

EXPERIENCE BEYOND BELIEF

The 'Strangeness Curve' and Integral Transformative Practice

Mira Z. Amiras

Abstract: This article explores the experimental work of Michael Murphy, co-founder of the Esalen Institute, and George Leonard, who is on the Board of Directors of Esalen. Leonard was the first to coin the term 'human potential movement', using it to describe the work that Esalen promoted beginning in the 1960s. In the 1990s, Murphy and Leonard devised an experiment in what they called Integral Transformative Practice (ITP): methods of achieving the extraordinary through meticulous body/mind practices not tied to a specific spiritual path. A key question raised by participants during the experiment was whether it was necessary to believe in order to achieve. This article explores what did and did not correlate to 'success' both within the original experiment and in the past 10 years of subsequent experimentation.

Keywords: Esalen, extraordinary experience, Integral Transformative Practice, metanormal, strangeness curve

Michael Murphy, co-founder of the Esalen Institute, and George Leonard, Murphy's close friend and collaborator, and a member of the Board of Directors of Esalen, together coined the term 'human potential movement' to describe the work that Esalen has promoted and sponsored since the early 1960s. Esalen is a communal retreat and study center devoted to the exploration of 'human potential' and the cultivation of 'extraordinary experience'. It has hosted eminent scholars, artists, and healers, including Aldous Huxley, Joseph Campbell, Carlos Castaneda, Alan Ginsburg, Babatunde Olatunji, Michael Harner, Gabrielle Roth, and many others. Renowned for its natural hot springs, waterfall, and exquisite vistas on the California coast, the Institute offers over 500 seminars and workshops to the public each year, in addition to invited sessions on specialized topics and global issues.



What did Murphy and Leonard mean by ‘human potential’? Murphy (1992: 6) sums it up as follows: “I have come to believe that virtually everyone of us has experienced, and that everyone of us can cultivate, moments when the ordinary becomes extraordinary, when mind and body are graced by something beyond themselves.” “Experience,” he says here, not “belief.” Belief is too easy, perhaps. It often requires of us nothing more than devotion, conviction, and faith. Murphy does not mean to diminish the importance of faith or devotion, but rather to emphasize at Esalen practices that can be taught. Experience is a doing. It is a different kind of verb—one that requires going beyond mind, beyond what William James (1929: 73) would call “vague impressions of something indefinable” or “definitely statable [*sic*] abstract principles” as in the statement: “I *believe* in God.”

Embodied experience, unlike belief, has a tangible, physiological, objective component, which may also be accompanied by the subjective and the ineffable. Further, the ‘experience’ promoted by Murphy and Leonard has an ‘active’ quality that is not simply received or encountered by chance alone. This is a ‘grace’ that has been, or can be, deliberately sought and garnered through intention. It is this that Murphy and Leonard have spent the last half-century teaching: the cultivation of ‘extraordinary experience’. And they have done this by amassing, borrowing, and adapting methods for achieving ‘elevated’ states of being that can be developed, tested, and even measured.

“When I started Esalen, I started a journal of coincidences,” reflected Murphy, as we all sat inside a cozy former water tower at Westerbeke Ranch in the hills of rural northern California (31 October 1992). Esalen was to be “guru-proof,” he said, “a refuge from cults—a double vaccination against guruism.” But Esalen, while successful, had other pitfalls. “We thought, if something is good, go further. That was a mistake. There was no integration into regular life.” Murphy and Leonard felt that all the elements for “extraordinary human potential” were in place, that “something was trying to emerge, had to emerge,” but the venue was not quite right. It had to emerge not simply in the midst of an exquisite retreat center atop breathtaking cliffs overlooking the Pacific Ocean, but somewhere, anywhere, right there in the midst of everyday life. The two began to think about how to “get it right.”

In the early 1990s, Murphy and Leonard initiated a two-year experiment in what they called Integral Transformative Practice (ITP)—methods of achieving the extraordinary through meticulous body/mind practices in the midst of ordinary, everyday life. The experiment was to test the principles of Murphy’s then soon-to-be-published opus, *The Future of the Body: Explorations into the Further Evolution of Human Nature* (1992). While many, but not all, of the ITP methods derive from religious and spiritual practices around the world, the techniques developed by the pair were to be devoid of religious doctrine, articles of faith, or requirements of belief. Furthermore, to distinguish this desacralized practice from the mystical, magical, paranormal, and supernatural, Leonard coined the more neutral term ‘metanormal’ to describe the state of transformation that ITP was aiming for. Leonard, Murphy, and others, however, have found this term both irritatingly unhelpful and uninformative. This highlights the difficulty in

labeling the precise nature of the ITP ‘metanormal’ in distinction from that found within longstanding religious or spiritual traditions.

Examples of well-documented areas of non-sacred cultivation of the extraordinary that ITP draws from include sports and the martial arts, but even here, faith, belief, and the sacred more frequently than not enter the arena through individual or collective prayer, meditation, or partisan ritual. ‘Experience beyond belief’ is thus, a problematic concept; nevertheless, the techniques devised by Murphy and Leonard did their best to provide non-sectarian, non-faith-based approaches to the cultivation of the extraordinary that require practice, not belief.

