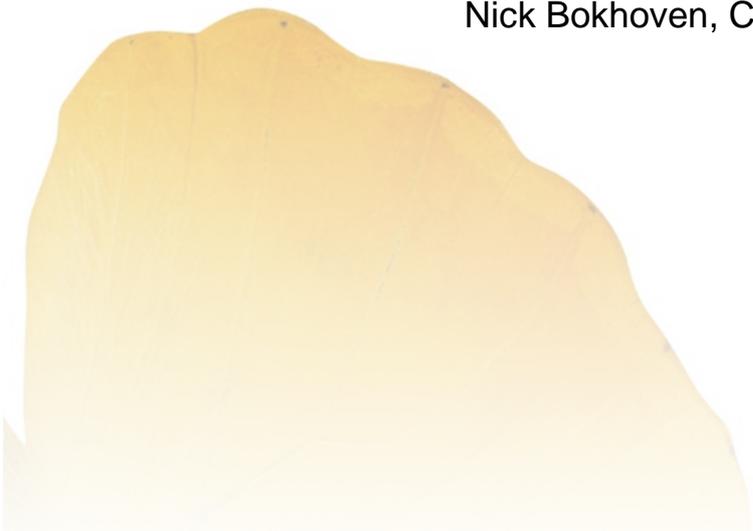




Birth, Death, Rebirth: Exploring Cyclic Nature & Our IF Experience

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WHAT WAS ALIVE AND INTERESTING?

It was after 10 days together, several community calls and coaching sessions that our pod formed. Three of us have been in a part of the same coaching call and we all had considerable interaction from the our times together in the intensives so little time was spent in the “formation” of our group. We quickly dove into what was alive and interesting from our experiences to date. In addition, we didn’t limit to the confines of our IF class. We spoke about Action Inquiry from Bill Tolbert which Eric had significant experience with. We explored the concept of the group shadow. Three of members in the group shared the experience of being a parent and we explored an idea of drafting this paper on integral informed parenting. Stages of development in groups is something we all experience and we saw as a growth edge. The topic of death had been introduced to the cohort in the first intensive with the Lifeboat exercise. In Flex & Flow sessions during the second intensive, some groups dove into end of life topics. This topic came forward into our conversations as a pod. We circled death from several perspectives; our end of life, others end of life, of the ego. Ironically, it was the topic of birth/death/rebirth that had the most energy.

WHERE DID WE LAND?

As we started to talk more about this cycle of birth/death/rebirth, we began to bring forward more examples on every call. We witnessed this cycle outside our windows with the spring season emerging. When we looked at ourselves we saw this cycle in very course - we came in as one person and are leaving a changed individual. Christy had the opportunity to facilitate a session in her community on the topic of death. Eric had an experience with a mock funeral oration - the inspiration of our exercise. Nick had experienced moving conversations in the first two intensives. Lisa had experience with her work with Tribal Nations. It was our unique and moving personal experiences that solidified this topic for us.

WHY POETRY?

Poetry falls in the realm of art and beauty, of circles, of metaphor and sensate experience. Like the gift of music, poetry is a uniquely human gift to the world. In a world that seems to perpetually be in trouble, poetry has a way of cutting through illusion, providing perspective, beauty and relief against the backdrop of all the destruction we seem to do on the planet.

Poetry gives language to the experiences that lie at the deepest core of our being, and can bring clarity, openness, awakening, and confirmation to the most mundane, painful, or ecstatic experiences we have. In many ways, poetry invites us to meet our own life head on, through seemingly magic forms and words that have the capacity to touch the ineffable.

So, it seemed natural and wise to turn to poetry in our attempt to understand the very human yet not well understood, mystical cycle of birth, death, and rebirth. Early on in our POD we looked at what the poet philosophers had to say about birth, death, and rebirth and we wanted to provide a sample to set the tone, feeling state, and context of our inquiry.

John O'Donahue, the Irish philosopher/poet/priest offers some wise blessings and reflections on birth, death, and rebirth.

