

The Sacred Practice of Integration

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***[Excerpt on Internal Integration for Our
Mythic Circles Forum – October 2024]***

Internal Integration

I truly believe that all the knowledge in the universe is already within each of us. With enough genuine curiosity, focus, determination, and honesty, we can rediscover anything and eventually master it. This may take lifetimes, but anything is possible with enough intensity and duration of focus. There are some areas of knowledge that require a teacher or specific opportunity to spur our curiosity. However, there is one area of study where we have total access, total agency, and where insights benefit everything else we do – the study of our own experience. So let us explore the practice of internal integration.

Just as with the story of the Garden of Eden, we each began our life as a newborn in wholeness – unconsciously whole, but whole none-the-less. We

had no notion of what “good” or “evil” were - we just existed, freely expressed ourselves, and trusted that all our needs would be met by the universe. This was short-lived, because as we engaged with the world and the people around us, we quickly began our own process of acquiring “knowledge of good and evil”- something we euphemistically call “socialization.” Socialization has its value in creating a collective identity and establishing basic ways of engaging with each other. However, for most people, it also causes us to manipulate who we authentically are - sacrificing some of our integrity and authenticity for external validation. This is our exit from the Garden. So, before we can in earnest understand internal integration, we must first understand the dynamics that resulted in our internal disintegration.

Internal Disintegration

At some extremely early age, we start to pay attention to the people around us – people we care about, people we depend on for survival, people we look up to as examples. We look for hints and suggestions regarding how we need to act to get what we need or want. We interpret our interactions, and we observe what others go through. We come up with ideas about how we need to act in different contexts – certain elements of ourselves that work better when we are dealing with Mom, others that work better with Dad, others that work in school, and others with one group of friends versus another. We start to compartmentalize certain characteristics of who we inherently are so that we can “fit in” to whatever works best in each environment. Our state of

unconscious wholeness has been disrupted, and our internal process of compartmentalization, valuation, and separation has begun.

Compartmentalization

As we notice what characteristics seem to work best in various context, we carefully curate different personas. We let certain parts of us shine, hide other parts of us, and fake other parts. While this process may allow us to fit in, it also diminishes our ability to bring our full self to these various situations. We squander energy in trying to remember which parts of us are welcomed here and which parts are not. We waste more energy keeping the latter hidden (after all, they are still part of who we are whether expressed or repressed). The more personas we have, the more energy we waste in keeping our characteristics compartmentalized. The greater the difference in our various personas, the greater the energy depletion as well. Because this energy is squandered on compartmentalizing and withholding, it diminishes what we have available to engage in life.

Let's say that over time, I have developed certain personas where I act a certain way at work, a different way with my friends, and a different way at home. When I am in my work persona, I talk and act a certain way, overplay certain aspects of who I am, allow other aspects, and repress other aspects. With my friends, I've come up with certain rules and then difference rules at home. From the perspective of lower truth, this helps me fit in and be valued in a certain way in each of those contexts. However, from a higher level of truth, there is a tremendous amount of life energy that is wasted on assessing what context

I am in, remembering the rules, and monitoring what parts of me show up, get exaggerated, or get repressed.

This compartmentalization keeps us from bringing our authentic best to whatever we do. We have prioritized a lesser truth (i.e., fitting in by means of filtering ourselves) at the expense of a higher truth (i.e., sharing our authentic self). When we realize that we've bartered away our authenticity for some lesser truth, then it becomes increasingly uncomfortable to keep filtering and compartmentalizing who we genuinely are. Those feelings of discomfort and frustration are potent catalysts for us to seek greater internal integration.

Valuation

Socialization also brings about notions of value. Valuation is the collective determination of whether something is better or worse, appreciated or insignificant, or any other subjective comparison. We all have natural inclinations toward certain things – some element of our authentic original nature that is seeking expression. However, when we start getting external validation or discouragement, then those external influences often override or complicate our own authentic preferences. We start to put effort toward those elements that are valued by society and disregard those elements that are not.