“Grace,” said Murphy with soft insistence, at the beginning of Cycle 1 of the ITP experiment in 1992, “depends on *practice*. When you practice, some of these surprising things happen. Stick with the practice. Practice orients us to our transformation.” In the first month of the experiment, Murphy set the stage: “[It’s like] using a sail into the winds of grace—but you have to open the sails ... [through] practice.” In the second month, he repeated it, and in the third, he said it again: “The winds of grace are always flowing—open your sails!” Again and again, early in the experiment, he would bring that image back to the group. “We just have to set our sail. Some set a small sail, some a great one!” The cultivation of ‘grace’, then, was to be more like a sailing expedition than, say, a spirit possession. Some participants struggled with this practice for the duration of the first, if not the second, year of the program. Some students of ITP, over the past dozen years, have struggled with it as well. They would almost rather be possessed by a spirit than have to practice. ‘Practice’ sounds too much like work.

At the end of Cycle 1, the role of spirit, faith, and belief in experiencing the extraordinary was still being debated. One participant claimed that, after all was said and done, you still had to at least start with faith: “What you believe is what you’re going to get.” Leonard continued to disagree. “Belief can get into denial,” he said. “Just have a positive attitude. Faith is not the same as expectation. Faith can lead you down paths that you wouldn’t take otherwise [and for which] you don’t have expectations” (19 November 1992). In essence, ‘belief’ can disable us by limiting our ability to experience our experience. “Expect nothing,” Leonard would say, “and be ready for anything.”

It was adherence to practice, not faith, upon which ITP was based. Once the experiment began, it became clear that practice in a—and as a—group was more effective than solitary practice alone. The participants in the ITP experiment bonded quickly and became a community, with all of the cohesiveness and tensions that community life engenders. The group took on a life of its own. And individual practice worked best when it was reinforced by communal support as well as sanctions.

The ITP Experiment

The core experimental group began with about 35 participants, roughly equal in gender, with ages ranging from the mid-twenties to the seventies. The participants were predominantly white, middle to upper-middle class professionals and retired

people. Two Asian women and one Asian man participated. The religious identification of the participants included Buddhist, Christian, Jewish, secular humanist, and atheist. These participants were not fleeing conventional religion. Rather, they each sought to enhance their experience of ‘possibility’ and test the limits of experience—or at least have a good time trying. All of the participants were already familiar with Murphy, Leonard, and the diverse teachings of the Esalen Institute, and many were already immersed in practices of their own, ranging from writing, art, sports, dance, and music to meditation and the martial arts.

The second year saw only slight demographic changes. Over the subsequent decade or so, some of the original participants have continued their ITP practice, with some now teaching ITP in different venues around the country and globe, and new generations of ITP alumni have emerged. Since its inception, an Internet community has also appeared, as well as local ITP groups across the US and abroad, including Europe, Israel, Australia, and India. This study discusses the results of the original two-year ITP experiment, my own experience as a participant/observer, subsequent contact with ITP practitioners, and the experiences of my own students of the ITP experiment in courses I have developed at my university over the past dozen years.

At the first meeting of the Integral Transformative Practice group on 4 January 1992, Murphy began by saying, “We live only a portion of what we’ve been given.” When he and Leonard published the results of their study, the title of their book was exactly that—*The Life We Are Given: A Long-Term Program for Realizing the Potential of Body, Mind, Heart and Soul* (1995). The book outlined the program, illustrating the practices developed by Murphy and Leonard, and gave a synopsis of the results of the initial experiment. It was an optimistic workbook, teaching readers how to go about the process, but it left out some significant findings regarding transformative modalities.

While the ITP practices had been stripped of belief, religion, mysticism, and sectarianism, a key question considered by Murphy and Leonard, and raised by participants during the experiment, was whether it was necessary to believe in the extraordinary in order to achieve it. This question became one of the variables to be explored at the conclusion of the experiment. If ‘belief’ was not a necessary component, was it at least a useful one? The short answer, I suppose, is that ‘belief’ can keep people on the path, keep them committed to their practice, keep them focused, centered, and filled with intention. For example, Murphy and Leonard experimented with testimonial-type affirmations, but these did not significantly contribute to success in achieving extraordinary capacity. The pair directed their attention to the physical practice of ITP to determine which variables correlated with the achievement of the ‘metanormal’, and which did not.

The program included a daily practice and a weekly regimen, with weekly and sometimes biweekly meetings, as well as an end-of-year retreat. Daily practice included a 37-minute kata (an individualized exercise system of body positioning and movement, borrowed from the Japanese martial arts); regular aerobic and strength exercises; a low-fat, low-salt, low-sugar diet; and a meditation practice. The weekly regimen included ITP meetings that taught practices associated with the ‘metanormal’ and informal lectures given by Murphy at his San Rafael home.

“It’s nothing magical,” stated Annie Styron, Leonard’s wife and a co-leader of the ITP group, during that first introductory meeting in 1992. “All you need is the willingness to try anything and to keep working toward transformation.” “Don’t expect a gee whiz experience,” added Leonard, “but enjoy the unembellished beauty of the commonplace.”

