

SHIFTS IN CONSCIOUSNESS

Creating a new narrative

"And no one pours new wine into old wineskins. Otherwise, the wine will burst the skins, and both the wine and the wineskins will be ruined.

No, they pour new wine into new wineskins" Mark 2:22

Introduction

In order to transform our life, we **need to see our life differently than the way we have viewed it** up until now. A shift in consciousness involves a **transformation in how we see and understand ourselves and our world**. This not only brings forth new insights but frees us to create **new narratives for our lives, ones that liberate our true calling** to live into the future. When combined with the other four dynamic elements, a shift in consciousness brings about a



new way of being; our lives become increasingly attuned to the flow of grace.

A shift in consciousness can occur at **two levels**.

The **first** is a **shift in perspective**, which shifts *what* we see. It is akin to putting on a new lens, or twisting a kaleidoscope, enabling us to see realities and ourselves differently than the way they were seen before. The **second** involves a

deeper transformation in the very nature of

consciousness by removing the distractions and distortions of worldly preoccupations and self-concern. This shift is akin to acquiring a **new operating system** which transforms **how we understand what we see**. Arriving at a shift in perspective is a bit easier, while the deeper transformation takes a great deal of patience, discipline and practice to acquire. Both contribute to a shift in consciousness, making available greater wisdom and new possibilities previously outside of our awareness and understanding.

Einstein famously said, "No problem can be solved from the same level of consciousness that created it." We need, as Jesus said, **a new wineskin** (new consciousness) in order **to hold the new wine** (new narrative). Such a transformation of consciousness moves our mental fences, widens our perspectives, invites creative alternatives, elevates our morality and deepens our spiritual journey. It allows us to breathe new life into the ongoing and ever-evolving narrative of our life. It does not invalidate our prior perspectives, rather, it incorporates and transcends them. In this

way, shifts in consciousness become *soul-shifts* that liberate us to grow more fully into who we are called to become.

We cannot bootstrap ourselves into a shift in consciousness. However, we can do **certain things that can either help or hinder** its possible development. In this chapter, we will first look at what inhibits us from seeing a different perspective, then explore ways to enable us to shift our perspective. This will be an important step toward a more profound transformation of consciousness and the creation of new narratives, which we will discuss in the second half of this chapter.

Windows on the World

Friedrich Nietzsche once said, “We look at the world through different windows”. **Pope Francis and Donald Trump, for example, must be looking at the world through very different windows** as their worldviews are so radically different. A ten-year-old girl trying to survive amid the rubble of Syria sees a different world than a ten-year-old girl on a rural farm in Kansas. A beggar dying on the streets of Nairobi sees a different world than a CEO sitting high above Wall Street. Your perspective on life and the world will vary greatly depending upon your window on the world. Peering through a different window can transform your entire worldview.

Thomas Merton discovered a new worldview on Fourth and Walnut: “Then it was as if suddenly saw the secret beauty of their hearts, the depths of their hearts, where neither sin nor desire nor self-knowledge can reach, the core of their reality, the person that each one is in God's eyes. If only they could all see themselves as they really are. If only we could see each other that way all the time”. If only we could see ourselves as we really are. If only we could see others, the people we serve, our community, as they really are. **If only we could see, as God sees**, the depth and beauty that we and others hold in our hearts. If only we could see each other that way all the time!

What blocks our view

Windows on the World was a restaurant located at the top of the North Tower of the World Trade Center in lower Manhattan, which was destroyed during the attacks on September 11, 2001. Out of the blue, on that beautiful September day in New York City, our window on the world was forever changed. The impact upon us in the United States and across the globe was seismic. The ripple effects continue to this day. A new window on our world emerged that was as dark and foreboding as the December 7, 1941 attack on Pearl Harbor.

Both events, in 1941 and 2001, were literally inconceivable. How could we not see these coming? By all accounts we had the information but were unable to imagine these horrific possibilities becoming a reality. Although the intelligence agencies had all of the information required to forecast

these events, and warnings were given by those collecting the data, those making the decisions could not think outside the box of their own expectations. Their expectations conformed to what had been, not what could be.

One of the most challenging aspects of any transformative journey is the **constraints we place upon ourselves, others, and our possible futures, by our own existing worldviews**. Our worldview tells us what is possible and what is not. It is **our internal operating system that organizes and interprets what we see, hear, touch, taste and smell**. Our worldview shapes our mind-sets, creates our heart-sets and determines the skill-sets we believe we need to exist in the world we created. It is what determines whether we are cynical about our future or hopeful. It governs our choices on a daily basis and what we do when we reach a particular crossroads. Remember why groups fail to transform? They **make new improved versions of the past, try harder rather than try differently** and download the same information using the same operating system. Unless you're thinking shifts in a way that offers you a new window on the world, your efforts to solve today's problems will fail. What prevents us from looking out through a new window? Here are four of the most common barriers:

- Inability to think outside the box;
- Tunnel vision;
- Future blindness;
- Imprisoned by reputations.

I will describe these for you so that you might reflect upon whether you and your community are prone to any of these barriers. If so, perhaps you can choose a window with a better view.

1. Inability to think outside the box

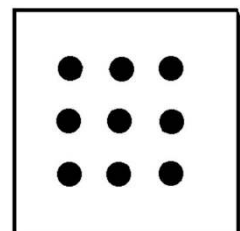
"The difficulty lies not so much in developing new ideas as in escaping from the old ones." John Maynard Keynes

I am sure you have seen this diagram (Nine Dots) and tried this exercise before, but indulge me and try it again.