In many cases, these externally determined values cause us to sacrifice or marginalize our own inherent interests, ways of thinking, or ways of being simply because they are not valued by those around us or

society at large. We sell out our authentic internal compass for the whims of the fickle masses. We do this in the name of survival at first, then in the name of acceptance, and then in the name of success. But this success is on the wrong terms, we are succeeding at someone else's game, and losing our true self in the process. At some point, this dissatisfaction, this sacrificing what is authentic for what is superficial – this too can serve as a driver for us to seek greater internal integration.

Separation

The natural consequence of both compartmentalization and valuation is that the world goes from being a place of infinite potential and limitless abundance to a place of competition. If certain things (e.g., power, money, influence, reputation) are more valuable than others, it is because they are perceived as limited. Also, since those at the top seem to make the rules, then we all compete to get closer to the top. In this mindset, it is “me against others.” I am separate from those around me. Others either support or hinder my upward mobility. Siblings compete for parents' attention. Workers compete for raises and promotions. People compete for influence and admiration. Companies compete for market share. Religions compete for souls. Countries compete for dominance. Compete. Compete. Compete. We are all stampeding full tilt toward the cliff without even understanding why. We get swept up in the unconscious notion that “winning” (rather than our own integrity) makes us relevant. This pursuit of fleeting external validation

just perpetuates our alienation of others. The irony is that in our desire to be relevant (i.e., matter in the eyes of others) we actually create greater separation from others.

At some point, we get fed up with this vicious cycle. It may just be an inkling, a sense, a fleeting notion at first, but it persists and becomes louder with time.

Eventually, it cannot be ignored. We yearn for something more, something meaningful, something with integrity, something that transcends the separateness that has made us feel so alone in our pursuit of gain and acceptance. Socialization - that “civilizing” force – has gone too far. It has throttled our soul. We have sacrificed too much of ourselves. Instead of separation and competition, we yearn to be part of something bigger. We yearn to work toward something noble and altruistic. We yearn to feel whole again.

Compartmentalization, valuation, and separateness are the forces that cause our internal disintegration. They are not without their purpose. The knowledge of “good” and “evil” (i.e., the civilizing forces outline above), compel us to see really contemplate ourselves, the world, our motivations, and perspectives. The tensions that result provide the fire within and the fire without to fuel our desire toward integration. In doing so, we may eventually find our way back to the Garden, this time consciously and with purpose.

Let us begin the process of internal integration.

Awareness

First, we must learn to see properly. Many of us have become conditioned to predominantly see whatever is societally valued – opportunities for comfort, wealth, power, prestige, or risks of losing the same. We increasingly define ourselves in terms of socially valued characteristics and lose sight of what our authentic strengths may be. What do I mean by this? If we take a surface strength of mine – “strategic thinking” - this is something that is societally valued.

However, if I ask myself “why am I good at strategic thinking?”, then we begin to get closer to the heart of the matter. Perhaps it is because I consider many different contributing factors and many potential outcomes (intended or unintended). Let’s go another layer deeper. Why do I consider those things? Perhaps I’m sensitive to resource-limited situations and always trying to figure out how to get the most out of something without overburdening the system and people involved. Why is that? I see both the great potential and the real and perceived limitations of a situation and yearn to find ways to transcend those limitations and realize more of that potential. Why? Because I believe that we are all destined to do great things (in small or big ways) and that life and its challenges are there to help us realize that purpose.

As we go through this process of analysis, we end up with something real. What started as “strategic thinking” (which is almost a “throw away” term these days) ended up being: 1) my passion for realization of potential, 2) my attention to various types of limitations and possibilities, and 3) my belief that challenges are opportunities for transformation.

Those three really mean something. They are authentically parts of me. They are transferable to many different situations. To lump them into some generic term such as “strategic thinking” doesn’t do them justice. This is what I mean by learning to see properly – we must get to that which matters most. This is just one example. There are many other strengths, limitations, passions, and fears with which we can go through a similar process of discovery, but it requires genuine curiosity. We must be honest with ourselves and truly want to dis-cover/uncover the authentic heart of who we are under all those layers of societal conditioning.

Recollection

What does it mean to “recollect”? Most commonly it means to “remember”, but literally it means to “gather back together”. It is a means of integration. It is a process of remembering the reasons that we disintegrated certain elements of ourselves and then finding a way to gather them back together into a cohesive whole.

