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From “Me” to “We” An IONS Community Group Transforms Itself

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IT WAS OUR USUAL IONS COMMUNITY GROUP meeting, and it started in the usual way—twelve of us checking in with what was up in our lives. Then the usual became extraordinary as we embarked on an exploration into the transformational process described in the Institute’s new book, *Living Deeply: The Art and Science of Transformation in Everyday Life*, based on a decade-long research program undertaken by the IONS research team. In a series of three two-hour gatherings, we shared a journey of inner discovery and group connection that changed us in surprising ways.

THE GIFTS IN SHARING

We began with the question “What *is* transformation?” “A change in perception and perspective,” said one member. “Being outside of my usual ways of thinking and acting,” shared another. “Disruption in the norm . . . moving from head to heart . . . daring to speak my truth . . . seeing differently and making new choices based on that . . . remembering my spiritual connection . . . renewal.” As the book suggests, we then looked back at our lives to

mark the *aha!* moments, turning points, tipping points, peak experiences, disasters, and remarkable moments that changed us. This life-mapping exercise started hesitantly, but once we plunged in, it was hard to stop.

In sharing our profound and deeply intimate experiences in a group, we discovered a wider range of what it means to be fully human than we might have been aware of had we done such an exercise alone. In this safe space, we found we were deeply connected in ways not previously known as we shared stories of pain and suffering from accidents, divorce, and loss, as well as the deep learnings. We shared memories of ecstatic times in nature when we felt so much a part of the forest, ocean, or sky that we forgot we had skins, when the notion of interconnectedness became palpable. We shared peak moments of birthing, of becoming a grandmother, and of psychedelic openings when we touched another reality and felt at one with all that is. One member experienced her life-mapping process as a yin-yang dance of receiving and releasing, expansion and contraction, too much mind giving way to heart-mind balance, and isolation being replaced by love. ➤

From this perspective, the ups and downs began to look less like a Dow Jones chart and more like the middle way of the Tao.

Our stories were different but somehow the same as we realized that spirituality was at the core of all that had happened to us, and perhaps at the core of even the most commonplace of activities. It's all about how we look at things. The stuff of life will happen, and we agreed that it's not *what* happens as much as *how we are* with what happens—how we act and react—that determines our experience. Attitudes, beliefs, interpretations, and perspectives can have life-affirming or life-debilitating influences. We decided that personal balance could be achieved by living in the present moment and that each moment offers a choice of whether to engage reality from a rigid and conditioned material-physical point of view or from a spiritual-noetic perspective that leaves room for compassion, creativity, and intuitive flow.

PRACTICES FOR THE “NEW ME”

The life-mapping exercise led to a discussion of some of the practices we use to stay open, grounded, and supported in nurturing a spiritual way of being. One member, a woman of 82, said, “I’m just letting go of my stories. It doesn’t matter what happened in the past anymore. Now, I’m just living in the now.” Another member of our group tries to see Godlike qualities in others—especially in those she doesn’t like—and also in herself as a reminder of her own basic goodness. One person’s powerful practice is a meditative focus on loving-kindness and compassion, while another’s resolve is to be openhearted and nonjudgmental.

In exploring the common themes of our practices for shifting the story of who we are, we found that the following were especially important:

- *imagining or reimagining something anew*
- *focusing on positive qualities such as acceptance, appreciation, and gratitude, and feeling these feelings all the way through*
- *integrating methods for releasing harmful thoughts, behaviors, and beliefs*
- *making these actions a daily practice*

It occurred to us that such practices reinforce the changes we desire while in themselves becoming an almost subconscious default setting of guidance. And once new intentions are set, the universe does its part to help. Discussing the importance of making appropriate choices brought up this quote from the foreword to *A Course in Miracles*: “Every decision I make is a choice between a grievance and a miracle. I relinquish all regrets, grievances, and resentments, and choose the miracle.”

Life doesn’t always cooperate with our most noble of intentions, however, and so when faced with a contentious situation, we found value in asking questions such as “What is possible here?” and “What is my part in it?” Listening with compassion changed the life of one person, who explained, “I see difficult or angry people as wounded, and once I really hear their stories, I can drop into my heart to find understanding and forgiveness. It changes the way things go.” The same can be applied when working with our own internal challenges. The group agreed that listening and loving are the simplest, and yet the most powerful, agents of change.

Generally the group was not content with focusing only on our own process of growth and awakening, and so putting our new attitudes and ways of being into action by way of creative problem solving became important. One person offered, “Grow bigger than your own future so you can involve the community and world for the common good.” Another’s motto was, “Notice, choose, act.” We want to connect diverse factions in our community through meaningful conversations, periodic events, and conversation cafés. We know that our personal spiritual work not only serves ourselves but also ripples out in unseen ways.

GRASSROOTS LUMINARIES

As this three-part process drew to a close, we found we had moved from “me” to “we” in our sharing of stories and thoughts. We had blended into a deeply meaningful and heartfelt circle of collective wisdom. We were grassroots luminaries! We had also moved from “we” into a

much larger sense of what was outside the room, to our community and the natural world surrounding us. It seemed that the more we shared, the more we came to know and appreciate one another and the more we felt an expanded sense of lovingness for all creation. ☽

Transcribed and assembled by Shirley Freriks, facilitator of the MendoIONS Community Group in Mendocino, California. She is on the new IONS Member Council, which will focus on developing inspired connections within the greater IONS Community Group Network.



What is “consciousness transformation”?

- It's a lasting change for the better that springs from *radically shifting your perspective of who you are*. Meaning and purpose become more clear to you, and things that are out of alignment in your life gradually (and sometimes quickly) fall away. But the most fundamental change is within you; it is a profound shift in where you direct your attention and your intention.
- It's about opening to new possibilities and recognizing that your current view of yourself and the world is only partial. Seeing with new eyes allows for a new understanding of yourself and your unfolding. This most essential change, the one from which all other changes spring, is a change in your worldview and your perception of what is possible.
- It's recognition of the sacred nature of life. With openness and nondogmatic curiosity, we can begin to live into a fuller and richer sense of self and others. The sun shining through autumnal leaves, mist hanging in a lush valley, a baby grabbing your finger, eye contact with a kindred spirit on the bus, a disagreement with a loved one—these are all choice points that allow you to change the way you attend to a situation by choosing to open to its meaning, rather than push it away or rush past it.
- It's a process that can be stimulated by even the most shattering of circumstances. In fact, some transformations seem to require the kind of vulnerability that accompanies extreme loss or grief. Transformation often asks for something to die so that something new can be born.
- It's a natural opening of awareness, revealing a more expanded world of relationships than you previously perceived. For many people, noetic experiences occur in the context of a nonordinary state of consciousness through which they are able to gain new perspectives of themselves and their definitions of self.
- It's the outcome of dedicated effort. Although there are many different transformative paths, some of the qualities they all share include
 - setting an intention to use our openings in their various forms to promote personal growth;
 - bringing more awareness to where we place our attention;
 - building new patterns of thoughts and actions that are more beneficial to our way of being in the world;
 - and taking time in silence and solitude to listen to our internal wisdom and guidance.
- It includes a deep connection to nature. Being a sacred and mysterious force unto itself, nature often reveals new self-knowledge to us and thus serves as a catalyst for transformation.

—adapted from the book *Living Deeply: The Art and Science of Transformation in Everyday Life*