In addition to the kata, meditation, exercise, diet, and participation, each participant was to make four affirmations stating his/her transformational goals. The first three were to be individually determined goals, while the fourth was prescribed by Leonard to be included by all members of the group. The affirmations included the ordinary, the exceptional, and the extraordinary. The fourth affirmation was “my entire body is healthy, vital, balanced and centered,” or sometimes the fourth affirmation was stated as “healthy, vibrant, and whole.” All affirmations were to be stated in the present tense rather than as an intended goal.¹

The first affirmation was to focus on the transformation of an ‘Ordinary Capacity’. This would be something clearly achievable by anyone who set his/her mind and body to the task—something easily understood by contemporary, ordinary scientific explanation. It might include goals such as losing 10 pounds, learning to swim, or writing a book. The second affirmation was to concentrate on the achievement of an ‘Exceptional Capacity’. Here, the participant would attempt to achieve something that might be considered out of reach, perhaps even unlikely, but still explainable within the ordinary understanding of the nature of nature. “It would be exceptional [but not impossible] within the realm of modern scientific understanding,” Leonard stated. Remission from cancer, for example, is well-documented, even if it is not well-understood. The third affirmation was to be in the realm of the extraordinary, a ‘Metanormal Capacity’, in Leonard and Murphy’s terminology. Here, participants were asked to think far outside the box. This would be an achievement that “boggles scientific understanding,” Murphy asserted.

In the realm of the extraordinary, scientific method and rationality would be unable or hard pressed to explain the transformation. It would be, in Thomas Kuhn’s sense, a ‘paradigm shift’ of extraordinary proportion. Leonard made clear that the experiment had no controls: it was not scientific, it had no claims, nor was it to be taken as therapeutic or curative. “So take your flu shots and see your doctors,” said Leonard. “The aim is not therapy but transformation.” In *The Life We Are Given*, however, Murphy and Leonard emphasize objective measurement and statistical analysis of achievements in transformation. And despite the proviso that participants should refrain, a number of participants focused their affirmations on either the therapeutic or the curative.

When the initial two-year experiment was completed, what correlated and what did not correlate to ‘success’ in achieving the extraordinary was evaluated, in terms of both the original experiment and the past 10 years of subsequent experimentation. Is belief a necessary component to experience, or is it instead a residual category to help cope with the ineffable? Despite the claims listed above, at the time, Leonard, Murphy, and statisticians were unable to find any strong correlation of variables regarding the achievement of the extraordinary,

whereas they did find some correlation with regard to ordinary and exceptional achievement. Murphy and Leonard did, however, come up with a curious observation that appears to be significant, which they chose not to include in *The Life We Are Given*. They dubbed it the ‘strangeness curve’, which we will come to after following the path of the practice itself.

The Structure of Extraordinary Experience

While the ‘strangeness curve’ may be useful in identifying and acknowledging extraordinary capacity, recognition alone is not sufficient to produce the extraordinary upon demand. Instead, I have noted a distinct pattern—and a set of obstacles that are encountered—among those who tread the path of their ITP affirmations. Practice, as Leonard and Murphy had observed in Cycles 1 and 2 of the ITP experiment, is at the core of the transformative practice, but it is not sufficient.

Leonard (1991) posited five ‘keys’ to transformative practice: instruction, practice, surrender, intentionality, and what he called ‘the edge’. Based upon my participant-observation in the ITP experiment and on the experiences of my students since 1993, I see the achievement of extraordinary capacity more as a series of choices and increased or decreased commitment. These choices appear sequentially, and so I offer them in the form of stages in which options are considered, followed, rejected, or perhaps simply impulsively derived.

Participants in Integral Transformative Practice over the past dozen years—for ITP has spread well beyond the original experiment—rarely have been uniformly active, passive, or negating: their choices waver between possibilities. They aspire, they give up, they train, or they decide the entire enterprise is bullshit but nevertheless still worth exploring. The view that follows is far less unilinear and optimistic than Leonard and Murphy’s cheery discussion of outcomes in *The Life We Are Given*. To be fair, though, the pair do warn, however briefly, of the pitfalls and dangers on the path: “But make no mistake. Transformation is not automatic nor is it ‘easy’ ... But the degree of difficulty varies from person to person. Some people find immediate pleasure in physical training, while others do not. Some easily adopt a healthful diet, while others feel deprived. The joys of meditation come naturally to certain people but not to everyone ... And beyond that, the path of transformation might entail pain you don’t want or expect” (Leonard and Murphy 1995: 196–197).

The path of transformative practice might easily cross the boundaries of some, or even all of the following possibilities. Struggle, questioning, and critical thinking—all may accompany the practitioner and the skeptic, less so the believer. In order to achieve the extraordinary in science, for example, skeptical inquiry *is* the practice: “[In science] we see the unthinkable and think the unseeable ... In brief, ‘information ... should be documentary, comparative, causal and explanatory, quantified, multivariant, exploratory, skeptical’” (Shermer 2005, quoting Edward R. Tufte on the Feynman-Tufte Principle). Thus, even the physical sciences cultivate the extraordinary, “seeing the unthinkable” and “thinking the unseeable” as well as using the skeptical mind in the pursuit

of the extraordinary. The scientist who simply ‘believes’ would be a poor scientist indeed. The same is true of the cultivation of the extraordinary.