In psychology, there is the notion of the shadow. Just as in nature, when we look at something there is the part that is in the light that we can see clearly. However, there is also the part that is in the shadow that we cannot see clearly and sometimes we don’t notice it at all. Yet, this shadowy part is just as much part of the whole – sometimes a very important part. To truly know something, we must see it fully – shadow and all. I think of our personal shadows as operating at two levels: positive shadow and negative shadow.

Before we explore the concept of positive shadow, it is important that we address the notions of superiority and privilege. Every person is unique. We come into this life with natural strengths – ways of connecting, understanding, motivating ourselves and others, and ways of seeing and making sense of the world around us. Societally, some of those strengths are valued more than others, however, all of them are important in terms of appreciating the full spectrum of humanity. In addition to our natural strengths, we also have opportunities through our upbringing and life experiences that help us develop our strengths further or cultivate new strengths. For some of us, who have the good fortune to not worry about basic survival, there may even be aspirational characteristics that we wish to develop to a higher degree and therefore place a lot of emphasis upon. All of this is to say that although we are all equally entitled to the same basic human needs of being seen, being valued, and being respected, there is a great diversity in skills and skill levels. There are people that are better at certain things and others that are better at others. When it comes to those specific skills or perspectives, not all people are created equally (or given equal opportunity to develop). Shadow elements are created because of our own inner judgement of ourselves, and so they manifest as judgement of others as well. This is why they distort our perspective and limit our ability to act authentically.

All that being said, positive shadow elements are areas where we are either more developed, or we value that characteristic to a greater degree than others. We all have different ways in which we are unique or exceptional. However, the shadow comes

into play because we don't fully realize that there is a gradient between us and others. This gradient can be due to natural skill, opportunity, chance circumstances, acquired experience, or constant attention to a topic. Despite our exceptional development in these areas, we don't see the gradient – we incorrectly assume that others should be similar to us in skill level or value certain things similarly. As a result, we often feel annoyance, disappointment, or frustration toward others when they fall short of our erroneous expectation. These are relatively minor emotions, but they still take up more space than they deserve.

The fact that we are triggered to some extent, distorts our ability to see a situation clearly and act authentically. I want to be clear, the emotions themselves are not the problem. Emotions clue us into the fact that something requires attention. In this case, the emotions of annoyance, disappointment, and frustration give us a hint that our expectations are not in line with reality – that somehow we are not seeing the situation clearly and, if left uncorrected, it may result in the need for a greater correction later. Those emotions also can serve as a subtle reminder that, for various reasons, we are further developed in those areas and that these are gifts that we could share freely with others. This is not a statement of superiority. After all, there are plenty of areas where we may be at the lower end of the gradient and others are much higher. The key is that my annoyance, frustration, or disappointment highlight a discrepancy between my expectations and reality and a correction needs to be made both externally with my expectations of others, but also internally with my awareness of my own capabilities.

Negative shadow elements take up even more space than positive shadow elements. Negative shadow elements come from early conditioning in our family and later from our social circles. As a young child, when we shared elements of who we authentically were, we may have gotten a strong message that that way of being was not welcome. Based on the intensity of the response from someone we cared about, we decided then and there to put that part of us away – hide it or psychologically amputate it from our persona. The painful memory of that rejection has led us to create all sorts of unconscious mechanisms so that we never make the mistake of showing that part of us again. We are now going through life with the psychological equivalent of one arm tied behind our back.

Negative shadows also significantly distort our interpretation of others' actions. Anytime we see even a hint of that amputated characteristic in others, we feel a strong dislike or disgust for it. It's as if we have a social immune response intended to keep us from ever giving that part of us expression again. When we see others that have not cut that part of themselves off but rather have shared or shown it freely, we tend to have intense negative reactions toward them (i.e., uncompromising insistence, resentment, or disgust). It's as if we think subconsciously "how dare they act that way when I would never allow myself to do the same!" In order to justify our own sacrifice, we must dismiss or criminalize others. This certainly impacts our interactions with others as well as reinforces our self-critical narrative.

