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The Art of Integration

In the long run, we shape our own lives, and we shape ourselves. The process never ends until we die. And, the choices we make are ultimately our own responsibility.

- Eleanor Roosevelt

My client Joel came for an integration session after three weeks alone in a cabin in total silence. He reported that it had been challenging. He had felt fidgety at times, and peaceful and still at other times. By the end of the retreat, he had connected with a gentle sense of equanimity, toward himself and the external world. He had revisited many relationships in his life, which revealed insights. He came to see me to receive support for the integration phase following his retreat. It was important to him to somehow express the emotions he had felt, the many insights he had received, and his renewed feeling of serenity.

As we explored the ways he could express himself, he came up with the idea of writing a song, recording it, and sending it out to the people who had “visited” him during his retreat. He was a guitar player but singing was new to him. This felt like a sweet way to honor his connection with them, as well as a creative endeavor. He came back the following week with his guitar and sang his song to me; it was a delightful distillation of his heartfelt feelings. He sent his song out and surprised his family members and friends who got to see a part of Joel they had not seen before.

Expanded state experiences such as Joel’s have the power to initiate growth in our life and expose us to new possibilities. While a journey can shift internal patterns and belief systems, this does not necessarily mean one’s external reality is transformed. More lasting effects appear during and by virtue of the integration process.

In indigenous cultures, because ritual is woven in with day-to-day life, there is less of a need for intentional integration practices. The community often engages in ritual as a group, and each person is likely to receive support from friends and family. The person facilitating the ritual, the local curandera or shaman, often lives in the village and can keep an eye on those who were present. In our modern industrialized world, while rituals and ceremonies are gaining popularity in many communities and cultures, many journeyers return to their family, work, or school, after an extraordinary experience and find there is minimal appreciation or understanding from others. This leaves many journeyers with few people to connect with and a potential sense of isolation. Thus, the integration process is something we must intentionally create in order to honor these experiences in the best way.

An extraordinary experience, whether through a ritual with a psychedelic sacrament, a ceremony, a vision quest, or a retreat, can stand alone as a treasured event. There is something inherently valuable in surrendering to spirit, being one with the cosmos, and understanding the patterns of

the universe. But the real question is: what does it contribute to our daily life? How does it make us more whole, balanced, and awake? What is the use of seeing God if you cannot be kind to your partner? What is the point of realizing that all beings are connected if you are unable to look a homeless person in the eye?

My background as a somatic counselor has taught me the importance of expressing the invisible dimensions in tangible ways. I believe that the gifts of our consciousness exploration can add value to our daily life and should be expressed through real life actions.

Integration is the process of bringing separate elements together into a whole. For our purposes, it is the art of weaving the extraordinary into the ordinary—interpreting a journey’s mythical and symbolic layers, revealing its gifts and treasures, and anchoring them into our lives. If we do not commit to tending the living, evolving process that is our life, no one will. When we commit to the process of integration, we honor the transformation that has occurred.

The phase of integration may last a few days, a few months, or a lifetime, depending on the content of the journey and the magnitude of what has been revealed. Memories, glimpses, or moments can visit us years down the road and finally give us the aha moment of why a certain vision or insight appeared and how it fits into the overall scheme of our lives. But because we are more psychologically adaptable for the days and weeks following a journey into an expanded state, this is the best time to introduce practical changes and anchor new insights into our lives.

What happens without integration? Most of the time, what may have seemed clear during the journey slowly fades like a dream, as old habits and tendencies return. Occasionally, the absence of integration can result in disorientation, as expanded states of consciousness can expose previously unknown and possibly painful layers of the psyche. People have come to my office in severe states of disorientation after having powerful expanded state experiences they were not able to process. Their intention to access the transpersonal realm brought them face-to-face with complex parts of themselves. Without the necessary support and integration skills to make sense of these inner states, they were frightened, had nightmares, or found themselves becoming anxious or depressed and unable to function in their everyday lives. What could have been a significant inner transformation instead resulted in a destabilized state.

It is an insult to the potency of this inner work to not take the time to integrate what has been revealed. Without proper follow-through, the journey becomes another fleeting experience and loses its power. It is a tragedy to squander such potential for healing and growth. As the experience fades from the journeyer’s immediate memory, it is the commitment to integration that will keep the teachings and insights continuing to inform all aspects of their life.

