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CLOSING REFLECTIONS

So What?

"Start anywhere; follow where it leads." The group of ten authors, artists, and practitioners who guided the evolution of this study did just that: started with the interviews and followed where they led.

We do not have statistically significant data to support any of the reflections that follow. What we do have, however, is a deep intuiting, a collective discernment that has emerged within us in response to the hundreds of hours of interviews, the thousands of transcribed pages, the myriad symbols, metaphors and principles that suggested themselves through the interviews, and the hours of conversation and dialogue we engaged in with each other.

SO WHAT...IS THIS PHENOMENON?

Throughout our work together we experienced abiding inspiration and joy, accompanied at times by feelings of being overwhelmed, of being deluged by torrents of energy and complexity. In his book, *A Theory of Everything*, Ken Wilber writes:

> "This book is a brief overview of a Theory of Everything. All such attempts, of course, are marked by the many ways in which they fail. The many ways in which they fall short, drive specialists insane, and generally fail to achieve their stated aim of holistic embrace. It's not just that the task is beyond any one human mind; it's that the task itself is inherently undoable: knowledge expands faster than ways to categorize it."

Exactly. Each time we tried to create a single, coherent analysis of this phenomenon, we immediately sensed the inadequacy of our attempt. Most fundamentally, we struggled even with how to talk about what we were doing. People who have explored this phenomenon have called it many different names: group synergy; group mind; collective intelligence; spiritual wisdom; collective knowing; group wisdom; magic; "being in the zone"; *kairos*; the transpersonal realm; *koinonia*; divine intelligence; and on and on.

When we first began working together, the language we used was *magic*, as in "how can we understand what helps magic occur in groups?" Over time we settled on a different phrase—*collective intelligence and spiritual wisdom*. Building on Jacob's question, we started to ask, "what helps groups access the collective intelligence and spiritual wisdom they need to do their work?"

We have not attempted to develop a precise definition of the phenomenon we explored. Instead, we started with the interviews, and followed where they led. In doing so, we believe we have documented the existence of this phenomenon, and, through the weaving together of stories, commentaries, principles, metaphors, images and poetry, have begun to discern some of its contours and dimensions.

While we cannot precisely define the phenomenon, we can describe a basic structure through which the phenomenon unfolds. Interview after interview told the same story. People come together. Sometimes they know each other well, often they don't. They come together in situations where the stakes are high—either individually or collectively or both. Through processes of connection and exploration, the group experiences a profound, collective expansion in understanding and capacity. Consequently, the group produces results literally unimaginable when the group first convened.

SO WHAT...DID WE LEARN ABOUT THIS PHENOMENON?

So many things.

Every person we talked to believes that people are gathering together more often—in dialogue groups, ceremonial circles, retreats, cafés, and countless other forms. They believe that more and more people are seeking, and can bear witness to, experiences of collective intelligence and spiritual wisdom.

This data leads us to hypothesize that experiences of this phenomenon are becoming more common.

The principles that surfaced from the interviews, helping us to understand more clearly some of the elements of the experience, the significance of gathering, and some of the practices of preparing for and opening to the phenomenon, reflect another dimension of our learning. The metaphor clusters reflect yet another cohering pattern, and suggest more questions. Why these metaphors? What might be seeking to be seen in the interplay of these images?

The stories and commentaries suggest many more patterns and common themes. For example, a number of the stories spoke to the crucial roles that intention and invitation play in helping to evoke the phenomenon. Others spoke directly to the movement from opposition to paradox that both assists, and is a hallmark of, the phenomenon.

As we continue to engage with this data many more markers of meaning will no doubt emerge, particularly, we expect, through the interplay of the various forms within our individual and collective imaginations. For now, one of the most apparent patterns to us is this: most of what we know, as a field, about how to evoke this phenomenon involves processes of initiation. That is, practitioners around the world know a great deal about how to help groups experience initial moments of this phenomenon, where groups experience a loosening of the tethers of habitual thought and reflex; where identities expand; and where collective connections evolve into new patterns of knowing and action.

This is no small achievement...and...we heard no story about a group that sustained its encounter with this phenomenon over prolonged periods of time. What more is possible?

