

Chapter Four

Feel Like You're Twenty Again: Ten Steps Towards Personal Integration



When Bill Clinton was president, people used to say that he is good at “compartmentalizing” his life. What that meant is that he could take experiences like his relationship with Monica Lewinsky and somehow separate it from daily conduct of his life. Compartmentalizing means separating the different aspects of your life into compartments in such a way that the “boxes” don’t affect each other. While this idea seems to have helped Mr. Clinton hold onto his presidency, it may not be the ideal way to be.

I have felt similarly compartmentalized for many years. As someone who works both in academic and business circles, I have found it difficult at times to connect these areas of my life. My family seems to have little to no grasp of either my work or academic pursuits. My friends have some understanding of my worklife, but little of my academic life. As a result, I felt fragmented. I moved in many different but seemingly unrelated circles.

Fragmentation is the opposite of integration. Someone who has integrated his life has found a way to connect different circles (like work and school), and also has found a way to connect different experiences so that they are connected together in some way. If you

have ever felt “at loose ends,” or have wondered how to connect some of your past experiences with the present, then you will find this discussion of interest.

This essay begins by talking about fragmentation, and then discusses some steps to take to begin to integrate different areas of your life. It then gives ten steps you can take to integrate your life. The key idea is in writing descriptions of your past experiences. It concludes by giving four practical steps you can take to get started on the path towards integration.

Fragmentation

I will begin by discussing some of my own experiences with fragmentation. After graduating from college, I spent a number of years pursuing my PhD in philosophy. During that time, I made a number of friends and acquaintances in this field. Even while writing my dissertation, I was working as a technical writer for several companies in the Boston, Massachusetts area. After receiving my degree, I started my own company, Idea Network, but I continued doing the technical writing. I also began teaching philosophy part-time.

During the time that I was teaching philosophy part-time and doing technical writing, I experienced a feeling of fragmentation because these two areas were completely unrelated to one another. There was very little commonality between my technical writing job and my philosophy teaching job. After several years of this, I decided to try market research, thinking that this would enable me to use more of my philosophical training, including my background in analysis.

As I had hoped, I was able to use my philosophical training more in market research than in technical writing. However, because this was a new profession for me, it took a number of years to become successful in it. Market research is a business that relies heavily on networking and word-of-mouth, and it takes time to become established in the field. As time went along, I was able to integrate more philosophy into my practice of

market research. As a result, these two areas of my life, philosophy and work, have become more integrated.

A Step Towards Integration

Since fragmentation can occur when two areas of experience are completed unrelated to each other, the solution to this is to try to draw some type of connection between them. If you feel that your work life is too divorced from your family life, try inviting your spouse to a get-together at work. It is very common, and even healthy, for a husband or wife to have hobbies and interests they pursue on their own. However, if you want to avoid fragmentation, try to get your spouse or partner interested in one or more of your hobbies. At the same time, try taking an interest in their hobbies or interests. These steps will make yours a more integrated life.

Connecting the Dots

Another approach to integration is to find ways to integrate past experiences into your present life. For example, how well do you remember where you went to high school? Do you still stay in touch with old friends from high school or college, or from previous work experiences? No doubt there are some of these experiences, and even people, that you would just as soon forget. However, you might find by renewing some of these memories and revisiting some of these experiences that you will gain added insights and perspectives into your present situation.

One way to integrate past experiences into your present life is simply to visit places where important things happened to you in the past. Revisiting the community where you grew up, or driving by your old high school, can reawaken memories of past experiences and help you better appreciate where you are today. I call this “connecting the dots” because it resembles the idea of forming a pattern out of a group of isolated points by drawing lines between them. Once you visit these places from your past, they are no longer isolated points of past experience, but instead are integrated into today’s experiences.

Some New Perspectives on Integration

While the above discussion points in the direction of integration, I recently discovered how to approach the issue of integration at a much more fundamental level. It all started when I got my record player fixed.

When I was in college and graduate school, I listened to many record albums, mostly rock 'n roll. These albums became closely identified with certain periods of my life, and evoke many memories when I listen to them. Sometime in the early 1980s, cassette tapes became all the rage, and people stopped listening to record albums as much. Then in the 1990s, CDs came into style. As a result, most people stopped listening to or buying record albums altogether, preferring the cleaner sound of CDs. It is unusual for music to be released on record albums today.