Death

The world rests in the night. Trees, mountains, fields, and faces are released from the prison of shape and the burden of exposure. Each thing creeps back into its own nature within the shelter of the dark. Darkness is the ancient womb. Nighttime is womb-time. Our souls come out to play. The darkness absolves everything; the struggle for identity and impression falls away. We rest in the night.

— John O'Donohue, *Anam Cara: A Book of Celtic Wisdom*

Rebirth

When love awakens in your life, in the night of your heart, it is like the dawn breaking within you. Where before there was anonymity, now there is intimacy; where before there was fear, now there is courage; where before in your life there was awkwardness, now there is a rhythm of grace and gracefulness; where before you used to be jagged, now you are elegant and in rhythm with your self. When love awakens in your life, it is like a rebirth, a new beginning.

— John O'Donohue, *Anam Cara: A Book of Celtic Wisdom*

Cycles of Birth, Death, and Rebirth

The cycle of birth, death and rebirth is brilliantly cast open in *The Holy Longing* by Goethe:

*Tell a wise person, or else keep silent,
because the mass man will mock it right away.
I praise what is truly alive,
what longs to be burned to death.*

*In the calm water of the love-nights,
where you were begotten, where you have begotten,*

*a strange feeling comes over you,
when you see the silent candle burning.*

*Now you are no longer caught in the obsession with darkness,
and a desire for higher love-making sweeps you upward.*

*Distance does not make you falter.
Now, arriving in magic, flying,
and finally, insane for the light,
you are the butterfly and you are gone.
And so long as you haven't experienced this: to die and so to grow,
you are only a troubled guest on the dark earth*

— Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *The Holy Longing*
Translated from German by Robert Bly

The poet David Whyte speaks to trusting Nature's cycle of death/birth/rebirth. He compared it to the cyclical beauty of the repeated coming and going of the moon:

*I want to write about faith,
about the way the moon rises
over cold snow, night after night,*

*faithful even as it fades from fullness,
slowly becoming that last curving and impossible
sliver of light before the final darkness.*

*But I have no faith myself
I refuse it even the smallest entry.*

*Let this then, my small poem,
like a new moon, slender and barely open,
be the first prayer that opens me to faith.*

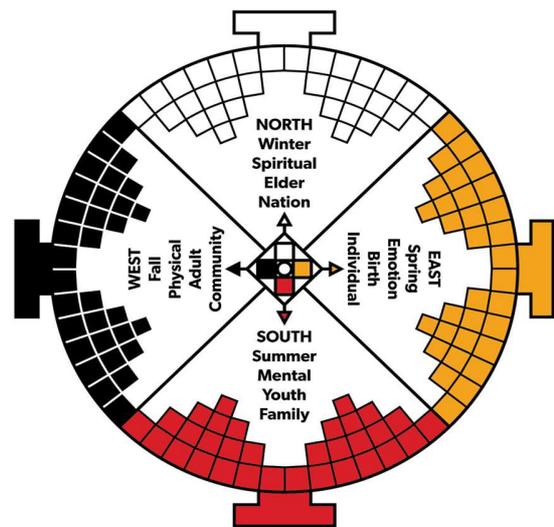
— David Whyte, *Faith*

Like Goethe's powerful concluding 2 lines ("*And so long as you haven't experienced this: to die and so to grow, you are only a troubled guest on the dark earth.*"), Whyte's poem identifies how difficult it is for us humans to move and flow with the cycle of birth, death, rebirth. Perhaps it is that pain and suffering are inherent to the cycle; and we have to learn to work with this reality in order to receive the depth and beauty hidden within.

If we zoom in on different aspects of self and human experience we see that the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth appears everywhere in everyday life. It is amazing how we can attempt to shield ourselves to it, which of course, creates constriction rather than growth.