Practice, belief, and skepticism are not discrete categories, for the believer may have a practice, that of prayer, for example, which she or he sees as an *active* step to the attainment of a goal. But the believer is more receptive, grounded less in the physicality of practice than in the acceptance and surety that the extraordinary will be provided, if one is worthy of it. The ITP practitioner, on the other hand, is pro-active, taking charge and using physical (as well as, perhaps, metaphysical) means to the goal. In contrast, skeptics may take on the challenge as a lark, although more often than not they later discover that they, too are very attached to the outcome. I have outlined the separate stages and recombinant modes of practice as follows:

Stage	Practitioner Mode	Believer Mode	Skeptic Mode
I	Aspiration	Providence	Whim
II	Practice	Receptivity	Inaction
III	Intention	Acceptance	Resistance
IV	Detachment	Surrender	Attachment
V	Experience	Belief	Denial

Stage I: Aspiration, Providence, Whim

This first stage is a curious one. Both during the original ITP experiment and in subsequent years of observing would-be adepts, it has been apparent that many participants do *not* have a compelling desire to achieve their chosen extraordinary capacity through their own effort. Nor are many participants terribly compelled by the extraordinary practices that they read about, see in films, or encounter in guest presentations—for Murphy and Leonard brought numerous adepts to present at ITP meetings. These included Olympic athletes and trainers, martial artists, preventive cardiologists, intuitives, artists, and more. Or Murphy would speak about his own spiritual teachers—of their practice, of their achievements, of their philosophy of practice, of their ‘work’—but not of their belief. It became clear from these exemplars, from Murphy’s writing, and from the ITP practice itself that the cultivation of the extraordinary entails the shifting of our most coveted patterns. This is exactly what makes it so difficult.

In choosing to work toward a particular extraordinary capacity, at least a third of the participants displayed no serious affinity or aspiration for what they selected. Some were flippant in choosing the ‘extraordinary’ ability that they said they would pursue. One man in ITP Cycle 1, for instance, chose to change his hair from gray to brown again—just to prove that it could not be done. His selection was not something he cared about; he was simply trying to come up with something—anything—and therefore his motivation to ‘work’ toward transformation (without the aid of hair dye) was, not surprisingly, minimal at best. “Lemme just see *this* happen, hah!” he muttered. This approach, not surprisingly, bears little fruit. Healthy skepticism, unlike derision,

however, provides a helpful counter-balance to obsession or desire. It allows the participant the opportunity to think long and hard about his goals without expectation or attachment, to assess the necessary steps to achieve those goals, and not to fall into an uncritical ‘faith’, ‘belief’, or incredulity that ‘it’ (again, whatever *it* is) will descend upon him full-blown without his own active engagement. For in the end, belief and disbelief amount to the same thing: judgment without evidence.

The desire to achieve and the will to work at achievement are necessary components of extraordinary practice. They are not, however, sufficient. One participant, for example, insisted that she wanted to see visions, that she felt something was wrong with her if she could not do so. Her desire was obsessional, incessant, and exhausting, and it was making her ill. But while it is, in fact, quite easy to see visions (e.g., using simple ITP techniques), she had no desire to ‘do’ the practice. More important, at least from my own point of view, was that she was not interested in what ‘having visions’ might mean or what to do with them, should they appear. She simply wanted to ‘have’ them. Period.

Just as desire is not the sole component of aspiration, so too aspiration alone is insufficient for the cultivation of the extraordinary.

Stage II: Practice, Receptivity, Inaction

In this second stage, the participant determines what the steps are to the achievement of the desired extraordinary human capacity. He or she will research every example documented, evaluate the steps taken to achieve the capacity, and find a teacher or mentor (or better yet, multiple mentors) to guide him or her in the work. He will be willing to devote himself to the doing. She will go to whatever lengths necessary to get the proper information and training. If the work requires language studies, tracking down obscure knowledge or reticent teachers, the participant takes the appropriate steps. Here, too, it is only the serious student who is willing to do the work.

Waiting for the miracle to happen of its own accord or as a result of divine intervention does not correlate with achievement of the capacity. The woman who desires or aspires to be a film star but makes no effort to learn acting or acquire roles is relying on receptivity alone without pro-active effort on her part. “The more you practice,” says Murphy, “the luckier you get”—an old aphorism, but a potent one. Practice, writes Leonard (1991: 73–74), should be considered more as a noun than a verb. We should practice because it is *our* practice; it is what we do—it becomes an element of our identity.

‘Practice’ as a noun encompasses ‘practice’ as a verb. It requires doing. It is repetitive, ritualistic, habitual, and mundane, but it is, nevertheless, the route to the extraordinary. The simpler the practice, perhaps, the more it may lend itself to the extraordinary. Take running, for example, one of Leonard and Murphy’s favorite practices:

I dream of a society in which people run gently on city streets, along winding suburban lanes, on country roads, nature trails, fields, and beaches. To enjoy

this gentle running, we need not summon up the specter of death or envisage atavistic delights. Running may offer us agony, climax, and transcendence, but it is also a simple, healthy exercise—probably the cheapest and most readily available way of improving circulation, breathing, and general muscle tone. Running may help connect us to other forms of existence, but it is also a way of increasing our chances of survival in this one ...