I have given this challenge to thousands of people across different cultures and very few could solve it. The challenge is this: first, draw these nine parallel dots on a blank piece of paper, then connect all nine dots with four, contiguous, straight lines. In other words, once you put your pen or

The Nine Dots Puzzle

- Start on any dot
- Can you draw 4 straight lines going through all the dots without taking your pen from the paper?



pencil on the paper, you may not lift it off the paper while drawing the four lines. All four lines must be straight and contiguous. Good luck!

You can check your answer at the end of this chapter. Although there are several possible solutions, I found that only a handful of people per hundred could solve this puzzle. Among those who did solve it, many were successful because they saw it done before and they remembered (rather than discovered) the solution. This illustrates just **how hard it is to think outside the box** and see reality in a new way. More often than not we connect the dots in the same way we always have even when we know it doesn't work. Einstein's statement that we need to solve problems with a different mindset than the one that created them is easier said than done. To illustrate this point further, tell me what you see in this picture (Figure 19: Two women). You may have seen this picture in an introductory psychology class. Although you may have seen it before, you may still be challenged to see more than one woman, an old and a young: woman. Can you see both? It is hard to think outside of the box, to shift perspectives away from the one with which we are used to seeing. This is a major barrier for communities seeking to create a new vision for the future. They will need help in connecting the dots of their reality in a new, fresh and liberating way. They will need others outside the system to help them think outside of the box.



Two women

2. Tunnel vision

On December 28, 1978 United Airlines flight 173 left the Denver airport bound for Portland, Oregon with 189 souls on board. All three pilots were experienced having accrued over 36,000 combined hours of piloting. Upon descent into Portland, they lowered the landing gear and noticed that one of the three indicator lights had not turned green, indicating that the **landing gear was not completely extended and locked into place**. This would be unsettling for new pilots. But for seasoned pilots, this was an event for which they train many times during recurrent flight training. The crew requested a holding pattern to give them time to investigate. All three pilots became preoccupied with trouble-shooting the failed indicator light. **All three pilots failed to scan their other instruments** and

navigate the plane. As a result, the DC-8 **ran out of fuel and crashed some six miles from the runway**, on a perfectly clear day with three seasoned pilots. The NTSB report listed **the cause of the crash as fuel exhaustion resulting from the pilots' "preoccupation with a landing gear malfunction"**. Without question, the pilots needed to trouble-shoot the light. However, they had tunnel vision when they became so focused on the indicator light that they failed to see the big picture. An example of tunnel vision occurring in communities is when its members become completely preoccupied with *recruiting new vocations*. Understandably, this can be a priority for communities that might have the means to form new members. However, some communities become so **focused upon new members as their only hope for the future, they fail to see the big picture**. They fail to see hope residing in the current members and emerging opportunities. This tunnel vision blocks their view and their ability to look through new windows on the world that might otherwise offer hope for new life.

3. Future blindness

"What makes this world so hard to see clearly is not its strangeness but its usualness. Familiarity can blind you too." Robert M. Pirsig

Yogi Berra once said, "It is tough to make predictions, especially about the future: Nassim Nicholas Taleb builds upon Yogi's pithy statement in his fascinating book, *The Black Swan: The Impact of the Highly Improbable*. The blackswan, according to Taleb, has three attributes:

"It is an outlier, as it lies outside the realm of regular expectations because nothing in the past can convincingly point to its possibility;

It carries an extreme impact;

In spite of its outlier status, human nature makes us concoct explanations for its occurrence after the fact, making it explainable and predictable:

Taleb notes that **most of history is written by rare unexpected events in life** (i.e., black swans), not the expected ones (i.e., white swans). History is made from low probability, high impact events, such as the rise of Nazism, the rise of Islamic fundamentalism, the market crash of 1987 and the 9/11 attacks. The status quo, or more of the same, does not make history. **Our future does not arrive on our schedule, nor does it come from our planning**. The wheel, the computer, the laser and the internet did not come from a strategic plan. Taleb argues that we expect to see what we've always seen before, but it is **what we don't know and can't predict or see that will likely have the greatest impact upon our narrative for the future**. "History is a museum", says Taleb,

“where one can go to see the repository of the past and the charm of the olden days. It does not help to forecast the future”. The black swan logic makes **what you don't know far more relevant than what you do know**. Thus, we need to open ourselves to see what others see, to serendipity and God's providence.

Taleb suggest that we are all prone to a “**narrative fallacy**” or our mistaken interpretation and filtering of facts based upon history, rather than seeing the facts for what they are now. We remember the facts of the past that fit and confirm our existing narrative, while neglecting others. We don't remember the truth, but our reconstructed truth. In this way we are all prone to “future blindness”In order to avoid these tendencies and write a new narrative, we have to see the facts as they are today. Communities need to trust their experience, stay close to the data and invite others to help them see new possibilities. They will need to **intentionally look closely for what is emerging**, rather than quickly conclude it is more of the same based on history. Getting the perspective of others who have not been part of their history helps communities see with new eyes and avoid the narrative fallacy.

4. Imprisoned by reputations

“If you think you are so enlightened, go and spend a week with your parents.” Ram Dass

Maybe you have had the experience of returning home to your family of origin only to be placed back in the box of a reputation you had received some 10, 25 or 50 years ago. Our reputations get frozen in time. For example, because you were the oldest of four growing up, perhaps you had more responsibility than your younger siblings and were expected to help out by doing laundry, dishes or yard work. Even though 25 years have passed, your siblings remain lingering over Thanksgiving dinner, waiting for you to clear the table and do the dishes, just as you had in the past. Although you have moved away, grown well past these moments in time, it is hard to shake a reputation. Thanksgiving dinner revives them on a yearly basis.