Because of our strong reaction, negative shadows also limit our available actions. We find ourselves thinking or saying “it is never ok to _____” or “you have to always _____”. The triggering around the topic is so charged that we can only see it in terms of extremes or opposites. The grey area in between is unavailable to us in our triggered state. As a result, this uncompromising rigidity limits our possible actions in life. Our unwillingness to use all our internal resources – specifically these rejected parts - also limits our potential. Our constant unconscious vigilance to never get close to showing that aspect of our authentic nature and our maintenance of all the walls around that amputated part of us, constantly drains our energy. We are walking around on our knees, fiercely resisting any notion that we can stand up on our feet.

Let me share an example. I may view shameless narcissistic self-promoters with disgust (as the words “shameless” and “narcissistic” would suggest). However, there is an amputated part of my own psyche that would love to be seen and valued for who I am. For whatever reason – fear of rejection or fear of making others uncomfortable – I filtered myself long ago and only share what I think people are ready for and comfortable with. When I see others that have let that exhibitionist part of them thrive, I feel repulsed. As long as I have that extreme reaction, I will never even contemplate that part of me would also like to be noticed. To clarify, this does not mean that I secretly wish to be a “shameless narcissistic self-promoter”, but rather that there is something about being seen and valued that is important for me to reconnect with. If we can only see it as a pair of opposite extremes (i.e. “you are either this or that”),

we are trapped because we either remain less than whole or we have to become that which we have grown to despise. However, if we can begin to see the spectrum of options between the extremes, then we can find a more appropriate expression that allows us to transcend the opposites. This is what Buddhists refer to as the Middle Way, what Christians mean by loving thy enemy - we must hold both extremes to find a way that transcends them. Building the capacity to transcend the tension of the opposites is essential to enabling internal integration.

Let me share an example that brings in both positive and negative shadow elements. As the saying goes, “there’s no use in crying over spilled milk”. Despite the old saying, I find myself often being quite annoyed with my kids for knocking over a cup of milk while they are caught up in some moment of exuberance (especially when I just warned them about that very possibility). My reaction is negatively supercharged by two shadow elements. First, the positive shadow element of being very aware of everything around me.

I have spent a lifetime trying to become more and more aware of everything around me so that I don’t cause any undue stress on the system. So, I am often annoyed when others do not have that same sense of awareness of their environment. Second, there is a negative shadow element of never allowing myself to be so exuberant that I’m totally lost in the moment¹.

¹ As a case-in-point, I could not even write about exuberance without equating it to being “totally lost in moment”. My negative shadow demands that there be some sort of negative

These dual shadow elements cause me to be triggered by the situation and reactive in my response (i.e., I'm not seeing it clearly nor am I being intentional in my handling of it). This is a simple example, but similar dynamics happen in all aspects of life. When we become aware of and re-collect those shadow elements, then we can see reality more clearly and these normal occurrences can be handled more easily and even meaningfully. However, without doing my inner work, they become triggering and reactive situations that undermine my ability to be and become the person I aspire to be.

Complexes

There is another psychological structure that is the psychic equivalent of a blackhole where it has its own gravitational field and not only drains our energy but also that of anyone around us. They are called autonomous complexes.

Complexes are scripts of behavior that we created in our “infinite wisdom” as a 2- to 5-year-old related to how we need to act in certain situations. At that young age, we needed these scripts to make sense of an intimidating, uncertain, and threatening world. These scripts often morph into strategies that we develop and perfect through repeated use over the years.

connotation for acting in a way that I would not allow myself to act.

As a young child, these strategies feel key to our survival. As we grow into adults, the strategies become more intricate and often enable us to gain advantage. Throughout our 20s, 30s, 40s, and sometimes longer, these strategies have been honed into robust scripts for navigating an increasingly complex world; they can often feel essential to our survival and success. We may identify so strongly with them and feel so indebted to them that being any other way seems unthinkable. However, at some point, we realize that instead of these strategies serving us (as they did in early life), we are now slaves to them.