There is something here I may yet understand: What we run for we shall never reach, and that is the heart and the glory of it. In the end, running is its own reward. It can never be justified. We run for the sake of running, nothing more. (Leonard 1974: 183–189)

Adhering to the practice was perhaps the hardest part of the ITP experiment. The obligation to adhere to cardiologist Dean Ornish's low-fat diet, for example, became a running joke and continual fodder for rebellion (and was deleted from later ITP requirements in favor of advocating a 'healthful diet'). Ultimately, doing the work came down to practice. Passivity—waiting for prayers to manifest or providence to provide—was not an acceptable vehicle. Leonard was dismayed by what he called "America's war on mastery." He posited not only that American culture did not endorse the practice of practice, but that the American economy promoted passivity, consumption, dabbling, and lack of commitment as essential to the flow of goods (Leonard 1991: 27–37).

Consumerism demands that we acquire a machine or technological device to do the doing for us. Practice requires the body. "Your body—the house you don't live in" writes Therese Bertherat. "If walls could hear," she says. "In the house of your body, they can" (Bertherat and Bernstein 1977: ix). The Integral Transformative Practice envisioned by Murphy and Leonard cannot be done through the gifts of technology ("with perhaps, the sole exception of a good pair of running shoes," quips Murphy). Instead, it must be cultivated through the body. Improving eyesight, for example, was not to be achieved through the acquisition of a stronger pair of glasses, but rather through eye-strengthening exercises. Trusting the body and letting it do its work are the prescribed means for transformation.

Stage III: Intention, Acceptance, Resistance

Practice requires the eventual imposition of intentionality. I place practice before intentionality. Leonard places intentionality first. Practice engages the body in the doing; intentionality engages the mind. It is well-documented, however counter-intuitive, that ritual (practice) precedes belief (construct)—that belief can be reconfigured differently again and again in order to guarantee preservation of ritual.² Similarly, here the practice begins first, often tentatively, without full commitment, without thought of lifelong dedication. When intentionality awakens, practice can no longer remain a lark or rote physical activity. Many participants who have taken part in some form of ITP experiment began without any initial engagement of will. Some developed a partial effort and commitment later on, and a rare few were fully engaged from the outset. Serious, committed intentionality in many cases evolved slowly over months or even years.

Continuity and consistency are also required, but again, not as a rote exercise; the task, whatever it is, must be done impeccably. The practitioner's will must be engaged. Even the anthropologist, immersed in participant observation in one of Leonard's mind/body exercises, the Samurai Game, requires focused intentionality in order to experience the experience:

I was determined ... and began seriously training myself for war. I found every book I could on the 'warrior spirit'. Books on medieval Japanese warfare. Tactical guides. Novels based on the life of Musashi. Books on swords. The making of swords. The drawing of swords. The testing of swords (turned out they were ranked in terms of how many human bodies they could slice through in one clean strike). The path of swords. The spirit of swords. Even the Hindus had a tradition associating Kali, the Goddess of Death, with the sword, so I expanded my research and started looking into the Hindu tradition as well. Then I discovered that to the Aztecs, the blade represented the embodiment of the Goddess. And of course, there were the swords that the Ghawazee dancers of Egypt had stolen from British imperial soldiers and incorporated into their tribal style belly dance. I have no idea how or why, I found myself committed to studying swordwork. Within days of vowing to take up the sword, a beautiful bokken was given to me—a Japanese training sword handmade by my swordmistress's own teacher.

I began burning incense. Samurai, apparently, used to go into battle with incense in their hair so that they would smell good in death, even during the early stages of decomposition. I bought a summer kimono. The only silk I've ever owned. Samurai warriors dressed aesthetically, just as they died aesthetically. I listened to Shinto purification chants during my three hours of commuting time each day. On the highway I played unearthly sounds that would have made me crack up the car if I had heard them at any other time before I began my training. Now, they were powerfully intoned syllables. Tools to mobilize ki, the living energy of the universe. At home, I would ring my butsurin for more focused meditations. The bowl is about 150 years old and has some fine reverberations. My breathing slowed significantly. My posture was changing as I walked. Slowly, I was becoming a warrior ... I began talking like a warrior.

I said to my psychoanalyst husband: "You should train to be a warrior."
"A worrier?" he replied, "I already am one." (Zussman 1999: 29)

Immersion in the practice, whatever it is, is required in order to feel the transformation. Just as immersion is required in language study or anthropological fieldwork, the experience is a *doing*. Watching others or just going through the motions or having contempt for the silliness of it all does not lead to engagement. Obsession, on the other hand, does lead to engagement. Leonard (1991) warns that there is a fine line between overly obsessive immersion and 'being on the path'.

In ITP groups, the kind of obsessive engagement described briefly above is rare but effective. And even for an individual practitioner, the degree of intentionality wavers and shifts over time: it grows, it wanes, it falls away entirely. Still others in the group wait. They wait for 'it' (whatever 'it' is) to happen to them, or for the 'energy' of the group itself to wash over them. Group exercises and collective practices had a powerful effect during each session for at least one or two participants.