Sometime in the mid-1990s, my record player quit working. I bought another one in 2000, but I could never get a good amount of sound out of it. Meanwhile, I still had almost all of my records from the 1960s through the 1980s, but I couldn't listen to it because my record player wasn't working. I had a CD player, but I had nowhere near the selection of CDs that I had of record albums.

Finally in March 2002 I took the record player to be fixed. After about a month, I got it back with the message that there was nothing wrong with it. I finally discovered, by talking to a salesman, that one of the hidden settings was wrong, and this is why I couldn't get any volume out of it.

I returned home to find that it worked perfectly. I started listening to my old records from college and graduate school. In fact, I spent most of a weekend listening to these records. I hadn't heard some of this music in years, including Joan Jett, Moon Martin, the Rolling Stones, the Motels, the Go-Gos, and many others.

As I listened to all these records, a very interesting thing happened to me. First of all, I started remembering many experiences from my earlier life. I had so many experiences

in college and graduate school, and I had forgotten about many of them. These songs brought the experiences back to me with a significant amount of clarity.

Secondly, as these experiences came back to me, I had a desire to write them down. College and graduate school covers 15 years of my life, which is a little less than one-third of life. Besides wanting to write these experiences down, I wanted to write down the experiences that are linked to my college and graduate school years. In fact, I ended up wanting to write my entire autobiography.

Writing an autobiography can seem like a very large task. It is natural to think of a book that contains a descriptive account of somebody's life, perhaps with a few pictures thrown in for good measure. And who has time for that?

Instead of trying to write a narrative autobiography, I decided to simply write out short descriptions of some of the highlights of my life. I rediscovered something I already knew: that my life has followed certain patterns. In fact, I found that I seem to go along extremely well for several years or more. Then, perhaps because I can't deal with success, something happens that sabotages my success, and forces me to start over again.

In addition to the narrative account of my life, I wrote out my life in verse. I discovered that there were many times in life when I faced dire consequences unless I performed in a certain way. As a result, I called my autobiography "[Sink or Swim.](http://www.flowresearch.com/life/welcome.htm)" (available at <http://www.flowresearch.com/life/welcome.htm>).

The Key to Integration: Writing Descriptions of Your Past Experiences

An amazing thing happened to me as I wrote out my past experiences. Not only was I remembering them, I was drawing connections among them. Instead of all my past experiences being hidden away in my memory, they suddenly came to life in the present. My memories actually begin before I started grade school and continue through grade school, high school, college, graduate school, through several different jobs, and right up to the present.

As I remembered my past experiences, I also had a desire to clarify my relationships with everyone I know. This may seem like a tall order, and it is, but it is one worth undertaking for your own peace of mind. I found that my relationships with certain people were based on pretence, or false ideas, and I realized that I had never achieved closure in my relationship with my wife (I was recently divorced). So I began dealing with people on an individual basis, trying to clarify the relationship.

Another important component of this entire process is that I have hundreds of photographs covering most periods of my life. In addition to describing my experiences, going back and looking at old photos really helps in bringing back memories. For example, I discovered that I have one photo of my college girlfriend. Sadly, I have almost no photos from college, but I have many more from the 1980s and 1990s. These photos are extremely helpful in reconstructing my experiences.

Where It All Leads

This may sound like nothing more than an elaborately conducted nostalgia trip. But it is far more than that. What I discovered as I went through this experience is that now somehow my past experiences are present to me in a way they weren't before. In the past, I had more or less tried to forget about the past in order to focus more fully on the present. Now I look through the prism of 56 years of experience. Suddenly my life has become much richer than before. Not only are my past experiences present to me, they are becoming connected through a complex network of associations that I am still building.

In addition to resolving issues that were left hanging with other people, I am going through all my papers at work and at home in an attempt to integrate them or throw them out. I am the worst person when it comes to having things sit around in boxes. No more! I am going through all my boxes and bringing everything into the present. I even took out the 12 pairs of old jeans from a bag on my closet floor and put them up on a shelf. Even though I can't fit into them now, they are there to inspire to me lose weight so that

someday perhaps I can. I now have 31 pairs of jeans, of which I can wear 10 pairs. If I can ever manage to wear them all, I figure I'll have a different pair for every day of the month.