NATURE & ANCIENT TEACHINGS

For those cultures who have maintained more tangible connection to the Natural Laws, the presence of cycles is closer to home than in mainstream Western culture. In the First Nations communities where I (Lisa) spend a lot of time, there are many many people struggling and disconnected; and yet, even quite remarkably - with all that suffering - there is a palpable, timeless resting in Nature, in the earth, and in the cycles of change that permeate everything. These wisdom teachings are woven into rituals, prayers, in the landscape, and in the language itself. Here is a Medicine Wheel being used in one of the communities where I work - it gives guidance to living a balanced and harmonious life. Notice the cycles of the seasons (every year winter's death gives way to spring's rebirth), the four directions, the cycle from birth to Eldership and back again to birth, and the cycles of increased circles of inclusion and awareness and back again to the individual.



The Tibetan Book of the Dead talks about the Bardo realms, and similar to the Medicine Wheel, draws our attention to the many transitions that are constantly taking form in our ordinary lives, happening all the time. The challenge is in the cycle itself: in being awake to how much things actually change, and in the art of moving and growing with the cycle. How do we practice not getting in the way? How do we work with all the big feelings and in all the letting go that accompanies change?

Dying is often accompanied by pain, illness, disappointment, fear, or sadness, so this whole process is incredibly rugged. When we enter the part of the cycle that is dissolution, everything is triggering us to believe that things are not ok. Yet the wisdom teachings and Reality itself say there is a bigger "yes" that can give space to all the "no". There is a place in the depth of our beings where we can actually surrender.

EGO & IDEALIZED SELF

If we are interested in approaching our big death with an open heart, spiritual practice and meditation might be considered essential practice for our preparation. And our ordinary

difficulties in life are a great place to start to learn how to surrender and let go of what is *willing to be burned to death, so to be fully alive.*

One place to take a deeper look is at our idealized self. Karen Horney describes the idealized self as a glorified version of self, one that is formed early on in life to overcome feelings of inferiority. It is formed in response to our constant human needs for love and belonging, and very often gives the individual the much desired feeling of significance and superiority over others. Of course this self-idealization can never be reached. It is experienced unconsciously as a disparity, and results in either unhealthy striving toward perfection or the failure to recognize any personal faults. Both sides stunt our development.

Compliant people develop an idealized image of themselves as loving, helpful, and forgiving; aggressive people strive to be powerful, ruthless, and triumphant; and detached people pursue freedom, peace, and self-sufficiency. Because the conditions that give rise to any one of the defensive moves tend to give rise to them all, people will be torn by inner conflicts, and these will be reflected in both their behavior and their idealized image.

— *Bernard J. Paris, found in Karen Horney's Vision of the Self*
http://plaza.ufl.edu/bjparis/ikhs/essays/paris_self.pdf

The points of defensiveness - the conflicts and their behaviors - are exactly where we can practice letting go, integrating the idealized self, and becoming compassionate and alive in our lives, not despite our limitations but including them fully.

So the way that we behold our pain (in this case, the conflicts and the feelings that surround them), confers a certain meaning and depth and beauty in our lives. In a paradoxical way, suffering can crack the shell of ego and actually free us. Then a new hidden life within you can actually come out and emerge. A new dimension of ourselves can come out, one that is too large - too bright and too colorful - for the small place in which it has grown. So real suffering that we work with can break the smallness within us and liberate us into a greater place.

OUR IF EXPERIENTIAL FACILITATION

Our Intention

The gross, subtle and causal energies are not so easy to handle. According to our own experience and our own center of gravity, people reach different levels of energy. Our state of consciousness also depends on the context and the content of the moment. In our pod conversations, we did not have the same answer to the question of dying. Some of us had a centre of gravity closer to the gross and some of us had a centre of gravity closer to the subtle.

Definition of gross: concrete, pragmatic

Definition of subtle : bright, light

Definition of causal : very subtle, dream, imagination

We allowed that experience and our playful natures to inform the experience we have designed, this is an opportunity to take you on a journey into the 3 States of Consciousness

This is also an opportunity to practice from our individual learning edges:

Nick - to facilitate from the left side

Christy - to trust the unknown and facilitate from the lower left

Lisa - to facilitate from the right side and also with wild abandonment to the unknown

Eric - focus on moving from ideation to product

Opening (10 min)

Introduce our pod group and our intention

Birth, Death, Rebirth: Exploring Cyclic Nature & Our IF Experience

An Invitation to consider what has died since the beginning of the IF program? And what is emerging?