Practice does not have to be expert, but there needs to be both a self-consciousness and a self-awareness about it. Self-consciousness is about paying attention to form, posture, movement, and meticulous action. Self-awareness is about keeping open to the shifts of consciousness (or lack thereof), insights, and revelations that accompany practice. Any practice can be filled with both. Extraordinary gardening, for example, can find the practitioner thrust into a sudden awareness of the garden as a microcosm of the earth's living ecology and being able to see the totality played out before her, including her own role in creating or disrupting balance. Thus, it is not simply repetitive motion, but motion filled with awareness as well as intentionality. To carry the garden example further, an indifferent gardener can prune brutally, simply to rid himself of the offending limbs, while the passive approach might be to wait for the next spring or winter storm so that 'the universe' can sort things out of its own accord. If gardening is the practice, it should be noted that we do not call those who wait for storms to do their pruning 'gardeners'.

Stage IV: Detachment, Surrender, Attachment

The most curious stage appears to me to be this one. The non-practitioner, the negater and skeptic, who has been so rebelliously inactive and resistant, suddenly discovers just how very much she cares—that is, how attached she is to an outcome that she is certain will not, cannot, possibly come to pass. The believer, on the other hand, surrenders to the process, with faith, hope, and boundless patience, albeit accompanied by a prayerful life.

The practitioner has practiced. He has worked hard, done his research, joined in the community, and received its support. He has been fairly faithful to his affirmations and has toiled to achieve his goal, and still it has not come. Discouragement. Disgust, perhaps. Or perhaps something else: letting go of the outcome. Equanimity. Practicing for the sake of practice. Relinquishing attachment to attainment. Leonard shares with us the example of Richard Heckler, preparing for his black belt test in aikido under Sensei Robert Nadeau. Leonard describes Heckler this way: "Dazzled by his gifts and grace, we might find it hard to discover any flaws in this man, and sometimes Richard did seem almost too good to be true ... He had a burning if rarely expressed desire to make a name for himself." Yet in the training, Richard was forced by his sensei to relinquish his attachment to taking his black belt test (Leonard 1985: 198–203): "[Three months before the test, his teacher] told Richard that he didn't know whether he would be going up [for the test] or not. Richard could go through the three months [of] preparation if he wished. On the day of the exam, said Nadeau, he would let him know whether or not he would take it." Heckler practiced anyway. When others asked if he would be taking the test, he said he did not know. "Nadeau," recounts Leonard, "paid less and less attention to him." "Is there anyone else?" Nadeau said, looking right past Richard. Richard said nothing, and I heard myself answering for him. 'There's Richard here. You forgot him.' 'Oh yeah', Nadeau said dryly. 'What's his name.'"

In this example, it is the instructor who is setting the mode, pushing the practitioner to choose equanimity. Detach, become discouraged, surrender to the process—do all three? Nadeau, known for his physically and psychologically brutal yet exhilarating teaching style, will not accept a practitioner, however meticulous, who cannot relinquish his attachment to outcome. “Well, are you going up?” [Leonard] asked Richard when he appeared on the mat. ‘I don’t know. Nadeau still won’t speak to me.’” From his sensei’s point of view, Richard was now humbled, confused, and on the mat simply because aikido was his practice, not because he had a black belt to collect. He was clearly ready.

According to Murphy, of all the variables tested at the end of the two-year ITP experiment, “practice for the sake of practice had the greatest correlation when it included mental focus” (18 January 1994). Going through the motions without intentionality did not work. But correlation to what? The correlation was to the achievement of three of the four affirmations. The affirmation to which nothing correlated was the ‘metanormal’: the extraordinary.

Stage V: Experience, Belief, Denial

The experience, when it comes, is overwhelming in most part because one has relinquished it and let it go. Those who have waited faithfully for grace to envelop them continue to wait: it does not happen that way, except by serendipity. Those who have scorned the process, refused their practice, or refused to abandon their desire for outcome—they too face something akin to disappointment. Perhaps it is validation of their disbelief. They are resigned to let go now, at the end, because they have not done the work.

If we revisit the dojo in which Richard Heckler’s black belt test is about to take place, we are suddenly pitched into the ‘strangeness curve’:

From the very beginning, it was apparent that something extraordinary was occurring. It is like one of those sporting events that are later memorialized, perhaps a World Series game or bullfight, during which every last spectator realizes at some level that what is happening out there on the field is more than a game, but rather something achingly beautiful and inevitable, an enactment in space and time of how the universe works, how things are ... It was as if Richard’s hands were reaching beyond the four walls of the dojo to a point of balance in the cosmos ... The room became appreciably lighter ... Some people also began seeing an aura—some described it as “golden,” others as “clear plastic”—around his entire body ... There was still a general sense of time’s moving slowly, unhurried, dreamlike pace ... A powerful arc of golden light seemed to be streaming from the [picture of O Sensei, founder of aikido] toward Richard’s head, covering him, suffusing him with gold ... The voice in his head was clear: “*This isn’t Richard. This isn’t Richard*” ... O Sensei had been there all during Richard’s exam. (Leonard 1985: 203–205)

The anthropologist too—having aspired to participate, cultivated the practice, become immersed in intention, and relinquished any outcome at all—can conjure the extraordinary even within Leonard’s ITP role-playing Samurai Game:

The lights go out, and as the dimmer switch is slowly turned back on, I see the most magnificent sight. Dawn on the battlefield appears in a brilliant blush of morning twilight, stretching for as far as the eye can see. Two armies of samurai in medieval Japanese battle garb are ready for war. I think I'm hallucinating. That rising sun over the battlefield is the most beautiful sight I have ever seen. George said we would enter an era that has vanished. And here I am.