The “**Pygmalion effect**” is well known among educators as to its damaging effects upon students' reputations. The Pygmalion effect tells us that **a teacher's expectation becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy**. For example, if a teacher thinks Mary is not a very smart student, the teacher will set the bar of expectations low and challenge her less. As a result, Mary adapts her performance to meet the expectations of her teacher. Indeed, Mary gets lower grades. Our reputations, deserved or not, shape how others see us and, in turn, how we respond.

Members have reputations that imprison them for years in communities. Not only can the perception of members be frozen in time but so, too, can their collective contributions to the communal narrative. The communal narrative - stories members tell themselves about their community- can likewise be stuck in time. Reputations, and the stories you tell yourselves about one another and your lives, can continue well past their basis in reality, remaining unchallenged as self-fulfilling prophecies.

The point is this: *The inability to think outside the box, see the big picture, notice the black swans, and free ourselves from outdated reputations and stories, greatly limits communities from transforming their lives and creating a new future.* What can be done about it.

Enabling Shifts in Perspective

"If you don't like something change it; if you can't change it, change the way you think about it." Mary Engelbreit

What helps us gain a new perspective? What is it that shifts our thinking, opens our hearts and helps us see with new eyes a world that otherwise *appears* much the same as it did yesterday? It is not so much our eyes and ears that need to change, but our *perspective* that needs to shift in order to interpret differently what we see and hear. **We need to attend to and process what we hear and see differently, from a different vantage point.** We need to try on a different lens or twist the kaleidoscope. Here are three ways to shift our perspective:

- Listen to the prophets;
- Welcome the stranger; and
- Expand or shrink the system.

Listen to the prophets

"What is familiar is what we are used to; and what we are used to is most difficult to 'know' - that is, to see as a problem; that is, to see as strange, as distant, as 'outside us'" Friedrich Nietzsche

If your community is searching for a new perspective and is primed and ready to listen, **then listen to the prophets.** Prophets are those who can **see beyond the horizon that most of us see and challenge our current vision of reality in ways that bring us closer to the future.** They reframe reality in ways that both disturb and resonate with us at a deeper level. It is this

combination of disturbance and resonance that impels us to search for a deeper, more liberating truth. They speak a language that is counter to conventional wisdom and pushes us to think and act counter to prevailing norms. They are not disturbers who obfuscate the truth and bring chaos to our world, but agents of transformation calling us to see the familiar in a new, more hope-filled way.

There are many prophets among us, both lay and religious, who seek to reframe our customary worldviews and offer refreshing perspectives on Religious Life. They call us to a deeper, more liberating truth about emerging new paradigms. The religious prophets of our day are reframing the vows, offering ideas about new forms of Religious Life, and [advancing perspectives on the meaning, purpose and future of Religious Life](#). Their prescient words can provide stepping stones toward the future, if we let them. Here is a small sampling.

Joan Chittister, in her trailblazing book, *The Fire in the Ashes*, said this: “The fact is that religious life was never meant simply to be a labor force in the church; it was meant to be a searing presence, a paradigm of search, a mark of human soul and a catalyst to conscience in the society in which it emerged:

Diarmuid O'Murchu, in his recent book, *Religious Life in the 21st Century*, speaks of a [paradigm shift from the “ideology of the hero” to the “archetype of the lover”](#). He believes this shift is an effort to “reclaim a deep, ancient wisdom inscribed in both monastic and apostolic forms of the vowed life - but largely subverted by the ideology of the patriarchal hero: O'Murchu uses the term “paradigmatic visioning” and describes this as one that favors relational webs over isolated parts, connections over distinctions, collaboration over competition; it celebrates commonalities rather than differences.

Barbara Fiand, in her book, *From Religion Back to Faith*, asserts that the emerging worldview is one that is [moving away from a dogmatic and fossilized religion and is returning to an emphasis on spirituality and faith](#). “Theology is useless”, she says, “unless it can be transmitted to the body of the faithful in language that clarifies rather than obfuscates, that speaks to present-day reality rather than to a worldview and reality no longer relevant. The power of Christianity is tested in the hearts it reaches and the transformation it effects”.

Michael Crosby, in his book, *Repair My House*, agreed with Pope Benedict XVI that the Church in the western world has a “crisis of faith”, but turned this around saying that the crisis is not a loss of faith in the Spirit, but a “lack of faith in the institutional church itself.” He goes on to say: “At the

core of every refounding lies a power in the refounding person or persons that offers something beyond simple repair of cosmetic cracks in the fade. There is a rebirth that springs from the way that person or persons grasp the power of the original mystery”.

Sandra Schneiders re-frames Religious Life as “a charismatic life form, called into existence by the Holy Spirit, to live corporately the prophetic charism in the Church. It is not a workforce gathering recruits for ecclesiastical projects and it does not receive its mission nor the particular ministries of its members from the hierarchy.

John Dear offers a new lens for the Gospel call to peace-making. David Courturier suggests that the vow of poverty should be based upon a “theology of abundance” and “compassionate collaboration. Elaine Prevallet offers a new lens for the vows. The list could go on: Richard Rohr, Ilia Delio, Peter Senge, Margaret Wheatley, Robert Putnam, Elizabeth Johnson, Peter Block, Barbara Marx Hubbard, Anthony Gittens, and many others. All of these scholars, theologians and futurists are offering new lenses for understanding the evolving nature of Religious Life within the context of our evolving world. They reframe our theology and worldviews, pouring new wine into new wineskins.