When triggered by a difficult situation, we unconsciously plug right into that well-known strategy. Increasingly, we find that the strategy no longer seems to work for us, but we end up distorting reality to defend it. This is a psychological form of addiction. In the grips of our complexes, we can't think for ourselves. We can only get sucked into the energetic vortex and play out the self-limiting (and often self-destructive) script that we've honed after so many decades. We go through the negative thought loops over and over again, justifying why the person perceived as offending is less than human and deserves such and such a terrible fate, etc. We plot and scheme about what we could of, would of, should have said or done and what we will say or do next time. Instead of acting like a striving adult doing our honest best, we can only see evidence that supports the perspective of that hurt little child that came up with this script in the first place. We feel like the world is against us and so we double down on whatever false limiting beliefs we need to tell ourselves to feel justified in our terrible feelings. This

is the downward spiral of the complex - and it tries to suck in anyone and everything that it possibly can. In the grips of our complex, we look around at others that seem content and in control of their faculties and we think (subconsciously), “Let’s see how you do when you get sucked into my world,” and we proceed to do what we can to make them feel our internal pain. As I mentioned earlier, a complex is like a black hole of negative energy. It simply wants everyone else to feel the burden of what we felt as that hurt little child – when we were uncertain if the people around us and world at large were going to allow us to survive.

It is easy to vilify complexes, but they play a critical role in early development. They give us the protection needed to make it until our ego strength is such that we can fully function in the world. The problem is when the complex overstays its intended purpose and imprisons us in this outdated way of relating. It is like a psychic autoimmune disease – something that started as an appropriate immune response to keep us healthy but went too far and started to attack that which it was supposed to protect. Despite our biological age, it also causes us to literally act like a hurt child when we are in its grips (because that was the thinking that created it). This discrepancy may cause others to feel stressed and confused which often triggers their own complexes. This is how complexes in one person trigger them in others and can spiral into this negative vortex of unconscious collusion.

Complexes are called “autonomous” because they essentially are scripts that once they are triggered, we just automatically play out. We seem to have very little agency or control when in that reactive state.

There is not much we can do once we are in our own complex (after all, we wouldn't be in them if we could be intentional). However, we can be aware of what our complexes are and signs that we are in their grips. Then we can find ways to remove ourselves from the triggering situation and try to get a healthier perspective where the striving adult is back in control (instead of the hurt child). As far as working with others' complexes, this can be tricky and judgmental, so it's best to keep the focus on ourselves and strive to stay intentional and conscious of how we are showing up.

As we learn to see our reality more clearly and begin to reintegrate the aspects of ourselves that were marginalized in early life, we gain greater capacity. We are reawakening and reinvigorating parts of us long forgotten, correcting long-overdue flawed perceptions, and many more subtle and direct transformative steps that are giving us greater agency, empowerment, and integrity. So, what do we direct this newfound potential toward? This is where clarity of purpose comes in.

We are each born into this life with certain natural skills and tendencies, but also with a unique and specific purpose. "Purpose" does not have to be something monumental or revolutionary. It can simply be that we are meant to bring a certain type of energy to everything we are involved with and that through our interactions the world, those around us, and even we ourselves are changed in some meaningful way. Living our purpose means we are in the process of becoming the person that we are meant to be and that our unique way of being acts as an effective conduit for positive transformation in the

world. This also means that once we have clarity on our purpose, it should constantly serve as guiding light for all that we do. This is my belief – one that I question and test constantly – and through that rigorous testing, it only rings more and more true.

True Original Nature

For those of us who have raised or been close to children from their infancy, we know that each soul comes into this world with a certain wiring – certain natural strengths, ways of relating, and ways of exerting their will. In the desire to belong, a child filters some of these characteristics, but they are still there in the background covered by layers of social conformance (or rebellion). If we pay close attention, we can uncover them. There are moments in life where something really grabs us – a moment, a personality (real or fictional), a specific place, or a way of being. The reason it demands our attention is that something about it resonates deeply with who we authentically are. It is like the guitar in the corner of the room whose string begins to vibrate when the same note is struck somewhere nearby. This resonance gives us a clue to some aspect of our true original nature.

There is an exercise that I take people through. I ask them to think of a few characters from stories that resonate with them. This may include stories from fairy tales, books, history, television, or movies. They are often favorite characters or ones that simply stuck with the person well after the story was over. The reason that character captured their fascination is

that certain elements of what they represent resonated with that person's true original nature. Five people could have picked the same character for totally different reasons.