I know what must be done and it comes effortlessly ...

For the duration of the Game, for the germinating weeks preceding it, and for every moment ever since, I have felt the presence of something beyond myself. Something that straightens my back when I slouch. Something that raises my head when it slumps. What could it be? Who? Or is this something simply a part of myself I have not known? Wendy, sweet swordmistress, tell me: whatever it is, does it reside in my body? Or my mind? Or my ... soul? (Zussman 1999: 35)

Ah! The default mode—the soul. Is it faith? No, emphatically, not! To declare it thus is a feeble attempt to grasp the visionary experience with pious or devotional hands when words, in fact, will not do. Even the label 'ineffable' reeks of mystical attainment. More important than labeling is allowing that the experience did happen, that others too were witness to it, that it was indeed cultivated with hard labor and long effort, that there is no attachment to results, only a sense of awe, appreciation, and something more, a bonus: training in the ability to cultivate the extraordinary leads inevitably to the extraordinary becoming more accessible. Transformation then can become possible for the community as a whole, in addition to the achievement of the individual. But will the individual even recognize the extraordinary when it comes, and is it necessary to be left in a state of confusion, disorientation, or even denial when it does?

The Strangeness Curve

At the end of Cycle 2, Leonard attested that with regard to the achievement of the affirmed 'metanormal' capacities, there was little or no correlation with any of the measured variables collected. And then one night during our discussion at Murphy's house, someone, I believe it was Murphy, said something that I found directly to point: "*It's hard to have an experience if you don't think it exists*" (27 July 1993). Leonard had mentioned the 'strangeness curve' the year before, but this time it got fleshed out further. It is knowledge of the 'strangeness curve' that I believe best correlates with a practitioner's ability to realize the extraordinary. Being made aware that humans tend to delete their extraordinary experiences helps us pay better attention when we do experience them.

Essentially, the 'strangeness curve' goes something like this. We have experiences on a daily basis that we find to be too dull or inconsequential to convey to others. Nothing noteworthy or strange has taken place, and comment is not warranted. An example might be: "I did my kata today with the ITP group."³ These experiences are at the bottom of the bell-shaped 'strangeness curve'. A little higher on the 'strangeness curve' might be something noteworthy, although still barely worth mention: "I did my kata today with the ITP group,

and I thought I heard a lovely melodic voice, but it probably was someone's radio in the house across the street." Note that the experience is instantly followed by a reasonable explanation that keeps the melodic voice within the realm of the ordinary. It is explained away.

Higher still on the curve would be something worth conveying, but still within the realm of the possible: "I did my kata today with the ITP group, and I heard a lovely melodic voice coming from above me. I can't get it out of my mind." Here, no explanation is given. The experience may be ordinary or extraordinary; it is worth recounting and feels compelling. The experience is conveyed as believable and not yet on the order of 'strange'. As the strangeness increases, the ability to see it, acknowledge it, and accept it decreases. Murphy (1998: 45) says, "All of us have trouble accepting capacities that our teachers, friends, or families disallow." Thus, the extraordinary experience might be described as follows:

I did my kata today with the ITP group, and I heard a lovely melodic voice coming from above me. When I looked up I could see this tiny luminous being floating above my head, right there in the dojo. She was warbling, and I could understand her even though it was in this melodic language. I could see her so clearly; she was golden, and shining, and I felt warmth inside me like hot cocoa running through my insides on a cold snowy night in the Sierras. I started to cry. Then, of all things, she told me not to get on the Golden Gate Bridge, and I listened to her. I actually listened! Went to a coffee house to straighten out my head. Missed such a huge pile-up that they had actually closed the bridge. I had wanted to see visions, but that wasn't exactly what I expected.

In the example above, the narrator may be able to convey the event, but she may or may not be able to feel it. Further, she knows what happened, knows that it made her cry, knows that she followed instructions—but she does not need to believe it. Depending on one's background, the event is now either believable or unbelievable, or perhaps just a good tale that requires neither belief nor disbelief—it is beyond belief. At this level of the curve, we are likely to reframe or reimagine our experience to convey it in language in keeping with our own belief structure or that of our audience. The problem arises when our experience is clearly outside of our own cosmological understanding.

At the furthest end of the continuum, however, are events so strange that the individual is likely to delete the occurrence entirely. "I did my kata today with the ITP group. Something happened. I think. I couldn't go home right away. I don't know why. The weird thing is, I couldn't have gotten home anyway, because they closed the bridge."

Murphy (1998: 46) states: "There's neither reporting to others nor to one's conscious self. This end of the strangeness curve represents experiences suppressed so completely that it takes drugs, hypnosis, or maybe someone's sympathetic ear to remember them." Curiously, neither Murphy nor Leonard included even the notion of the 'strangeness curve' in any of their non-fiction writing. The quotes above are taken from Murphy's novel, *The Kingdom of Shivas Irons*,

the sequel to his *Golf in the Kingdom*, on mystical aspects of golf in Scotland. Murphy's language in his 1992 compendium of extraordinary capacities across the globe uses prose that is very academic, stilted, and deliberately stodgy in an attempt not to frighten away any reader who might feel threatened by potentially paradigm-shattering material. Thus, even Murphy's writing style takes the 'strangeness curve' into account.