You have your own prophets, too. In every community there are those on the edge of change, instruments of transformation who march to the beat of a different drummer. They go about their ministries with tremendous zeal making a profound difference in the lives of those they serve. Sadly, **they are often pariahs in their own community, dismissed as disloyal or crazy.** Though they may not have been proclaimed *prophets*, they are prophets. Famous or not, they offer new perspectives and visions of the future. They are agents of transformation.

Whether or not these particular prophets resonate for you, the invitation here is to search for those that do. Explore and reflect upon these possibilities in order to discover how they might shift the perspective you presently have for understanding your lives. Invite those who can help you see over the horizon and look anew at Religious Life. **Invite those who will stretch your thinking, not simply reinforce your current way of thinking.** Listen to the visions that resonate, disturb and bring new meaning and hope to your life and mission. **There are prophets among us who can broaden our perspectives, if only we choose to listen.**

Welcome the stranger

“The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God.” Leviticus 79:34

Communities can alter their perspectives by welcoming the stranger and strange ideas. Sometimes I find communities **stewing in their own juices, having the same conversations, using the same language, looking through the same lenses**, going about things in the same way and ending up in the same place (Einstein's definition of insanity) . It helps to bring *outsiders* into the conversation. Welcome the stranger into your conversation, someone who is outside of your ordinary circle and who looks at life through a different lens. **Strangers can help us see things from a new perspective and open up new possibilities.**

An example of this happened in a recent consultation I had with a leadership team. A problem arose because they had allowed a number of senior members who were fairly independent to live in a Motherhouse community originally intended for members needing assisted living. This worked fine for a time because there were plenty of rooms to go around, but soon they were running out of space for more members needing assisted living. Unfortunately, the members now living there considered it their *home* and were highly resistant to moving out. The team was stuck. What to do?

It was mid afternoon during our discussion and there was no creative energy left in the room. I said, “Just for the fun of it, let's invite some other folks into the conversation”. I asked them, “Go and find the first person you see in the hallway, whomever it happens to be, and bring them in here”. They got up from the table and came back a few minutes later with whomever happened to have been around at the time: the Communication Director, a kitchen helper, a housekeeper, and the Director of Maintenance.

When they came into the room, we explained the dilemma we had been wrestling with then asked for their thoughts. Reticent at first (more likely shocked), they slowly began offering their thoughts, then with their increasing comfort, their candid advice. The **energy in the room began to shift from the dead air we had before** they came in, to nervous laughter, then to an exciting back and forth. New possibilities were tossed around until an idea with some potential emerged. A house nearby, partially occupied by members, offered great space for assisted living. They began to strategize on how this might work and made a tentative plan.

The newcomers left saying “thanks” for the conversation. It not only gave them a reprieve from their afternoon doldrums, it was fun. They seemed to enjoy being *included* in a closed-door session with the leadership and being dignified by having been asked to help. I asked the team what they noticed about the exchange. They described it as being filled with “energy;” “possibilities;” “laughter;” “fun;” a “breakthrough;”

Communities are used to bringing in realtors to help with real estate, lawyers to help with legal matters, theologians to add to their theology, and all of this makes good sense. I would not suggest

otherwise. But when you are stuck, going in circles, out of creative ideas and energy, **think of adding new people to the conversation**. Add ones you have not ordinarily had in the conversation. **Bring in outsiders, especially those from other disciplines**, life circumstances and perspectives. Welcome the stranger and their strange ideas.

Expand or shrink the system

“The real voyage of discovery consists not in seeking newlands, but in seeing with new eyes.” Marc el Proust

Often, when reaching a roadblock as a therapist with a client, I would bring other family members in or out of the conversation. If I was seeing an individual client who was stuck, I might bring in the family. If I was seeing a couple or family who were stuck, I might ask for an individual session with one of them. If I was seeing a religious in individual therapy, I might meet with his or her superior or local community. I would expand or shrink the system **to open up a new perspective**.

Reflection: Shifts in Perspective

Recall your own experience in community:

When have you experienced your community's barriers to new perspectives (inability to think outside the box, tunnel vision, future blindness or imprisoned by reputations)?

When has your community been liberated by listening to the prophets or strangers and their strange ideas, or when have they expanded or shrunk the system?

Cultivating a Transformation of Consciousness

“The devout Christian of the future will either be a mystic...or he will cease to be anything at all.” Karl

Rohner

While a shift in perspectives is a good start, **a deeper and more enduring transformation of consciousness requires more than a cognitive shift in perspective**. A deeper transformation of consciousness involves **altering the very source and quality of our consciousness**. It is a change in the operating system, a soul- shift that aligns oneself more fully with the movement of grace. For Eckhart Tolle, such a transformation is a **“burning up of the ego”**. Burning up the ego enables a deeper cooperation with grace that moves us, ultimately, toward what the Hindus call *enlightenment*, the Budd hists call *nirvana* or what the Christians call *salvation*.

At the zenith of Christian salvation, we might arrive at what Jesus referred to as heaven. Eckhart

Tolle invites us to participate **in co-creating this heaven on earth** - a new earth - in the same manner as Jesus spoke of it, not as a location up in the sky, but as an inner realm of consciousness: “Then I saw 'a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea” (Revelation 21:1.) For Tolle, then, “A new heaven is the emergence of a transformed state of human consciousness, and 'a new earth' is its reflection in the physical realm”.

