
This book is one product of multi-phase ten-year qualitative research project investigating the process of consciousness transformation and building upon 35 years of research conducted at the Institute of Noetic Sciences (IONS). The book presents thematic results in an inspiring, narrative style. The results demonstrate commonalities among a broad array of traditional and emerging spiritual and religious practices. Additionally, the authors produced an accompanying DVD and an eLearning course, both of which contain book and video excerpts and practice demonstrations from noted teachers. Chapter summaries and writing exercises offer pragmatic encouragement for readers to explore and discover transformational practices that works with their own unique personality style and within the context of contemporary life. Transpersonal psychologists will find this a helpful book for supporting sustainable positive change for themselves and their clients.
Framed within the literature of perennial philosophy and pluralism, the goal of the project was to explore intersections and commonalities among a wide array of paths, while acknowledging that there is no simple formula embodied therein. The researchers were informed by the work of the Harvard Pluralism Project that distinguishes diversity, a demographic fact, from pluralism, which is a celebration of difference. From that stance they interviewed 60 world-renowned practitioners of traditional, indigenous as well as emerging spiritual movements including A Course in Miracles, The Four Fold Way, Holotropic Breathwork, Integral Transformation Practices, neoshamanism, neo-paganism and others.

The study began in 1997 when the researchers collected narrative descriptions of transformational experiences, elicited from 40,000 readers of IONS materials. Participants were asked to send descriptions of any experience that had changed their lives in any way, especially if the experience had a lasting effect. This resulted in 126 narratives, plus an online forum, which generated 1000 responses and provided a rich array of story for initial analysis. The narratives elucidated experiences of profound shifts in the respondents’ sense of self and their ways of being in the world. The researchers were intrigued to find a trend or “golden thread” in the data that seemed to suggest common factors among these experiences. “Some were initiated by experiences of great suffering; others by experiences of awe and wonder. But in each, a radical broadening of worldview and redefinition of identity, meaning and purpose took place.” (p.5). From this data, the researchers were spurred on to generate further questions like “What constitutes a transformation of consciousness? What triggers transformation? How can we sustain the moments that move us beyond ourselves? And what impact do transformational experiences have on how we live our lives?” (p.5). This led to interviewing a wide range of Bay Area teachers and leaders of the human potential movement via three focus groups, allowing them all to glimpse an emerging map from their stories of lived experience. Inspired by these results, the researchers then invited a group of nearly sixty world-renowned scholars, teachers and practitioners to extensive interviews. These were teachers and practitioners representing spiritual practices and philosophies across world cultures, religions and traditions including swamis, rabbis, priests, roshis, sufis, monks, psychologists, physicists, anthropologists, consciousness researchers, futurists, activists, dancers, artists, shamans, and a Wiccan priestess. Finally, in order to find out if the conditions they identified as precursors of transformation occurred in larger numbers of people or only in the narratives they had collected, the researchers launched an online survey of approximately 900 people from American households.

This project honed in on a very specific purpose: to uncover themes related to “….transformations that sometimes quickly, sometimes gradually, but in all cases dramatically and permanently change the person’s worldview to one of being more loving, kind, compassionate, altruistic, connected to others, and dedicated toward creating a more just, sustainable and peaceful world for all” (p.9). The researchers were clear to not focus on transformational experiences that lead people to hurt others, acknowledging that transformation happens frequently and in many contexts (ex: terrorism). The key to allowing noetic or transformative experiences to flourish, they posited, is to develop a practice that can ground transformative
experiences in everyday life, pointing to Piaget’s notion of cognitive accommodation, or the ability to shift one’s whole perspective to integrate new experience, as opposed to assimilation, or fitting experiences into current worldviews.

Two main outcomes of the research were a definition of effective transformational practice and the identification of four “essential elements of transformational practice”. They define transformational practice as “…any set of internal or external activities you engage in with the intention of fostering long lasting shifts in the way you experience and relate to yourself and others” (p. 93). They found that in order for people to generate ongoing personal growth and development from noetic experiences, four common elements emerged: Intention, Attention, Repetition and Guidance. Cultivating these four elements into daily living can help to anchor transformative experiences into our core and allow them to flourish.

The book is sprinkled with quotes from the 60 interviewees, forming a kind of gemstone path for the reader. For example, Zenkei Blanche Hartman states, “realization isn’t something we can do, and it’s only something we can be ready for. Practice isn’t the cause of realization, but it helps you to be more open and ready to receive what the universe has to offer” (p. 86). Angeles Arrien said, “…the Navajos have a wonderful term for a great realization or insight that is not sustained: they call it a floating cloud…we describe it and we talk about it – and then it dissipates because it hasn’t been mobilized or grounded or sustained….We’re generating lots of floating clouds. We need to ground our ideas so that they can change the world…” (p.201).

The authors are clear throughout the book that they are not providing a program for transformation, rather they are inviting readers to participate fully in the development of their own sustainable transformative practices and to trust their own direct experiences, whether it is tending a garden, engaging the expressive arts, meditation, and/or traditional religious practice. In the spirit of William James’ radical empiricism (James, 2003), they put responsibility on the contemporary practitioner to create a unique amalgam of practices and to develop inner trust that our ongoing transformation positively affects transformation in the wider world.

For more information about the IONS Transformation Study and Living Deeply, go to: www.livingdeeply.org.

REFERENCE


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