The far end of the 'strangeness curve', rather than being too banal to mention aloud, is too threatening to reveal even to oneself. We delete the experience before we allow ourselves to know it. Like trauma, we allow the extraordinary to elude consciousness so that we do not have to shift our cosmological structure and psychological condition to accommodate it.

What Leonard and Murphy are proposing with the concept of the 'strangeness curve' is that we give ourselves permission to acknowledge and to feel our own experiences at the furthest reaches of the 'strangeness curve'. I take this a step further. If we can do this, then we enable ourselves to recognize those "moments when the ordinary becomes extraordinary, when mind and body are graced by something beyond themselves" (Murphy 1992: 6). We allow ourselves the experience of the experience.

Teaching the 'strangeness curve' to my anthropology students in magic, science, and religion classes, for example, helps students come to terms with their own confusing encounters with the extraordinary, both in class and outside it. Instead of the material—say, on shamanism, sorcery, visions, possession, the ineffable, or their own nocturnal dream states or traumas—remaining non-credible, frightening, or suppressed, students can begin to reshape their cosmological understanding to accommodate their experiences (rather than reshaping their experience to match their long-held beliefs about what is and is not possible, good, or right). Without the 'strangeness curve', it is easy to delete, deny, or condemn one's encounter or experience. University students encountering what they consider extraordinary in other cultures, for example, may scratch out their class notes, proclaiming, as one of my own students did, "she could not possibly have said that." Or they study possession and cannot help but invoke Satan and indulge their fear. For some, even ethnographic material is too threatening. Others will believe anything at all. Still others, with a swift linguistic twist, turn ethnography into fiction in order to be able to swallow it. They did not read an ethnographic account, but rather a 'novel'.

With the 'strangeness curve', ITP participants (and college students) are given a framework—beyond belief—to acknowledge their own experience and the experience of others. They need not believe it or disbelieve it or even explain it. The event may never fit their fixed understanding of the laws of nature (or God), but they can know, at least, that it did indeed happen. In 'metanormal' cognition, says Murphy, "mystical knowing is more like seeing than thinking" (13 March 1992). In order to experience, it helps to stop thinking.

According to Leonard, those who achieved their ITP extraordinary capacity were those who were able to *see*, and therefore acknowledge, that they had indeed had the experience. In contrast, there were those who could describe their experience as if it had happened to someone else. Even while telling the

tale, they could not claim it. Some sort of dissociative state seemed to have set in. It (whatever 'it' was) clearly did not happen to them.

Simply knowing about the 'strangeness curve' appears to facilitate individuals' ability to acknowledge, feel, and know their experiences without fear.

Conclusion

The process of cultivating the extraordinary follows, for most, a winding path between the hard work of practice, the receptive anticipation of grace, and a skeptical, questioning mind. At the passive extreme are believers who wait for God or fortune or providence to bring them their due, should they be worthy. At the active extreme are practitioners who push forcefully and systematically to make 'it' happen. Between these extremes lies not moderation but yet another extreme, that of skeptical negation, a viewpoint held by those who deem themselves both too cynical and wise, too rational and questioning, to experience anything outside their own cosmological framework, let alone something labeled 'strange' or, worse, 'metanormal'. Yet despite their strenuous resistance, skeptics too may be on the path or may be struck by the extraordinary. And when it strikes, it strikes them hardest. Perhaps that very resistance, alongside uncompromising critical rigor, breeds their achievement of the extraordinary, especially in the sciences.

The question I would leave you with is not whether it is possible to cultivate the extraordinary without belief, for that has clearly been demonstrated by the work of Murphy, Leonard, and others. The more interesting question, perhaps, is what does one *do* with the experience of the extraordinary once it has been had? It may be easy to have a vision or to teach others to see with sparkling clarity, but when people do have the experience, how are they transformed by it? Do they treat others in accordance with that vision? And if so, does it bring us all much more harm or much more good? After the cultivation of extraordinary experience, what then?

Mira Z. Amiras received her PhD in Anthropology at the University of California, Berkeley. She is Professor of Comparative Religious Studies and Coordinator of the Middle East Studies Program at San Jose State University, in San Jose, California. She is Past President of the Society for the Anthropology of Consciousness and has served on the Executive Council of the American Anthropological Association. She is the author of *Development and Disenchantment in Rural Tunisia: The Bourguiba Years* (1992) and of numerous articles on rural North Africa, the Amazigh language revival movement, Jewish studies, and consciousness studies.

Notes

1. For a detailed description of the kata, meditation, affirmations, and other ITP practices, see Leonard and Murphy (1995).
2. The seeming chicken-egg conundrum is resolved by Michael Ripinsky-Naxon, Joseph Campbell, Marvin Harris, and many others, who demonstrate that while people say they do X ritual because they believe Y, in fact the practices pre-date the beliefs (see, e.g., Campbell 1987: 50–118; Harris 1974: 70–93; Ripinsky-Naxon 1993).
3. This is a hypothetical example, but one that closely resembles an actual experience.

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