Everything in the universe is evolving, even our consciousness. **How can we cultivate this transformation of consciousness and participate in its evolution?** To understand what might cultivate a transformation of consciousness, we first need to more fully understand what is meant by “consciousness” Ken Wilber has written extensively on the subject and draws a helpful distinction between “states” and “structures” of consciousness.

States of consciousness

States of consciousness are **temporary** and broadly categorized into **two types**. The first category includes **the natural states of consciousness**, such as wakefulness, dreaming and deep sleep, which everyone experiences. The second category includes **altered states of consciousness**, such as meditative, drug induced or peak experiences, sometimes referred to as “spiritual experiences” Peak experiences are the most common of these altered states. Let's explore peak experiences to illustrate what these types of altered states might involve.

Peak experiences

Peak experiences are powerful emotional and spiritual experiences that **jolt us out of our ordinary consciousness** and into altered states. Most people have had one of these as a result of **falling in love, a brush with death, or standing on the edge of the Grand Canyon**. Sometimes, as in Merton's case on Fourth and Walnut, we are simply walking down the street when a heightened awareness happens upon us and an epiphany emerges those changes everything. All of these peak experiences can dramatically impact the way we see ourselves and our world, though their impact might only be fleeting.

But even fleeting ones leave a residual mark. We are different for having had the experience. They help us to know that there is, in fact, another realm of consciousness. They help us to wonder that if we had this profound experience once, maybe there could be another. Perhaps there is a doorway to something more in our life than what we ordinarily experience. One example of a peak spiritual experience from my own life was the death of my sister-in-law, Norma Lipsmeyer. “When Beth's sister, Norma, was nearing her final days, she called her family to come join her

for what she referred to as her 'come to Jesus party'. Everyone came from our busy lives to share in the celebration of her life at this party co-hosted by Norma and Jesus. Upon receiving the invitation my wife and I immediately made arrangements to leave a Chapter we were facilitating in Oregon. We arrived at the Mercy health care facility in Fort Smith, Arkansas the next day.

When we walked into Norma's room her eyes immediately met ours as she smiled saying, 'Thanks for coming'. She welcomed each person in much the same way, her inviting eyes, a smile radiating love and her arms as open as her heart in total welcome. She embraced us as she did each person with her entire being, seemingly oblivious to her own pain or impending death. Because her clothes had become such a bother, she lay unabashedly naked as the day she was born welcoming each person to her 'party' in gratitude. Both Jesus and she were glad to have us come. Norma spent time with each one of us. Regardless of others who may have been in the room at the time, when she spoke with you it was as if no one else was there. She told each one of us why she loved us and how we had been a 'gift' to her. She shared her hopes for us while promising to pray for us as she journeyed on. She was entirely present to us in her loving way, so much so that we could not help but be drawn to her in the same way. The clocks and calendars that ordinarily prodded us through life mattered not. Phones, food, to-do lists and the everyday chores of life were lost on us as each one of us, Jesus and Norma met on hallowed ground.

Everything seemed to coexist without argument, as if held in a cosmic embrace and a great Amen. It was surreal and entirely real at the same time. Pain and laughter, tears and smiles, grief and gratitude, stillness and conversation, were all comfortably juxtaposed. And in it all, Jesus kept saying, 'Of course!' Life and death sat side by side and all was acceptable. We prayed and sang, talked and sat in silence, hugged and held each other with no sense of urgency. We were on God's time and in God's home and that's all that mattered.

Norma didn't want to die. She didn't want to leave us. She was as frightened of death as the rest of us. Being a sister of Mercy did not make her immune to being human and she wasn't shy about expressing her anguish. And when she did, we felt it as if it were ours. Along with her anguish we witnessed Norma's total acceptance of the truth, her love that knew no bounds and her faith that was stronger than most. **We were transfixed and transformed by her astonishing presence while she and Jesus loved us through it all.**

Her presence to us and ours to her was one of the most loving, human and sacred experiences I've ever had. I am sure that you have had these kinds of peak experiences, as well. It is unfortunate that it often takes death to shock us into this kind of presence, however, these kinds of experiences remind us that this profound gift of presence is always available to us. All we have to do is awaken this gift.

One peak experience, fleeting though it may be, is enough to **give us a contrast experience**. Although temporary, such an altered state of consciousness helps us distinguish the temporal from Eternal, truth from Truth, and love from great Love. It helps us know there is a nondual existence where the sublime and humor, life and death, grief and gratitude can come together without prejudice. Peak experiences are indelible touchstones we can return to over and over again when discerning what God, Jesus or Love would ask of us, the path we ought to take and with whom.

Structures of consciousness

Structures of consciousness are **stable and enduring holistic patterns**. They are more flowing and overlapping than static and rigidly separated, analogous to “waves” a “spiral” or “colors of the rainbow”. Wilber studied and documented dozens of versions of these structures across different cultures and traditions. He found that **some ascribe to only two levels of consciousness** (matter and spirit); **others three** (matter, mind, and spirit); **still others name four or five** (matter, body, mind, soul, and spirit) or more. As we ascend through new structural levels of consciousness, we attain not only a new sense of identity, but a **“new and higher view of the world, with a wider and more encompassing set of morals and perspectives”**. In other words, we move from **egocentric, to sociocentric, to world centric**. The higher-level structures are not givens, but **potentials some of us can attain**. But **how do we intentionally evolve to new structural levels of consciousness?** Aside from peak experiences, which are largely outside of our control, what can we do to intentionally transform our consciousness? It takes training and practice. Temporary *states of consciousness* can become increasingly permanent *structures of consciousness* with practice, as with meditation and contemplation. In other words, according to Wilber, **“The more you experience meditative or contemplative states of consciousness, the faster you develop through the stages”**.

