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LIGHT

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Awakening to the We

The current paradigm assumes that because our bodies are separate, our consciousness is distinct as well. But we've all experienced moments of oneness, of being inside the same experience, *together*.

BY PATRICIA ALBERE

*We are one, after all, you and I.
Together we suffer, together exist, and
forever will recreate each other.*
—Pierre Teilhard de Chardin

SAMUEL AND PAULA had been happily married for eight years. They lived in a beautiful apartment in San Francisco with their three small children, all under the age of six. When they came to one of my recent workshops, however, their marriage was visibly strained. They felt like they'd done nothing but

fight the past few months, as they juggled two careers, children, and a busy social calendar. They'd seen a therapist and were trying to be more accommodating of each other's needs, but felt unable to recapture the kind of easy togetherness they'd once experienced.

Samuel was familiar with my teachings and hoped that if Paula joined him at my workshop, maybe they could find a solution to their problems. I asked the couple to do a practice that began with simply sitting together, being present, and then answering – one at a time and with vulnerability – the question: *What am I experiencing?*

Once they had spent a few minutes with this exercise, I asked them to turn their attention to a different question: *What are WE experiencing?* With short words and phrases, they took turns answering this question, which required that they pay attention not to their own internal thoughts and feelings, but to something else, something between them, that place where their consciousness overlapped.

After they'd been doing this practice for about ten minutes, I looked at Samuel and Paula and noticed that they appeared more relaxed and open. In fact, their faces were lit up with a sweetness that I palpably could feel, and it was obvious that they had connected in a deep way. I asked Paula what transpired, and she said, "I feel like I just found our relationship again! All these months, I thought we were working on our relationship, but in fact we were just two separate people working on ourselves or trying to change each other. We had lost touch with the place between us, the place where our connection and our love exists."

As Paula and Samuel continued to engage in the workshop practices, they didn't "fix" their problems. Instead, many of them just naturally seemed to fall away, and the couple had a bigger place to come from in dealing with those that didn't. They weren't trying to change themselves or each other anymore. Rather, they were developing and delighting in the living connection between them, and out of that space, they were finding creative ways to navigate their complex lives. More importantly, however, as Paula and Samuel rediscovered how potent their connection was, they became less and less concerned about working on their "issues." As a result, they felt much more inspired to find out what new potentials could emerge between them.

The We-Space

WHAT PAULA AND SAMUEL'S story illustrates is the most critical shift we need to make if we're interested in pursuing higher potentials of relatedness. They shifted their attention to the place where relatedness exists – the space *between* us, where we overlap and our consciousness intermingles. Most people do not pay attention to that space between us or "we-space," but it's a very real and important part of human interaction. In philosophical terms, it's called the "intersubjective" domain.

We're all familiar with the concept of "subjective" experience, which often is defined as the inner, personal, and private world that each of us lives on a momentary basis. Most of us also are familiar with the "objective" domain, which is the scientifically measurable world of objects that each of us observe and largely can agree upon.

Yet, the intersubjective domain is different: It is the shared space of consciousness which exists between two or more people. This intersubjective field is more than simply the sum of two or more individuals in communication. Because relationships have an existence of their own – an "ontological reality" as philosopher Steve McIntosh calls it¹ – this realm has its own "being." It's a shared reality where we are in full contact with the same interior experience. The current paradigm assumes that because our bodies are separate, our consciousness is distinct as well. But we've all experienced moments (if not steady states) of oneness, of being inside the same experience, *together*. Some examples of this state include love, compassion, joy, laughter, penetrating clarity, and a myriad of other experiences.

What is new about this approach to relatedness is that we consciously focus on awakening to the space between us. Rather than communicating across the distance between two bodies and two subjective realities, we are placing our consciousness "inside" the other and focus on the "we" that arises when we are in a state of true communion.

This we-space doesn't just arise in our most intimate relationships. It's a field of invisible yet powerful connectedness that we move into and which takes on different qualities when we relate to different people. Every relationship has an intersubjective dimension that reflects particular qualities and characteristics. It can be stagnant, negative or toxic, or it can be alive, dynamic, transformative and thriving. Imagine the difference between the field generated

As Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. wrote, “We are tied together in a single garment of destiny, caught in an inescapable network of mutuality.” We need to find the courage to move beyond our separate spheres of enhanced individuality, to connect more deeply, and to awaken the sensitivities necessary for collective evolution.

by a creative team that is brainstorming and creating a novel, world-changing idea, and the quality of the field produced by an angry, drunken mob. Consider the contrast between the vibration of an excited crowd at a football game, and the energetic frequency of a church congregation. Now, it’s easy to see how the intersubjective field of relationships and groups invisibly shape what can and can’t happen for the people who are a part of it. Indeed, I believe that this field shapes the group experience just as much as our surface interactions shape it. However, most people remain unconscious of this field and sadly miss the amazing potentials that can be accessed.

The fact that most people are unaware of this field of interconnectedness does not make it any less real. As Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. wrote, “We are tied together in a single garment of destiny, caught in an inescapable network of mutuality.”² Throughout the ages and across the spectrum of traditions, spiritual teachers like Dr. King have told us the same thing: *At the deepest level, we are all one and everything in this world is interdependent.* Paradoxically, this underlying oneness gives rise to the multiple unique forms in which we find ourselves. Yet, our essential nature is unity – with each other and with all of life.

