

# The Life We Are Given



Editor's Note: What follows has been excerpted from **The Life We Are Given**, [Michael Murphy](#) and [George Leonard](#)'s latest collaboration which describes Integral Transformative Practice (ITP) — a pioneering program for transforming body, mind, heart, and spirit through balanced and comprehensive long-term practice. Their book includes stories of ITP students that emphasize the tremendous capacity for growth we all possess. It is a testament to the joy and transformation possible through long-term, committed practice.

For years, the two of us had wanted to try our ideas about the realization of extraordinary human abilities, to see if people with busy lives could change themselves for the better through long-term practice. We had long held a vision of human evolution and the transformation of human societies. Separately and together, we had worked for most of our adult lives inspired by the belief that all of us possess a vast, untapped potential to learn, to love, to feel deeply, to create, and that there are few tragedies so pervasive, so difficult to justify, as the waste of that potential.

Novelist James Agee wrote, "I believe that every human being is potentially capable, within his 'limits,' of fully 'realizing' his potentialities; that this, his being cheated and choked of it, is infinitely the ghastliest, commonest, and most inclusive of all the crimes of which the human world can accuse itself....I know only that murder is being done against nearly every individual on the planet."

We are haunted by Agee's words. They bring to mind the victims of war, famine, and disease, of ignorance, poverty, and injustice. They point to the dogmatism that inhibits thought, numbs the feelings, and twists the perceptions of entire cultures. But the crime of which Agee speaks is not a distant phenomenon, not something "out there." It touches the lives not only of those trapped by injustice or material deprivation, but also of those considered fortunate: our parents and children, our friends and sisters and brothers, ourselves. It is hard to imagine words more heart-wrenching than those of a close friend or relative who at the approach of death is heard to say, "I realize now I've wasted my life." Against the backdrop of the billions of years it took to give us our life and the brief time we have to experience it here, the dimensions of such waste are beyond our calculation.

And this isn't just a private matter. It's hard to say how much of the world's neurosis, drug abuse, illness, crime, and general unhappiness can be traced to our failure to develop our God-given abilities. But surely people who are deeply involved in lifelong learning, in practices that encourage community, good health, and a sense of oneness with the spirit of the universe, would be unlikely to sink into the despair, unrest, and cynicism that lead to so many individual and societal ills.

Early in 1992 sustained by our faith in the human potential, we convened an experimental class in what we called Integral Transformative Practice (ITP). The experiment lasted for two years and provided material and inspiration for this

book. But it isn't just this one class that informs our words, but rather the gleanings of a long journey, a lifetime's quest.

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When the Berlin Wall came down in November, 1989 and the entire Eastern Bloc began cracking apart like ice in a thaw, many expert observers found themselves struggling to conceal their astonishment. Just a few years earlier, most would have rated the probability of such a shift in the foreseeable future as close to zero. In hindsight, however, we can see that the process was underway before 1989. The Wall had been coming down for a long time before men and women, East and West, began hammering and ripping it apart.

Today another process is underway throughout much of the world, a grassroots understanding that spirit and body are joined, that mind can somehow influence matter, that lives can radically change, that the further evolution of humankind is possible. The evidence of this process is all around us, in books that come out of nowhere to top the national bestseller lists, in polls on spiritual matters, in sometimes sensational images in the popular media of angels among us, of contacts with alien civilizations.

Some might say that these are merely symptoms of end-of-the-millennium anxieties. And yet we meet with physicists who see similarities between certain implications of quantum mechanics and the great spiritual traditions, with electronic engineers who invoke connections between the mental and the material. We find more and more people, including some scientists, willing to entertain the notion that our science itself, wondrous as it is, has not yet adequately addressed every significant realm of the knowable. Again and again, in different guises, in words and metaphors that often seem to clash, in forms both trivial and profound, the same essential understanding quietly spreads around the world: The reductive, purely materialistic interpretation of reality is not the whole picture. Unfathomed possibilities exist in consciousness and the flesh. Our evolution has not reached a dead end. Despite our frailties and flaws and the seemingly overwhelming horrors of the time, the human species has immense possibilities for advance.