However, Wilber is also quick to point out that the higher levels of consciousness are particularly challenging to reach and are not possible for all adults. “Only those who rigorously train”, he says, “can move toward these higher levels”. With that caveat in mind, let's turn to some of the kinds of training and practice that might assist in the personal and communal transformation of consciousness.

Mindfulness

“The ultimate purpose of human existence is to bring 'presence' into the world. Being in the flow with Christ.”- Eckhart Tolle

Mindfulness exercises are ones that **open wide our field of awareness**. According to Wilber, mindfulness is “bare awareness” or “choiceless awareness”, an awareness without preference, comment, judgement analysis or interpretation”. Referring to centering prayer as a mindfulness exercise, Cynthia Bourgeault says, “every time the mind is released from engagement with a specific idea or impression, we move from a smaller and more constricted state of consciousness into that open, diffuse awareness in which our presence to divine reality makes itself known along a whole different pathway of perception”.

According to Wilber, the aim of these mindfulness exercises is threefold: **to come to know one's own mental processes; to gain the power to control them; and to free ourselves from psychic conditions that are otherwise unconscious and uncontrolled**. Richard Rohr would say that the aim is to **“live with ambiguity, mystery, and uncertainty, and where I can balance knowing with unknowing the heart of the mystery of biblical faith”**. Such a transformation of consciousness, according to Eckhart Tolle, requires that people let go of their “identification with form, dogma, and rigid belief systems and discover the original depth that is hidden within their own spiritual tradition and themselves”. He sees these methods of mindfulness as a means for transforming our consciousness beyond the preoccupations of our ego and into an experience of a heaven that is always in our midst. Mindfulness, then, has more to do with the quality of the field, than what is grown in the field; more to do with the quality of the sea, than the waves that ripple, rise and recede in it.

Once again, **temporary states can become more permanent structures of consciousness with assiduous practice of mindfulness exercises**, such as, prayer, meditation, and contemplation. These particular practices have been with us for thousands of years and religious communities are well versed in many of these. Therefore, let me highlight three other methods of mindfulness that are a bit more contemporary. These have an *interpersonal* emphasis and are practiced among some religious communities. They involve knitting together an inward contemplative focus of individuals with an outward focus and dialogue with others in community:

- **Presence;**
- **Communal discernment; and**
- **Contemplative engagement.**

These methods, like prayer and meditation, are *skills* that can only be developed through a great deal of patience, practice and discipline. When done well, these methods create a rhythmic flow of listening and responding to the Spirit moving within and among participants. When done well, over time, these methods can transform both the personal and collective consciousness of those involved. When done poorly, without patience, practice and discipline, these methods amount to little more than “fluff

Unfortunately, most communities fail to train in and practice these skills routinely, and with the same degree of rigor as they have practiced personal prayer, meditation or contemplation. Consequently, they are often discarded as just another fad.

I. Presence

Presence is a skill, not simply an attitude. It is more than being physically present. It is a skill that is foundational to communal discernment and contemplative engagement. In my experience, however, the skill of presence is often absent, even among groups who claim its importance. Something is getting lost in the translation from theory to practice. I'd like to be a bit more specific here, because without presence, attempts at communal discernment or contemplative engagement will bear little fruit.

When teaching the skill of presence, I often begin by asking a community, “When we started prayer this morning by saying, 'Let us bring ourselves to the presence of the Lord; what did that mean to you? What does the word 'presence' mean to you in that context.?’” What I typically hear back are comments such as: “*focus*”, “attention” “grounded”, “searching”, “clarity”, “listening to God”. The kind of presence we bring to prayer is the same kind of presence we can offer to others, if we choose. It is a skill that needs to be developed in much the same way as learning to pray or to play a new instrument. It takes training and practice.

To be present means to show up, pay attention, and to ***bathe another in your full attention***. This means turning off your cell phone, closing the door and being with another person as if there were nothing more important than just that person. It means refraining from reacting, judging, advising, analyzing, fixing and problem-solving. What's left if you can't do all these things, we ordinarily do?

We can come to the conversation ***with utter curiosity, wondering*** not so much about the literal facts of what another might be saying, but ***listening for the deeper story unfolding***. Presence means coming to the conversation with humility, recognizing the privilege it is to be invited into the intimacies of another person's life, honoring the sacredness of life. It means coming to the conversation trusting that whatever struggles the other person might share, they also have the wisdom and resources within to discover the answers they need. It does not mean sitting beside them presuming that we know what is best and right for them. We have only to be present to help them discover from within what they need.

Being present to another takes patience, practice and discipline. Much like learning *sitting prayer*, wherein beginners might last ten minutes before becoming distracted and impatient, the same is true for beginners in learning to be present in conversations. Ten minutes is what most of us want

to give another on any given topic, before we want to have our *air time*, jump to another topic, check our smartphones or get back to work so we can get our *to-do* list done and over with. Presence, bathing one another in your full attention, is a skill that can be learned and developed. When applied with discipline, it can transform our consciousness from the kind of surface awareness we have of ourselves and others to a deeper level. It calls forth our natural empathy and compassion for others once we hear the deeper story underneath the literalness with which we otherwise interpret, analyze and judge others. We see the other with new eyes.

