma: I'm also looking forward to having Bill on and some of the other guests, I think, obviously you being in the Dąbrowski community have access to. I'm looking forward to going along on a learning journey, just as much as everybody listening to the podcast. Because I don't have an academic background and I'm looking forward to learning from these people. And hopefully turning the conversations into something that will help other people like me, who don't have that academic background, get a handle on what the theory is and what it can mean to them.

Chris: I think it'll be great to have people on who can talk about their work and make it more accessible because most people aren't academics. I happen to know a lot of academics because I work with them.

Emma: That's what you do for a living.

Chris: It's what I do, right. Although I have to say, I fight the idea that I'm an academic because I'm not a professor. But I do have my PhD and I do academic work. I just don't get paid well for it or have an institution backing me. I think a big part of my work has not only been studying the theory and reading and doing research, but relationship building and getting to know the people in the Dąbrowski community. And for me, that's been the most rewarding part of it. Building relationships and getting to know Bill and the people that I work with here in Colorado at the institutional study for advanced development. But also Michael Piechowski. Michael is my mentor. I hope that he'll come on the show too, but he is not yet committed to it. So we'll see.

Emma: He's podcast shy, is he?

Chris: He's podcast shy. But I think that maybe once he listens and sees what it's like, he'll be maybe more willing.

Emma: I think it it's going to be not only a good forum to bring those different parts of the Dąbrowski community together, but let people disagree. I'm all for science and I'm all for questioning what is, and having polite disagreement and opening up discussion to a range of opinions on things. So, I'm quite looking forward to seeing what's going to come out of this.

Chris: Me, too. I'm very excited that we're doing this and I'm grateful to you because if we didn't have your technical expertise, we wouldn't even be bothering to try to do this. So, thank goodness for Emma.

Emma: Technical expertise gifted to me through the Harry Potter fandom, it's probably a good time to give a shout out to Potteriversity and our producer. So Katy McDaniel, Emily Strand, and Laurie Beckoff, who are all at the Harry Potter conference in Chestnut Hill giving academic talks. And I'm quite jealous of them at the moment. Being able to participate in that because I am quite the nerd.

Chris: That sounds like fun. I wish I was at the Potter conference right now. I mean, I'm glad that we're doing this, but that does sound like a good time, honestly.

Emma: Yeah, there's unfortunately like 15,000 kilometers between me and the conference. So, you know.

Chris: Yes, that's true.

Emma: You're not getting there in a hurry.

Chris: Yes. That is quite the barrier.

Emma: Apart from Harry Potter. Which we're not going to talk about, is there any particular topics that you are excited to talk about personally that you've got planned for us?

Chris: Oh, yes. Oh my gosh. There are so many topics that I'm excited about.

Emma: Start bringing out the whole frigging list, Chris.

Chris: I'm not going to read the whole list. Well, I'm looking forward to exploring topics in depth for one thing. I think that we really need to take the time to look at the levels in terms of the way that Dąbrowski set them forth originally, but also in light of all that's been learned since he did that. I want to dig into the controversies that surround the theory. I mean, it's not like it's a secret that there's been kind of a rift between Bill Tiller and Michael Piechowski. Well, why? What went on? I've spent a lot of time exploring this stuff and I want to help other people learn what I've discovered, and what's come out in my work because it's been really important for me to get to the bottom of all of this stuff.

So, there's been no easy way to share. And I'm looking forward to that kind of thing. But I also want to talk about overexcitability—why there's been such a backlash against it in the field of gifted education. Why there are academics right now who are basically saying that we shouldn't be talking about it anymore in gifted ed. Why has that happened? Why are they saying that? All of this stuff deserves to be discussed.

Emma: That's fine. Don't talk about it in gifted ed. We'll talk about it here instead. I get very incensed when they say, let's throw overexcitability. I'm like, Hey, I identify with that. Leave it alone.

Chris: Seriously. One thing that I think is funny is how many—well, hang on, I don't want to talk shit. It's really something to hear academics say that they're scientists and that overexcitability isn't scientific. And so we should stop talking about it. That's not how science works. There's been decades and decades of research on this construct. And so we're just going to throw it out because there have been some problems in how the research has been discussed in one small field. It boggles my mind.

Emma: I'm pretty sure that's not how science works and I'm not even a scientist.

Chris: Right, let's just shut down the conversation. Let's not bother exploring it any further. That's definitely how it works. I have a paper coming out at some point with my co-author Frank Falk, and we looked at the origins and conceptual evolution of overexcitability. We went way back before Dąbrowski and investigated how it was discussed. So, I think that it'll be fun to have one episode where we talk about overexcitability and where it came from and how it ended up in the situation that it's in right now, and point to where it should go in the future.

It's hard because this theory—it means so much to so many different groups of people. You have people like me who came to it from thinking that I was mentally ill, and you have people who

come to it from a more spiritual perspective, and you have people who come to it from gifted ed. There are so many places the theory's been discussed that I think that we could do this podcast for years and years and not run out of topics.

Emma: I think you're right about that. To be honest, even the brief list that we've put together so far, there's so much content on there and there's so many people to talk to and I'm excited to help you get your teeth sunk into it, to be honest.

Chris: I'm grateful for you. I have really hoped for a place to talk about the theory, and I had thought about making videos. I've written about it, but my writing about it is very academic. And so I'd realized that I'm not reaching a broad enough population with it. It's pretty narrow

Emma: People like me who don't know what they're talking about.

Chris: Who don't want to read that kind of work. I get it, it's not fun.

Emma: I read Bill's book and his book is really an easier breakdown of Dąbrowski's stuff and getting through that. I thought I was going to cry. And I'm like, no more textbooks, please. So I'm grateful for you, too, because it's like having my own personal tutor that I can get lessons from. And all I have to do is sit here and have a chat and do some editing at the back end. So I think the plan for us is to have these episodes coming out near the end of the month. And hopefully those will be the ones that we have our guests appear on. But I think you and I might be doing a few more background episodes in between. We'll throw a few little bonus things in there, and some of these topics just to help everybody get a better handle on the theory and give people the groundwork for it.

Chris: That's right. That's the plan.

Emma: It's not like we're doing a podcast on Star Wars where everybody knows the canon already and all the material. We're starting from scratch.

Chris: Yes. And now that you've said that, for sure, we need to do a bonus episode where we talk about what is canon, and what's outside of canon, and kind of give people an overview of what materials out there. Where you can find it. What it all means. Because there's a tremendous amount of work out there related to this theory. Certainly, not all of it is canon. So, I think it would be good to do that and clarify it for people.

Emma: Awesome. Well, I'm much looking forward to it and I'm looking forward to getting this theory out there. So, thanks for joining me today, Chris, on our first episode, it's been awesome having a chat with you.

Chris: Thank you, Emma. It has been awesome. And I am extremely grateful.

Emma: Time flies when you're chatting about Dąbrowski.

Chris: Yes.

Emma: Who would have thought? If you're looking to find our podcast, you will be able to find it on subset, also on iTunes, Spotify, and other good purveyors of podcasts. If you want to get in contact with us about any of our topics or you've got new suggestions or questions of what you'd like to hear in the future, you can contact us via email at positivedisintegration.pod@gmail.com and look for our new social media pages on Twitter and Instagram. Until next time, keep walking your path to your authentic personality.