Creation and Application of Integration Practices

Taking the intention and the narrative of the journey into consideration, the guide and journeyer can create integration practices that will sustain the development of the themes that have emerged. Although one or a few obvious themes will be revealed in a journeyer’s experience, it is most important to remember that a holistic integration requires involvement of all aspects of one’s life. By overemphasizing one aspect of life in an integration process, the risk is of unintentionally creating an imbalance the journeyer’s life. A new passionate commitment can

create new imbalance. A guide should keep an eye on the whole gestalt of the journeyer during the integration process, spreading the healing intention into all the facets of their life.

As with this entire approach, the phase of creating integrative practices should engage the qualities of wisdom, creativity, and love as the guide helps the journeyer discern their most potent course of action. This discernment calls forth wisdom. The practices should be designed creatively. But the most fundamental quality to draw upon during the phase of integration is love. By love, I mean a posture of compassion and tenderness. Sometimes the most compassionate way to support someone is to tell the truth in a direct manner. Regardless, love and support should remain at the core of a guide's motivation.

Integration suggestions should be doable and feel good. They should not feel like a burden, or induce intense stress, although they will likely feel new at first. If meditating every day is not something a journeyer is realistically capable of doing or has resistance to, then maybe meditation could be done every other day or once a week. A guide should be realistic so that the journeyer can honor whatever practice is decided upon. Start small. Practices can be increased after a week or two if they are easily incorporated into daily life. A walk in the park once a week, drinking a cup of herbal tea in the afternoon, or writing in a journal every few days are easy to implement. If the journeyer is able to stabilize their new practices and feel enriched by them, they can take them further.

After a post-journey integration meeting with me, one of my clients flew to Florida to confront her abusive father. During her experience, she had physically felt the body of her father on her small child's body. She had felt physically suffocated and enraged. She had been estranged from him for seven years. He was now dying, and she felt that time was of the essence. She reported back to me that once she arrived in Florida, she found him weak and bedridden. She stood at the foot of his bed and told him what she remembered. She told him she was angry and asked him what he had to say. When he said nothing, she stood there, staring at him in silence. She could feel the strength flowing through her veins, the strength she had repressed as a child. She was free of the secret, the "not telling" he had insisted on when she was small and frightened. Facing him now she felt free from his intimidation. She asked him again if he had anything to say to her. He lowered his eyes and shamefully answered, "No." She walked away. She told me that she finally felt complete.

Keep integrative practices intentional and practical. They can be challenging and cathartic—confronting someone like my client did or releasing anger. They can be tender and vulnerable, grieving a loss through a ritual, meditating, reading, or writing a letter to the inner child. They can be fun and enjoyable—running in the waves or going out dancing with a friend. They can be joyful—painting, singing, or simply spending time with our loved ones.

A guide doesn't need to argue if there is resistance. If there is resistance to suggested changes, then explore the resistance. Work with the journeyer's fear of *what will happen if I change?* The theme of resistance is real. We have all studied something and then dropped it. We thought it was fabulous and then we found ourselves not doing it anymore. We want to establish an engaged dialogue with the journeyer so that they do not feel isolated or discouraged. They might find they dislike the practice or need to be more creative and do something that supports them in a

different way. Stay with the aspects touched during the experience and create integration practices appropriate to the specific content of the journey.

Our culture teaches us to be consumers of all things, including experiences. However, a journeyer's active involvement in the integration process creates a different kind of relationship to the experience. There is an arc of transformation, which includes all of the journeyer's preparation, the actual journey, and finally the integration process, which invites the journeyer to engage with their own healing process. As a client of mine said about this work of personal exploration, "There is nobody out there; we are it. It is me with me, facing me, talking to me, healing me."

We are creatures of habit, and our habits are often stronger than our insights. If we do not actively commit to ways of dismantling our unhealthy habitual ways of being, our old physical tensions, behaviors, and tendencies will likely reassert themselves. Integration includes supporting and reinforcing new healthy brain pathways and neural networks through committed intentions and practical actions. Furthermore, by embodying and grounding these sometimes abstract or obscure experiences into everyday reality, we deepen our experience of the sacred in the everyday, and we bring a different vibration to the world. Not only will the integration work affect the journeyer, but it will ripple out to touch their family, friends, and community.

In the end, the commitment to sustain integration practices is not only to ourselves, but to all those we love as well.