2. Contemplative engagement

Every faith tradition has emphasized contemplation of some kind as a means for **exploring mysteries both human and divine**. It is as ancient as humanity itself. Contemporary expressions of this ancient practice give it new names. Some call it *contemplative engagement*, while others call it *contemplative listening, or contemplative dialogue*. And, when it is not done well, or the group is not well prepared, some call it “fluff.”³²³ When it is done well, it is a means to listen to the movement of the Spirit unfolding within individuals and the community gathered. Every community I am privileged to visit engages in some form of shared prayer and reflection. What makes contemplative engagement different is that it deliberately **weaves together the “I” and the “We” into a collective understanding**. It is not simply a group of people in a room each praying aloud, or in contemplative silence, in a siloed or parallel fashion. Nor is it simply faith sharing wherein each person shares while others listen silently (i.e., without verbally responding). Rather, it is an effort to integrate personal contemplation with active listening and dialogue in order to unearth collective insights.

Principles of contemplative engagement

Every community is different in their approach to, and reasons for using, contemplative engagement. The practice of contemplative engagement must be tailored to a particular community and their specific goal. However, as an orientation to the process, I usually offer these general guidelines.

1. **Embrace deeply your truest self** and unbind one another from the reputations that otherwise keep you hidden. Instead, seek to know one another as ever-awakening, yearning to be understood for who you are becoming.
2. **Tend to the garden** of your once treasured relationships by weeding out sources of mistrust or confusion and engage in skilled conversations that seek compassionate understanding.
3. **Listen, as if for the first time**, and not for what you expect to hear, are afraid to hear, wish to hear, or think you've already heard a hundred times before.
4. **Prepare your heart** to listen for the grain of truth among those hard-to-hear differences or

pearls disguised as resistance or disagreement.

5. **Become captivated** by the heart of the matter and by the deeper story that is unfolding before us, rather than on superficial distractions and unrefined comments.
6. **Discover the themes** underneath the soundbites, as well as the universal struggles that all of us share by virtue of being human.
7. **Surrender** your need for quick fixes or pain-free answers and relish the gift of revelation in these soul-searching conversations.
8. **Savor the silence** and resist the urge to fill it with empty words and reactive comments.
9. **Listen to your inter-connectedness** with one another as companions on a shared journey.
10. **Trust the wisdom of the community** to call forth and glean the fruits of the Spirit moving within and among everyone gathered.

3. Communal discernment

“The reason two antelopes walk together is so that one can blow the dust out of the other one's eyes.” African Proverb

Discernment has been practiced in one form or another since humans first began pondering, “What would God say about this situation?” Prior to the 1970s there were few publications using the word *discernment*, however, it has always been the intention of religious to bring their lives more fully in alignment with *God's will*. Every faith tradition, ancient or modern day, has had its own means for listening more deeply to, and discerning, what might please God.

Within the Catholic tradition, St. Ignatius of Loyola is credited with formalizing a method of discernment he called the **Examen. St. Ignatius** (1491- 1556) was also the founder of the Society of Jesus (Jesuits). Since the development of Ignatius' Examen, the Jesuits have kept this practice alive and shared it widely among other religious and laity.

Discernment is an in-depth process of prayer and reflection aimed at making choices that would more closely reflect God's desires. In other words, it is an effort to align our will with God's, to see as God sees, and make our decisions accordingly. It requires us to sift, sort and distinguish what might be urgings from God versus urgings from our own egos. It is used as a means for making major life decisions born of wisdom and in the service of furthering God's mission.

Today, **communal discernment** is commonly used among religious, especially women religious, for electing new leadership and making other important community decisions. While there is no

one methodology for communal discernment, most efforts draw upon the pillars of Ignatian discernment, namely *interior freedom and detachment from the outcome*. To be interiorly free means to rid ourselves as much as possible, or to hold more lightly, our fears, anxieties, wants and desires that might drive our decision, so that we can be more disposed to God's desires. Detachment from the outcome means to hold at bay our preoccupations or conclusions about a specific outcome and to stay focused on the here and now. Both of these efforts help us to listen to the movement of the Spirit and the truth that is actually emerging, rather than our predetermined, self-imposed ideas.

Communal discernment, when done well, can be among the most sacred experiences of a community rapt in God's loving presence. When it is not done well it, too, might be seen as “fluff.” Communal discernment for many communities has, in practice, been little more than personal discernment done in parallel fashion. Each person in the community, in other words, may be engaged in personal discernment while together in the same room, so they call it communal discernment. **Parallel personal discernment is not the same as communal discernment.** This is much like Piaget's notion of *parallel play* wherein several children may be playing in the same sandbox, but they are each doing their own thing, not playing *together*. Having accompanied many communities through processes of communal discernment, I can attest to the fact that the more communities practice it, the more adept they become at weaving together the inter play *of my will, our will and God's will*. The more they practice, the more they mature in their capacity to engage in communal discernment. Each effort is an opportunity to learn the skills and discipline required of communal discernment that go beyond parallel personal discernment.³²⁴

When communities become more able to engage in genuine communal discernment, their experience becomes increasingly transformative. Their consciousness shifts back and forth from 'I' to “We” as the collective wisdom is braided together. If they can hold the tension of their diverse understandings, remain interiorly free and detached from the outcome, and not collapse into *group think*, then they can experience a kind of *group grace*. This group grace, the fruit of genuine communal discernment, brings forth a powerful personal and communal transformation of consciousness.