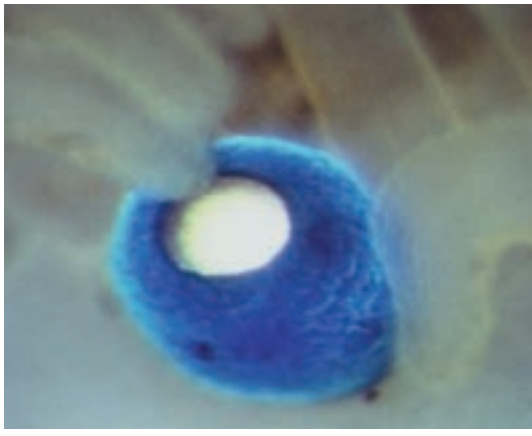
SO WHAT? WHY IS THIS IMPORTANT?

This is the question that has driven us from the outset. We wanted to answer this question convincingly for ourselves, and at least suggestively for others who may have never experienced this phenomenon or who are skeptical that we should attempt to more fully study and understand it. Over time, we began to articulate the following hypotheses.

HYPOTHESIS 1: The ***group*** is an organ of perception. A wisdom resides in the web of relationships and intentions that forms a group, a wisdom that is related to but distinct from the knowing that may reside in any one member of the group because of his or her position, knowledge, or past experience. Like a single scallop's 32 iridescent sensing organs, individual members can each be a sensing organ on behalf of the group, and at moments, a collective intelligence can emerge to weave transcendent meaning from these individuals' stories and perceptions. As David Abrams writes: "We are organs of this world, flesh of its flesh. The world is perceiving itself through us."

HYPOTHESIS 2: The ***group*** can alter the trajectory of history, and the trajectory of our own evolution. This hypothesis challenges so many of the tenets of at least western culture, but Juanita's story, Finn's story, Tom Hurley's story, Arthur's story, Adam's story, and many others we heard all bear witness to this hypothesis.

One implication of this hypothesis is that the group is not only a conduit for individual transformation, but for collective transformation as well. But what makes collective transformation possible? Myriad spiritual traditions document individual paths to enlightenment. The unspoken assumption to many, if not all, of these paths is that while groups can help accelerate individual transformation, transformation only happens one by one by one.



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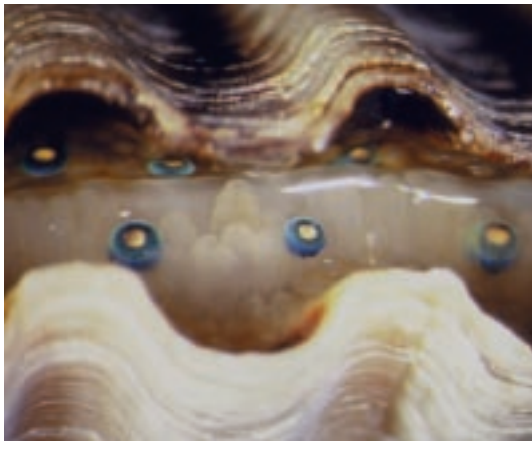
"...Individual members can each be a sensing organ on behalf of the group..."



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"...A collective intelligence can emerge to weave transcendent meaning from these individuals' stories and perceptions."

Single scallop eye with tentacles that continually bathe and protect it (top); Cotuit Bay Scallop Shell with multiple iridescent eyes (bottom)

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The stories we have heard challenge this assumption, but we are aware of no systematic exploration and documentation of paths that make possible sustained collective transformation.

A second, more subtle implication of this hypothesis is named clearly by Arthur in his reflections on the ecstatic darkness. If the group can alter the trajectory of history, and of our species' evolution, it can do so for better or for worse. We have the capacity not just to create spaces of exquisite connection and spiritual knowing, we can also give birth to horrors unimaginable to any other species. No other species has the capacity to systematically plan the sterilization of one of its kind. As the evolution of our technological capacities continues to outstrip the evolution of our capacities for collective intelligence and spiritual wisdom, we court the destruction of our species and life on this planet.

HYPOTHESIS 3: The ***group*** can generate spheres of hope and healing, both for individuals and the collective. Tom Callanan's story, Lauren's story, and Angeles' story all testify to the individual dimensions of this hypothesis. But Tom Callanan goes further, asking whether we are discovering "social form[s]...aimed at healing our collective consciousness." And Arthur suggests that the reconciliation work unfolding in South Africa begins with a premise that *individual* redemption is not enough, that profound healing from the tragedy of apartheid will require processes that facilitate *collective* acts of publicly bearing witness, accepting responsibility, and seeking forgiveness.

"If the group can alter the trajectory of history, and of our species' evolution, it can do so for better or for worse."

