



GEORGE LEONARD:



## And Everything Was Different

Peak experiences have a way of rearranging our perception in a manner that is both permanent and pervasive. An experience of this type taught me both the import and impact of blending, one of the foundational practices of aikido. It demonstrates how a change in context can completely change our experience. In this case, truly grasping the practice of *blending* made old-style confrontation obsolete in my life.

I was traveling around the country, giving speeches at major universities, after my first big book, *Education and Ecstasy*, came out in 1968. *Look* magazine, my employer at the time, had serialized the book in three straight issues. In addition to being on the cover of *Look*, the book was featured in full-page ads in the *New York Times*. It sold over 300,000 copies within a year. The late 'sixties was a very explosive and confrontational time in America, and the model of education I proposed in that book was revolutionary. Wherever I went, there was both interest and resistance to my ideas.

One evening, I was giving a speech at the Unitarian Church in San Francisco. I had only been studying aikido for three months at the time. Although I was not feeling well that day, I decided to go ahead with my talk anyway. After my presentation, I called for intermission before what I felt certain would be a fast and furious question and answer period. While walking through the lobby on the way to the

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men's room, I saw a stocky, florid man haranguing a crowd of people around him. When he saw me he shouted, "Get over here, Leonard!"

I turned in his direction. He viciously attacked me verbally, saying, "Not only will your book destroy our schools, it will probably mean the end of Western civilization." He stood waving his arms and cursing in colorful, forceful language. I begged off his challenge, saying, "Excuse me, sir, but I'd like to get to the men's room. After intermission, I promise to recognize you first."

Upon stepping back up to the podium, I located the man sitting six rows back and said to the audience, "I promised to recognize this man first. Please sir, did you have a comment or question?"

He stood up and started letting me have it, cursing as he had in the lobby, only worse. He insisted that only bad could come of my approach to education and that terrible things would happen to our children as a result. He continued along these lines for several long minutes.

Then it was my turn. I had faced this type of confrontation countless times and was quite practiced in how to manage angry opposition. My limited aikido practice had not yet given me a firm understanding of the connection between the body and the mind. I

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could speak of the connection; I could speak also of the *concept* of blending, but had not yet realized or embodied it. On the contrary, rather than blending with the angry man, I

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gave him his hostility back. Even worse, I got the whole audience howling with laughter at his expense as the poor man sank lower and lower in his seat.

A few days later, while in my downtown San Francisco office at *Look*, I received a special delivery letter. I opened it and read, "I am the man that you humiliated at the Unitarian Church." The letter went on to say how completely shamed and destroyed he'd been by what had happened. *Oh, my God*, I thought, *What have I done?*

I can be a slow learner, but in that moment—boom—I realized that had I made the choice to blend with him, everything would have been different. I could have taken his point of view, absorbed it, then made my point very effectively.

Two weeks later, I gave another speech, this time at the University of Colorado. The big auditorium was packed with a lively crowd. A group of graduate students sitting toward the back of the crowd were making wisecracks on the side. During the question period, one among them raised his hand and, with the full support of his cohort, began his challenge. He said, "Leonard, your book is bullshit! This

computerized system of education that you have in your so-called Jefferson School won't work! The computerized system would cost more than the whole school."

Rather than match his confrontational stance with a bigger, tougher attitude of my own, I had the feeling *in my body* of going down, standing next to him, and adopting his point of view. I said, "Well, you know, what you're saying makes sense. And this concern is really worrying me, too—the cost issue."

Instantly, he turned it around and said, "Wait a minute, wait a minute, computers are getting cheaper every year, every month." Right before my eyes, an opponent became an ally and began to argue in favor of my ideas. That was a turning point in my life. A shudder of recognition went through my body as the gestalt of that afternoon embedded the blending concept in my body.

As I toured around the country the rest of the winter and throughout the following spring, the audiences I spoke to were wonderful. Every other week I would go out to give a talk—and blend and blend and blend until my blender was bent. I was blending all over the place. Since that day in Colorado in 1971, I have not had to field a single hostile comment during a platform speech.

Experiences of this type not only shift the context and therefore our experience, they also provide a template for the future. This can be seen at the collective level with, for example, the civil rights movement.

It is very difficult for people of today to understand what American apartheid in the South was like before the Civil Rights movement. I grew up in Georgia; my grandfather was a state representative for Walton County for sixteen years. Between the ages of twelve and fifteen, I spent summers in my grandfather's big white house in Monroe, Georgia, with my cousin Ed Stevenson, who was five years my senior. Ed was fascinated by what was going on in the world—and also by the terrible injustice in this

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country. My cousin was a born teacher who went on to become a beloved figure at the University of Georgia in Athens. But during those summers, I was his entire student body and he opened a whole new world to me. Together, we did a tremendous amount of reading—Hemingway, Faulkner, James, Wolfe, and many others. He had me read *The Varieties of Religious Experience* when I was only thirteen years old! Those summers represent the high point of intellectual learning in my life. The whole idea of racism

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was anathema to my cousin, and to me, especially after an incident I witnessed the summer of my thirteenth year.