Let me share some of my own characters. The first is Val Kilmer's portrayal of Doc Holliday from the 1993 movie "Tombstone." What stands out for me about the character is that he has unlikely knowledge (e.g., he is a drunk cowboy that speaks Latin and plays classical piano), he is paradoxical (e.g., refined yet unrefined), and he has good friends on either side of rivalry (e.g., he is a liminal character). Similarly, Gandalf's character from the Hobbit/Lord of the Rings novels is someone who understands the mysteries of nature (i.e., unconventional knowledge), seems to travel freely between worlds (i.e., he moves in liminal space), and acts as a guide. Between these two characters, there are some similarities (i.e., moving freely between worlds and unconventional knowledge) and some characteristics that are notable, but unique to each (e.g., being paradoxical and being a guide). If we round this duo out with a third character – William Wallace from the 1995 movie "Braveheart" – then we have additional characteristics of: "uncivilized" from the system's perspective yet truly noble (again paradoxical), beholden to a greater notion of duty, and willing to sacrifice everything for what matters most (i.e., clarity and conviction). Again, some similarities with the previous two and some unique elements. Now, if we take a composite of these characters to get a sense of what resonates with my true original nature, then I am come to something like: 1) liminal – I like to operate in the space between worlds and move freely between them; 2) knowledgeable – unconventional

yet meaningful insights; and 3) paradoxical – wanting to transcend a world of opposites. In some cases, we can even distill the composite characteristics down to a single image. For me, it is the image of “a man who lives at the edge of town.” He goes into the wilderness and learns about the mysteries of nature while also going into town and learning about the mysteries of human nature. Then he tries to apply the insights from each context to the other and see what is universal. This has been a valuable guiding image for me anytime I have come to a major crossroad in my life.

Perspective

Another element of seeing our purpose clearly is having an appropriate perspective on life, its challenges, and its trajectory. If we reflect on some of the most challenging moments in our life, we begin to see patterns and common themes. It’s as if we have some critical lessons that are important for our soul to learn and our life keeps presenting us opportunities to learn that lesson fully. This is a bold statement and perhaps seems to imply that our life is predetermined, but I believe we have free will in terms of if and how we face these challenges/opportunities. We can avoid them, wish them away, or close our eyes and blindly push through them. Alternatively, we could take them seriously and use them as opportunities to meaningfully gain important insights as to who we are and how we are wired as well as insights about human nature in general. I’m reminded of three quotes that have stuck with me regarding life’s challenges. The first is something a mentor of mine

used to tell me repeatedly: “Don’t wish these difficult moments away, they are opportunities for you to come up against the limits of who you thought you were and to realize you are something much greater.” The second is from Swami Vivekananda and is something along the lines of: “Most people pray to God to change the situation, when we really should be praying for help to change our attitude toward the situation.” The third is from Jungian analyst Marion Woodman who said something along the lines of, “You can either go down this path kicking and squealing like a pig being led to slaughter, or you can muster up as much dignity as you can and walk down the road with your head held high – either way you are going to go.”

Let me share two examples from my life. I have always done well in school and work. However, there have been several pivotal moments where the potential existed for me to play neatly by the rules and do really well by external standards. In almost all these cases, I chose to be technically flawless, but then take things in a direction that the system wasn’t set up to evaluate. It was as if I was always trying to make the point – through my example - that the system is flawed and limited. What I may have passed up in external validation, I have gained several-fold in trusting my inner compass, building the courage to follow it, and respectfully challenging the mainstream way of being. This is a far cry from the boy who did his best to play by the rules and make sure everyone else was comfortable while sacrificing his authentic self. Life has created ample opportunities for me to strengthen and refine this inner clarity and quiet courageous action because it is something that is essential for my path and purpose.