Introduce the group into the space with a poem

THE CYCLES

Tell a wise person, or else keep silent,
because the mass man will mock it right away.
I praise what is truly alive,
what longs to be burned to death.

In the calm water of the love-nights,
where you were begotten, where you have begotten,
a strange feeling comes over you,
when you see the silent candle burning.

Now you are no longer caught in the obsession with darkness,
and a desire for higher love-making sweeps you upward.

Distance does not make you falter.
Now, arriving in magic, flying,
and finally, insane for the light,
you are the butterfly and you are gone.
And so long as you haven't experienced this: to die and so to grow,
you are only a troubled guest on the dark earth
— Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *The Holy Longing*

Mindfulness moment - As a large group to ground down, feet on the floor, eyes closed
Imagine when you first arrived at ECCU, the colour, the season, inside outside of you, when
you met each other, the faculty. Moving through from October to now, across the seasons

A poem to transition into the next exercise:

DEATH -

“The world rests in the night. Trees, mountains, fields, and faces are released from the prison of shape and the burden of exposure. Each thing creeps back into its own nature within the shelter of the dark. Darkness is the ancient womb. Nighttime is womb- time. Our souls come out to play. The darkness absolves everything; the struggle for identity and impression falls away. We rest in the night.”

— John O'Donohue, Anam Cara: A Book of Celtic Wisdom

Repeated Question (10 min)

In your pod group answer the question in one breath. We will take you through 2-3 rounds of answering the same question

1. What is the worst death you can imagine for yourself?.
2. How does this inform your life in the present or change the way you want to live?

Prompting where they are with their answer to bring awareness to the gross, subtle, causal and invite them to visit another state on the next round of question

Another poem to transition into the next exercise

FAITH

— David Whyte

I want to write about faith,
about the way the moon rises
over cold snow, night after night,

faithful even as it fades from fullness,
slowly becoming that last curving and impossible
sliver of light before the final darkness.

But I have no faith myself
I refuse it even the smallest entry.

Let this then, my small poem,
like a new moon, slender and barely open,
be the first prayer that opens me to faith.

The Funeral Oration (15 min)

An experience with one volunteer

Setup and Materials

- Open space (chairs for those who can't sit on the floor)
- List of the pod groups
- 1 facilitator per pod group.
- 1 white sheet per pod group
- Candles
- Flowers
- Dim the lights

The facilitator welcomes the pod group members and explains that they are going to celebrate their death (the ending of our nine month program) with depth and lightness. To do that they are going to give and receive a funeral oration. Each member of the group, one at a time, is going to lay down on the floor, in turn, with a white sheet over their body. While the first person is laying down on the floor (no noise, no movement, no speaking), the other members will give a 2-3 minute funeral oration. We then move onto the next member of the pod, laying down with a sheet over them they will receive their funeral oration.....etc.

Each person in the pod shares:

- Any Appreciations
- Any Regrets
- Any Wishes

that are alive in the moment about the person under the sheet

After receiving their funeral oration the whole pod will release them into their rebirth with a unitive chant – “I set you free”

Integration and Closing (5 Min)

A poem with the large group in a circle

Rebirth:

“When love awakens in your life, in the night of your heart, it is like the dawn breaking within you. Where before there was anonymity, now there is intimacy; where before there was fear, now there is courage; where before in your life there was awkwardness, now there is a rhythm of grace and gracefulness; where before you used to be jagged, now you are elegant and in rhythm with your self. When love awakens in your life, it is like a rebirth, a new beginning.”

— John O'Donohue, Anam Cara: A Book of Celtic Wisdom

Large group unitive chant - OMx3