Thus, altered states of consciousness are temporary but can evolve into higher structures of consciousness using mindfulness exercises. We can learn to quiet the endless stream of egoic preoccupations (*monkey mind*). We can learn to transform and elevate the quality of our own consciousness. Mindfulness exercises, whether intrapersonal (e.g., prayer and meditation) or interpersonal (e.g., presence, communal discernment and contemplative engagement) all have

the potential to bring about a transformation of consciousness. There is no guarantee, of course. But if these methods are practiced regularly by communities (not every few years at Chapter), then they can create the conditions for a transformation of consciousness to occur both personally and communally.

Reflection: Transformation of Consciousness

Recall your own experience in community:

1. *When have you experienced a personal or communal transformation of consciousness?*
2. *What is your experience of your community's ability, when gathered, to be genuinely present to one another, or to participate in authentic communal discernment or contemplative engagement?*

Writing New Narratives

A shift in perspective or transformation of consciousness enables us to see with new eyes. This, in turn, enables us to write new narratives for our lives and bring forth new life. We each have narratives, stories we have told ourselves about ourselves and our lives. We have stories about God, ourselves, and the meaning and purpose of our lives. These narratives are ones we have internalized from the stories our elders and others have told of us. These stories are but dim reflections of our true selves and the deeper story of our lives. Rewriting these false or outdated narratives into ones that more clearly reflect the inner truth of who we are *becoming* is integral to a transformation of consciousness: “For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known” (1 Corinthians 13:12).

In order for your community to birth a new way of being, you will need to search out fundamentally new ways of seeing your lives and writing new narratives for your future. These new narratives are ideally more authentic and aligned with who you are *becoming*, rather than who you have been in the past. A new, more fully aligned narrative, according to Tolle, brings acceptance, joy and new life.

What do Jesus' *Sermon on the Mount*, Martin Luther King's *I Have a Dream* speech, and Kennedy's *Moonshot* speech all have in common? These were all paradigm-changing orations that inspired and transformed those who were ready to listen. These narratives opened the minds of people to believe in things they either could not previously imagine or have thought possible. They opened the hearts of people, infusing them with hope and excitement for a future toward which they previously felt numb, helpless or lost. They liberated people from a status quo anchored in place by the

constraints of existing worldviews. They inspired people to act in ways that enabled dreams to become reality.

But even the most inspiring orators cannot craft *your* narrative. New narratives are not taught or given to us. Rather, they **emerge through us**. Others can inspire, plant seeds and offer alternatives, but you have to craft and claim your own narrative. Furthermore, your narrative will not turn on a dime and arrive in one **“Ah-ha” moment**. Even if you have an epiphany, or if someone suggests an alternative perspective on your life that deeply resonates, it will take time for you to assimilate its meaning and adjust to its possibilities. A new narrative requires a continual testing of its authenticity and resonance with the truth of your experience as a community.

Listening to the prophets, welcoming the stranger, reframing and changing patterns are all helpful methods and can open up the possibility of new narratives. It also helps to reverse this process and focus directly on the narratives as a means to help you **shift your perspective and aid in the transformation of consciousness**. Let me give you two exercises as a way to begin creating new narratives. These exercises are not intended to be one-and-done conversations in community, but ones that are built upon and continually woven into an emerging narrative by the community over time.

Example 1: Back to the future

An exercise I frequently use and have found helpful is one I call “Back to The Future”. I invite members to engage in deep prayer and reflection with a spiritual companion (living or deceased). I ask them to imagine with them what the future of their community might be (five or ten years hence), based upon their deepest longings and the fruits of their prayer. They are then asked to write a letter to the community sharing the fruits of their prayer and reflection, looking back from the future. It is an exercise that not only taps their fears of mortality and hopes for their legacy, but their yearnings for new life and generative aspirations for the future.

The power of the exercise is not only in the depth of reflection that is asked of them, and what it evokes in them individually, but in the sharing of the letters and what happens to the community when this is done. The sharing is intimate, sacred and brings a community to a deeper level of awareness about what is at stake for them and how they might journey together. Conversations like these provide rich material to further the emergence of new narratives.

Example 2: Unfolding new narratives

When communities reflect deeply upon the stories, they keep telling them-selves, those that are no longer true and those that are emerging, it is an eye-opener. Sharing the threads, they

hope to preserve and what they see emerging on the horizon is key. For example, I often invite communities to reflect upon the narrative of their lives, using these questions:

- What are the stories you still tell yourselves about your lives that no longer fit your emerging reality?
- What are the threads or parts of your story that are still true and would be wise to preserve?
- As you gaze upon the horizon with the eyesight of faith, what do you see unfolding that might be part of your new narrative?

Summary

Shifts in consciousness involves shifts in perspective, how we see and understand ourselves and our world. These shifts in perspective are akin to putting on a new lens or twisting the kaleidoscope. A more profound transformation of consciousness, though, is one that brings about new states and potentially new structures of consciousness. These can be cultivated by practicing mindfulness exercises such as presence, communal discernment contemplative engagement.

A shift in perspective or transformation of consciousness enables us not only to see with new eyes and elevate our quality of consciousness, but liberates us to create new narratives for our lives, ones that liberate our true calling. When combined with the other four dynamic elements, these soul shifting processes fosters *a new way of being*. Such transformations involve your entire being a soul shift wherein you become more attuned to the flow of grace.

Answer to Nine-Dot exercise