A black man was brought to the county courthouse in the center of Monroe, Georgia. Everyone knew he was going to receive the death sentence. The boy across the street and I jumped on our bikes and rode the five or six blocks to the county square to see what would happen. When we arrived, I saw the man being led across the square in chains. For one brief, electrifying moment, his eyes met mine. It was a terrifying experience, and pivotal. It led to my becoming completely dedicated not only to desegregation, but integration as well.

As a young journalist, I covered the Civil Rights movement from Little Rock through Selma and Old Miss. Among the greatest moments of my life were Sunday mornings at Ebenezer Baptist Church, listening to Martin Luther King Jr., who I got to know quite well. The Civil Rights movement gave a generation of young activists ideas about how we could change society. I believe that it can serve as a template for the current move toward social change.

America is far more divided today than at any other time in the last thirty years. For the various factions to hear each other, and learn first to tolerate and eventually to embrace each other, we need to learn social aikido. Once we learn to practice blending at a macro level, socially and culturally, everything will be different. But change at the social and cultural level meets with resistance in much the same way as change at the personal level. Therefore, it is important to look at why our resolutions to make positive changes so often fail.

I've written about this at length in both *Mastery* (Plume, 1992) and *The Life We Are Given* (Tarcher, 1995): A characteristic of living systems, *homeostasis* is the tendency to maintain equilibrium by resisting change—whether that change is for the good or the bad. This tendency can be seen in all self-regulating systems,

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from the smallest single-celled organism to the individual human being; from a nuclear family unit to large organizations—and even entire cultures. The in-built tendency to stay the same within rather narrow limits applies to psychological as well as physical states, and to behavior on both a personal and collective level. Said simply, most of us will do everything to be consistent with who and what we identify with and experience as who we are. We are faced with a special challenge when homeostasis works to keep things the same when things aren't so good. On a personal level, we know this backsliding tendency all too well: two steps forward and three steps back.

Dealing with resistance and homeostatic tendencies requires focused effort, and *awareness* is the first and most important step. Simply knowing and being able to anticipate resistance means that you will be less likely to give up at the first sign of a painful counter-pull. Secondly, it's important to negotiate with your resistance by learning—or inventing—the fine art of playing the edge. A thin line exists between making slow, steady progress—and making a solid push despite resistance. Both require determination, and both are made easier if we make the process fun. Having a support system, and finding companions to share the ups and downs, will help. Following a regular practice, a discipline that you keep for its own sake rather than to reach a goal, lends stability and comfort. That discipline, in turn, becomes a springboard for life-long learning—which involves us in constant change.

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Often, the extent of the resistance is directly proportionate to the importance and power of the change you want to make. Once you start changing for the better, you may become uneasy. In our experimental classes with LET (Leonard Energy Training) and ITP (Integral Transformative Practice) I teach people the 3-H process: how to bring the *head*, the *heart*, and the *hara* into alignment with the desired change. First, you involve the head, and get the intellect involved, by reading and consulting experts in the field. Once the head has the data and information needed to make a decision, you check with the heart. Imagine the situation you want to change and ask, "How does my heart feel about making this change?" Then, as a final step, you go to the *hara*—the power center just below the navel where you feel the sense of gut-knowing—and let *hara* make the final decision. This process has proven useful to many people when homeostasis gets in the way of change.

Society resists change in the same way that individuals do. There are a number of trends in Western culture that reinforce the status quo, and stand in the way of substantial change:

**1. The Trivialization of Human Endeavor.** It has taken *fourteen billion* years since the Big Bang to create the miracle of life. Humans are the most complex, most highly organized entity in the known universe. There may be others somewhere, but in the known universe, we, above all, have potential. And while the depth of our creative potential lies dormant, waiting to be realized, current cultural trends make human endeavor trivial. Think about this for a moment: What if someone came from another planet and using a high order of intelligence was able to tune into television for just twenty-four hours.



Imagine the picture they would get of humanity. What we watch, what we wear, what we concern ourselves with—all of it so insignificant.

Another indicator of this trend can be seen in the publishing world where it has become more and more difficult to get good work published. Recently, my agent told me that a top editor at one of the big publishing companies said, “If you have a novel, don’t send it, because I can assure you it will not be read.” *It will not be read.* This generalization shocked me to the core.