The other example is one that has to do with healthy boundaries. For much of my early life, I was a “pleaser” – not the sycophantic kind of pleaser that relied on false flattery and compromised morals, but the kind that quietly studied the person and situation to understand what I thought was really needed to address others’ needs. In general, if the people around me were content enough, then I could breathe a bit and be a little more myself. In always scanning the environment to make sure that everyone else was comfortable first, there was not much time left for myself. This made me valuable to others, but it also undermined my own needs and desires which eventually led to resentment. There was a twenty-year period of time, where (in hindsight) my life was pretty clearly trying to tell me that I needed to find a healthier balance with relationship boundaries. When I talk about “boundaries,” I do not mean that one should be uncompromisingly rigid and militantly opportunistic. Rather I mean that we do own our inner work to understand what is important to us about a given situation and protect that while also considering what might be important to others. Boundaries are not about hierarchy, but rather clarity, confidence, and contentment. At any rate, through shifts in various romantic relationships, professional and familial relationships, and eventually a business deal gone bad (i.e., culminating in a five-year legal dispute), I had to honestly and deeply learn this lesson about appropriate boundaries. At many points along the way, I thought I had learned my lesson, but there were subtler and more profound insights that were still needed, so life generously provided me with more practice. We each have our own vital areas of growth and our life provides us with all the

opportunities we need to transform. At first, it might be a gentle whisper in the ear. If unheeded, it may become a tap on the shoulder. If we continue to disregard or not take it seriously, then eventually life will hit us on the head with a baseball bat. In hindsight, it is almost comical how clear these trajectories were. Once we become aware of them, then we can lean into these challenges and embrace them as profound opportunities to truly become who we were destined to be.

Purpose

With these shifts of perspective and attitudinal adjustments, we finally come to a redefinition of purpose. When we gain a deeper understanding of ourselves – our natural strengths, values, our traps (shadow and complexes), our true original nature and trajectory – we can understand our purpose in a totally different way. I don't mean "purpose" in the sense of a role description or some generic societally sanctioned notion of purpose, but rather our real purpose – something that is uniquely and authentically our own. When I first ask people, "What is your purpose?" often they start with whatever they hope to achieve through their professional work or certain material goals. This is a fine start, but it's too dependent on external factors. We can spend an entire life striving toward some external goal and never get there due to all kinds of factors beyond our control. If we search a little deeper, then we may think of purpose in terms of our impact on family and friends. We consider that inevitable moment when this life will end and we get

to eavesdrop on our own memorial service: what is it that we hope the people closest to us will say? This still is somewhat dependent on external factors – specifically the perception of those that are near and dear to us. They may be unaware of certain aspects of who we are, or they may not have realized the full impact of our actions yet. However, if we think about what we *hope* others will say about us and we ask ourselves the question, “Who do I need to be so that people can truly say those things about me?” then we start to get a sense of our true purpose. Better yet, let’s take everyone else out of it. When at the end of this life, I finally come face to face with that ultimate reality and God asks me, “What did you do with the gifts, the opportunities, the challenges that I gave you?” I hope that I can say with good conscience, “I did my best.”

In my conversations with people regarding their purpose, it almost always comes down to a way of being – maybe it is self-acceptance, inner strength, calmness amidst chaos, wisdom, patience, genuine connection, or freedom (of all kinds). Whatever the purpose of this life is for each of us, we must name it and be conscious of it. Then we can see every moment as an opportunity to realize it more fully.

This is internal integration. Seeing clearly who we are – our blessings, our limitations, and our true original nature. Reintegrating the undervalued and lost parts of us. Healing the wounded parts of us. Adjusting our notion of what life and its challenges are in service of. Aligning every part of us so that we are whole, healthy, and striving to manifest our purpose in the world. Enabling positive transformation - both in our inner and outer worlds.

This is the promise of internal integration.

About the Author

I have worn many hats in my work with hundreds of individuals, teams, and organizations. I have been a structural engineer, forensic scientist, sustainable systems designer, researcher, human systems developer, general contractor, trainer, facilitator, socio-technical integrated systems thinker, listener, provocateur, storyteller, work therapist, scalability consultant, systems optimizer, learner, annoying question asker, and - when the pressure is right – sometimes a maker of “diamonds.” Through my work, I strive to understand as much as I can about nature (inner and outer), the relationships between elements, and creative ways to manifest our collective potential.

At my core, I believe that each of us - individually and collectively - has the potential to be a conduit for positive transformation in the world. We simply need clarity of vision, the courage to strive, and the discipline to honestly learn from our experiences and keep striving. This is the foundation belief that drives me to serve as a catalyst for change – both internally and externally.

I live with my wife and two sons in a simple home in one of the most amazing places on Earth – Bolinas, California.

Andreas Floros Phelps, 25 March 2024