HYPOTHESIS 4: The ***group*** is an art form of the future. Our first three hypotheses, supported by our collective engagement with and making sense of the data we generated, led us to embrace Jacob's provocative image as a fourth hypothesis. That is, we believe that the group can be an art form, and as such, is worthy of study, reflection, and experimentation as an art form, a form perhaps crucial for the survival and future evolution of life and Spirit on Earth.

Taken together, these four hypotheses answer, for us, why the phenomenon is important, why we should devote substantial resources and energy to exploring the phenomenon more systematically, and why we should strive to deepen our collective capacities to engage with it.

SO WHAT? FOR THE FIELD, WHAT NEXT?

This question is very alive for us now. Here are some initial inclinations.

We believe the field we are sensing could benefit from the development of more consistent language, language to describe both the phenomenon and the field itself. We discovered that our use of the phrase "magic in groups" invited immediate, almost instinctual responses from people, responses that resonated initially more in feelings and intuition than in analysis. The phrase "collective intelligence and spiritual wisdom" invited more systematic analyses from people, but sometimes did not invoke their more intuitive knowing. The very nature of the phenomenon will resist any simple categorization or description; still, we can do better. That people use many different names to describe this phenomenon makes its exploration particularly challenging, and suggests the truth of Anthony Judge's observation: "What we need to understand may only be expressible in a language that we do not know"—yet.

We also believe the field could benefit from systematic opportunities for practitioners to learn together about each other's methods, and the ways their methods converge and diverge. Is there a core set of practices and structures that define effective processes of initiation? Do particular contexts call for different modes of practice? Understanding the centrality of context to this work, are some practices effective regardless of context? Are there ways beyond intuition and instinct that will help us make sense of what different contexts require? What creates "sufficient intention"?

The framework called "Spiral Dynamics", developed by Don Beck and Christopher Cowan suggests another realm of exploration for the field. This framework, which has been used to guide some of the reconciliation work in South Africa, posits that human consciousness evolves through at least eight distinct stages. Along with the work of Ken Wilber and others, this framework invites us to ask: does the level of consciousness of individual participants affect the capacity of a group to engage this phenomenon? How would we assess this?

Moving further into the unknown, we believe the field could be enhanced by disciplined work to explore what is required to sustain a group's encounter with the phenomenon. Initiation must come first; but once a group passes through a portal and begins to consciously experience collective intelligence and spiritual wisdom, what practices can help it stay on the other side? What implications might such practices have for the life of our social institutions, and for the evolution of our larger societal myths and narratives?

All of these potential next steps suggest that we take more seriously the role of convening, in groups, in institutions, in the larger culture. If the group is an art form of the future, then convening is the artistry we must cultivate to fully explore the promise of this form.

SO WHAT...MIGHT WE DO NOW?

The ten of us who joined to midwife the birth of this book are now holding this question, talking together, and with many others, about what may want to happen now. We hope this question is also alive for each of you holding this book.

"If the group is an art form of the future, then convening is the artistry we must cultivate to fully explore the promise of this form."

One image that has emerged is that each of you might be moved to share this book with friends and colleagues, people who are familiar with this terrain, people already on this journey, as well as with people who may just be sensing they want to join the exploration. Perhaps you would convene small gatherings to share with each other what this book provokes, what you have learned on your own journeys, what collectively you discern about this phenomenon and the field.

Perhaps some of us will feel moved to create opportunities to systematically explore the artistry of convening, to experiment with different ways of moving beyond initiation to helping groups sustain their experience of the phenomenon. Perhaps others of us might work with Chris' principles, inquiring together how these principles might inform the work we do.

Start anywhere; follow where it leads. If you want to communicate with someone about some ideas and next steps that make sense to you, or just want extra copies of the book, page 83 offers several people to contact. The ideas we offer here are initial imaginings...no doubt there will be others as each of us continues to listen deeply for the tone, struck long long ago, seeking to be heard again, now.

For as long as we can tell, human beings have gathered in groups: for survival, for play, for learning and work and creation. The provocative possibility that reverberates through the words and stories and images present in this book, is that this impulse is not wholly of our own, nor in service only to our ends, but moves in service to the unfolding of that which animates all that is.

Thank you for bearing witness to our journey. We look forward to the time when our paths may bring us together, when we may learn from each other about the promise and the power of collective intelligence and spiritual wisdom.

Namaste

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