**2. The Canonization of Celebrity.** Hand in hand with the tendency to trivialize our creative endeavors is the canonization of celebrity in the United States and around the world. People watch what celebrities are up to simply because they are famous. And why are these people famous? Are they particularly admirable individuals? Not always, but the mere fact that they are famous means they are watched and discussed. An inordinate amount of attention, press, and airtime, is afforded these people as a simple by-product of fame. This collective fixation on celebrities denies the infinite creative potential of the ordinary individual.

**3. Misdirection in Public Education.** This I consider to be a most devastating trend. Years ago, in *Education and Ecstasy*, I advanced a model of education that emphasized individuality. One of the most controversial chapters in that book was titled “Testing Versus Your

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Child,” in which I made the case that overtesting would have devastating long- and short-term effects. Today, we have programs like No Child Left Behind that focus entirely on testing. If these programs are successful, we will have *Brave New*

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*World*, where everyone will be essentially the same, having lost all contact with their unique essence. The tragic loss of creativity—that human wellspring that really makes things work—and disregard for individual styles of learning is, to my way of thinking, a dreadful negative trend. Very few of the radical changes in education I recommended back in the late 1960s have come about. Perhaps had I better understood the mechanism of homeostasis, I would have been more strategic and less radical in my recommendations.

**4. Breakdown of the Separation between Church and State.** We are seeing a trend that could lead to the undoing of the separation of church and state that was absolutely essential to the American Revolution. The emerging alliance between religion and governance has gained strength among our leaders; evangelicals and people in high office would like to see religion in the schools. This is truly

frightening because once religion is mixed up with governance, tyranny is sure to follow.

**5. The Tragic Waste of Human Potential.** All of the above trends feed into a larger streaming trend that leaves the incredible capacity of the individual human being and society as a whole largely untapped. We use only a very small portion—some claim less than two percent—of the vast potential available to us. It is possible to experience life in all of its dimensions—physical, emotional, intellectual, spiritual, and social—with far more depth, creativity and meaning than society leads us to expect. Each of us is potentially a genius. Think about that for a moment. There is only one of you in the entire known universe. What a loss if you don’t develop fully, if you don’t leave a legacy behind, even some tiny achievement. The greatest tragedy on the planet is the failure to realize our potential. And I would like to speculate that a great deal of the neurosis, illness, crime, restlessness, drug abuse, and perhaps even war, is a result of this failure to develop our potential.

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A friend said to me, as he approached his death, “I realize now that I’ve wasted my life.” Think about that. Would you like that to happen to you? Use your potential; there is nothing more important. Here are a fifteen guidelines to help you access your infinite creative abilities:

1. Assume that your potential exists.
2. Be patient if it does not manifest immediately. We don’t access it magically!
3. Follow your hedonic response, your bliss.
4. Run your ideas past good people. Listen openly to what they have to say. But don’t let negative responses discourage you if you have strong feelings.
5. Use the principles of play. Make up games whenever possible, which will be far more often than you might think.
6. Prepare, read, and learn the best material relating to your creative idea or direction. Don’t let the past stop you.
7. Brainstorm.
8. Practice, practice, practice.
9. Use the 3H decision-making process. Let the body be your teacher.
10. Get expert advice, but don’t necessarily follow it.



11. Generally trust *hara*. Your genius may not be in your head.
12. Consistently imagine how you'd like things to be.
13. Know when it's time to give up on a certain approach and go on to something different.
14. Be patient, but remember you don't have unlimited time. You may not get it right, but you can get somewhere.
15. *In potentia*, each of us is a creative genius. Each of us!

Novelist James Agee wrote, "I believe that every human being is potentially capable, within his 'limits,' of fully 'realizing' his potentialities; that this, his being cheated and choked of it is infinitely the ghastliest, commonest, and most inclusive of all the crimes of which the human world can accuse itself. . . . I know only that murder is being done against nearly every individual on the planet." These words are heart-wrenching, and spark my commitment to realizing the vast potential of humanity.

The crime Agee speaks of affects all of us, not just distant victims of injustice, war, famine, poverty, and natural disasters. I can think of no tragedy so pervasive as the waste of human potential that results from the dogmatic, thought-inhibiting and heart-numbing twists of perception that find humans expecting so little of ourselves. The vision of human evolution and transformation of human societies is

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growing, however, and we have hope. A collective "peak experience" that changes everything by shifting the context may well be upon us. What form it will take, none of us can yet know. And yet the quest of my lifetime, and that of so many deeply caring people, cannot

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 be denied. The human potential movement, still in its infancy, has touched the lives and hearts of millions of people. As the poet Dante said, "Love is what moves the sun and the stars," and I believe such a movement that fosters love in the human heart and in human interaction is the greatest adventure of all.