The programs described in this book have proven to be of significant value to most of those who have participated in it, with extraordinary outcomes for some. There's no doubt in our minds that a regular, long-term practice which involves body, mind, heart, and soul, and which aims at good health and the cultivation of our untapped potentials, can enhance individual lives and contribute to the social good. There are some who would say, "Yes, but you can never get many people to devote themselves to a long-term practice." But how are we to know unless we try?

In the transformations that emerge from an integral practice, the matter of social support is particularly important. It is difficult even to discuss such transformation if everyone around us stands ready to prejudge and invalidate. On the other hand, there is the danger of cultic pressure to see things that don't exist. The nonauthoritarian program we have championed...along with objective reality checks wherever possible, can help us safely past this pitfall. We feel that as the number of people engaged in the quest for transformation increases, the number of successes will increase even faster. If a significant minority of a society's people consciously and constructively engage in such a quest, we could see something new on this planet: one of those events that cannot be adequately predicted by what has gone before.

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Throughout our practice, we have taken care to remind ourselves of the stupendous miracle of existence, the ultimate value of every life. We have celebrated our connectedness with all living things and with the stuff of the inorganic world. We have viewed every step in the cosmic journey, from the birth

of the universe to the ever-flowing present moment, as our genealogy, and have experienced ourselves as a part of, not apart from, all that we behold or ever could behold. Many who have practiced with us have found the aliveness that has come from our practice to be transformative in and of itself.

To awaken can be painful, for it opens us to a poignant awareness of the pervasive waste of life around us and in us. But the eventual rewards are great. We no longer need horrors to jolt us awake. To see a sunrise is enough. To look into a friend's or lover's eyes, to truly see another human being, is enough. To hear a distant strain of music, or a child's laughter, is enough. With this awakening, this renewed aliveness, there generally comes a love for others, a love that asks nothing in return. Such love doesn't imply the denial of evil; the world is a dangerous place and awakening also means being aware of those dangers and standing ready to take centered action to confront wrong when necessary. But the ego-transcending love remains, and it spreads in concentric circles like ripples on a pond, kindling similar feelings in more of those it touches than we might imagine.

There are many powerful forces in the world, and some of them--cynicism, greed, ethnic hatred, heedless ambition, armies, and huge, impersonal organizations, to name a few--have a particular power to destroy. But a love that asks nothing in return is perhaps even more powerful, for it seeks to create, not destroy. Only a long series of close calls has given us this life. Again and again, over eons of time, often against long odds, Eros has finally won the day. Are we willing to consider the possibility of a society in which love prevails?

We believe that by the very nature of things, each of us carries a spark of divinity in every cell and that we have the potential to manifest powers of body, mind, heart, and soul beyond our present ability to imagine. We believe that a society could find no better primary intention, no more appropriate compass course for its programs and policies, than the realization of every citizen's positive potential. We mean the potential inherent in every aspect of our lives, from the most commonplace to the most extraordinary, the hidden capabilities that wait to be summoned forth, not just in the mind but also in the body, heart, and soul. Such a compass course might create clarity where there is now confusion and bring the human psyche into harmony with nature and the cosmos. At best, it could open the way to the ultimate adventure, during which much of what has been metanormal would become normal, and some who read these pages would be privileged to share the next stage in the world's unfolding splendor.

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**The Life We Are Given** can be ordered through the Esalen Bookstore at 831-667-3049.

As a companion to the book, George Leonard has designed a video, **The Tao of Practice**, that consists of a series of exercises called a kata, after the Japanese word for form. It is a 40-minute practice for people with busy lives, and combines elements of hatha yoga, the martial arts, modern exercise physiology, Progressive Relaxation, visualization research, and meditation. Leonard leads you through a full session as described in **The Life We Are Given**. Also available through the Esalen bookstore.