Recently, science has begun to confirm this theory. Ecologists have shown us the miraculous and fragile interdependence of our planetary systems – summed up beautifully by the great naturalist John Muir, who wrote, “When we try to pick out anything by itself we find that it is bound fast by a thousand invisible cords that cannot be broken, to everything in the universe.”³ Quantum physicists have explained to us that our world is not made up of pieces of matter but of dynamic systems of energy that exist in a constant exchange of information with each other. As author and researcher Lynne McTaggart explains in *The Bond*:

Between the smallest particles of our being,
between our body and our environment, between

ourselves and all of the people with whom we are in contact, between every member of every societal cluster, there is a Bond – a connection so integral and profound that there is no longer a clear demarcation between the end of one thing and the beginning of another. The world essentially operates not through the activity of individual things but in the connection between them – in a sense, in the space between things.⁴

As we go about our day-to-day life, we tend to be unaware of what McTaggart calls “the Bond” – our deeper connection to each other and the cosmos. We hear about oneness, we read the insights of the mystics and the breakthroughs of the scientists, but then we perceive ourselves as separate objects, bumping into each other. Like Paula and Samuel, we’re often out of touch with the we-space, even in our closest relationships. Our automatic locus of awareness is ourselves and we live inside a bubble of self-concern. As a result, it takes practice and humility to penetrate the membrane of separation.

Becoming aware of the “we” immediately changes the way people relate to each other. For example, an elementary school teacher named Joan who has been working with me shared that she has seen the power of we-space among her young students. She found that when she introduces the concept of oneness to a classroom of eight-year-olds, their behavior shifts. “I remember one particular little boy,” she recalled, “who stubbornly refused to follow directions. I said to him, ‘Instead of arguing about whether you’ll do this assignment your way or my way, how about we figure out how to do it *our* way.’ He totally understood and let go of his position. We figured out together—from inside the ‘we’—what was best for both of us.” Joan has used this concept in her classroom for years now, and she reports that it has turned the teacher-student relationship into a “creative partnership.”

Sometimes, an unexpected event shifts the intersubjective field, suddenly making us notice the

we-space that previously had been absent from our awareness. After the tragic events of September 11, 2001, I heard many stories of such sudden shifts. I was teaching in New York City shortly after 9/11, and one of my students, a woman who lived on the Upper East Side, told me that as she walked around her neighborhood immediately following the tragedy, she noticed that everyone on the sidewalks seemed to be inside a shared consciousness, and people spoke more freely with one another. She said she felt connected to complete strangers in a surprising new way and that it seemed perfectly natural to be open and trusting with her fellow New Yorkers. Similarly, a male New York resident told me that no horns were honked for several days after the towers fell. The city was unusually quiet, and there was a natural flow of cooperation and compassion that clearly was unusual for Manhattan.

Yet, the most powerful description of the post 9/11 we-space came from Tom, a man I know who is an emergency medical physician and head of a New York nonprofit. Tom regularly flies into places like Haiti to deal with the aftermath of disasters. Normally, when he arrives at a strange hospital there is an immediate resistance from the staff members, who vie for position and express other aspects of ego. But when Tom went downtown to help with the 9/11 rescue, he said there was an unexpected openness and holistic connection that allowed everyone to work together in a flow of efficiency that he's never experienced since. He said that he and his trauma teammates moved and responded as one organism.

It seems to me that it was the shock of 9/11 which awakened people. Residents of New York City suddenly became connected inside a field of relating that is very different than the reality in which we normally exist. They shared an unusual level of openness and vulnerability. Imagine if the consciousness of New York could have remained inside that level of connectedness, flow, and love for not just a few days, but for a year or more?

I am passionate about teaching the underlying principles that will allow human beings to relate from that kind of connection and concern for one another, and I am not the only one. My colleague Andrew Venezia in his paper "I, We, All" writes, "Many of our crises today as a global humanity stem from our inability to interface and relate with each other, in small and large scopes, from such a [we-space]. Our technological sophistication has outstripped our ability to create beauty and goodness."⁵

We fail to reach this level of relating partly due to cultural pressures. In the United States over the past half-century, our culture has encouraged an increasingly individualistic worldview. However, some of us also have been taught to follow our hearts and sense of purpose, to resist bowing to convention, to create healthy boundaries and also respect the boundaries of those we love. This is a positive and important cultural development, but it is not enough. Now, we need to find the courage to move beyond our separate spheres of enhanced individuality, to connect more deeply, and to awaken the sensitivities necessary for collective evolution. As we begin to pay attention to the intersubjective dimension of our experience, we will discover how to be in relationship not just with each other, but with the "we" and our greater humanity.

We also fail to reach this level of relating because our awareness generally is focused on the gross level, that which appears to be solid and material and separated in space. As we pay attention and become more sensitized to the intersubjective field, we begin to experience more subtle levels of consciousness that permit us to sense the invisible realms of reality such as subtle energies, inner sounds, visions, smells, tastes, and touch. When this unseen relational field awakens, we become more alive, more vivid, more dimensionally rich. This we-space is vibrant and expansive, and it reveals deeper levels of reality. 🌸

Notes

- 1 Carter Phipps, *Evolutionaries: Unlocking the Spiritual and Cultural Potential of Science's Greatest Idea*, New York, NY: Harper Perennial, 2012, p. 169.
- 2 Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., "Letter from a Birmingham Jail," 1963, Stanford University Martin Luther King, Jr. Research and Education Institute, <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/letter-birmingham-jail>.
- 3 Stephen Fox, *John Muir and His Legacy: The American Conservation Movement*, Boston, MA: Little, Brown and Company, 1981, p. 291.
- 4 Lynne McTaggart, *The Bond: How to Fix Your Falling-Down World*, New York, NY: Atria Books, 2012, pp. xxiv-xxv.
- 5 Andrew Venezia, "I, We, All: Intersubjectivity and We Space, Post-Metaphysics, and Human Becoming," 2013, <http://studylib.net/doc/9722222/venezia-i-we-all>, p. 60.

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