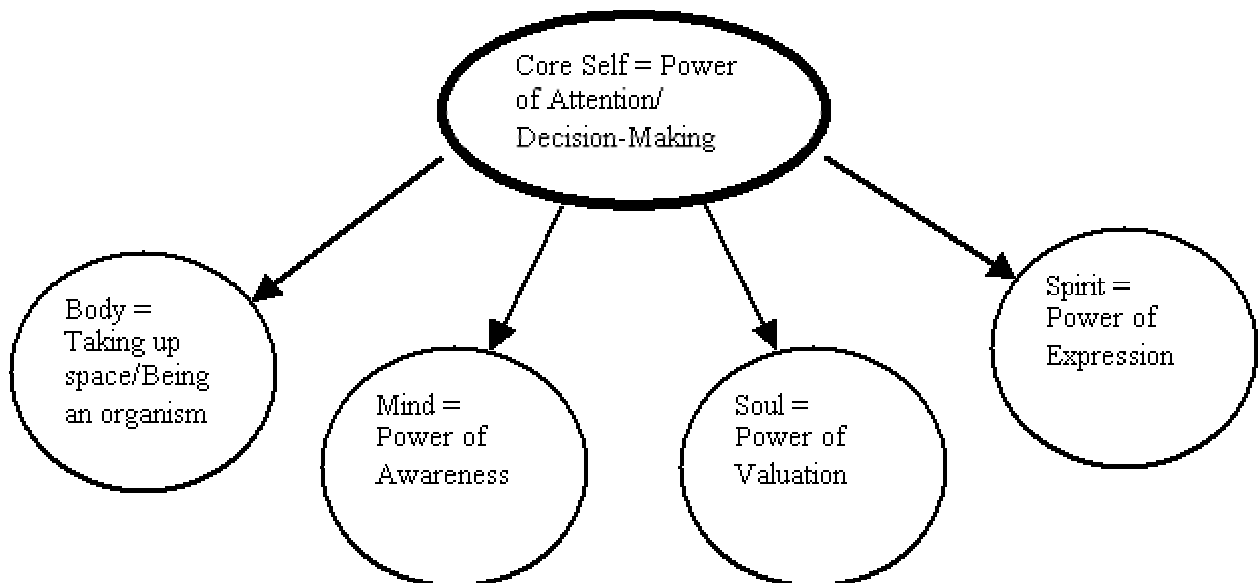


Old feelings and experiences are a lot like papers sitting around in boxes in a closet or on the bedroom floor. You may have old experiences and feelings about someone or something that you haven't been able to resolve. Maybe a personal friendship ended in an unsatisfactory way. Or maybe you have a hobby or even a potential profession that you've never had time to pursue. These feelings take up space in your soul, and they may prevent you from freely expressing your feelings today. If you can resolve these issues, it will free up your energy to channel it into your important goals and feelings. So call up that person, or write them a letter, and try to bring the matter to resolution. And give that favorite hobby a try – who knows where it will lead?

The Ultimate Payoff: Self-Expression

What I found as I went through all these different attempts to integrate my life was an amazing thing: I had discovered at last how to freely express myself. Self-expression is a perfectly natural ability that many people lose around the age of 20. It seems that the burden of society's rules and all the barriers that society places on people to prevent them from expressing themselves freely takes its toll for many people about the age of 20. This is when teens become adults, and is also about the age that many people have to start earning a living.

Over the past 20 years, I have developed the idea that our language is not adequate to describe our experience. I say that, just as there are many different shades of color in our experience than we have names for, so many other aspects of experience have "shades" that are not adequately reflecting in our language. Several years ago, I put many of these ideas together in an earlier version of **Shades of Experience**. In Chapter Seven of this edition, I produce the following diagram of the relation between self, mind, soul, spirit, and body:



Each of the components of a person: mind, body, soul, spirit, and core self (point of view) has an essential or defining element. The above diagram shows the defining element of

each component. For example, the power of expression is the defining element of spirit. The core self or point of view serves as the integrator that decides which of the four components to identify with. The real key to becoming an integrated person is to root out inconsistencies and integrate the core self, then use this newly integrated self to root out any inconsistencies within or among mind, body, soul, and spirit.

In Chapter Eight, I define self-expression as follows:

An act of self-expression is a conscious act that is an external representation of a thought, feeling, or emotion that is an element of a person. This is truly an exercise in self-discovery, since it is often not at all obvious what our desires really are. Someone who really wants to discover what they want to do in terms of a career, for example, may need to try a number of different things before discovering what makes them happy. We often have a very difficult time figuring out our feelings for other people. These mental and emotional phenomena are often difficult to comprehend, but it is clear that there are often powerful forces within us. John Stuart Mill refers to this as the “raw material of human nature.”

The concept of “being yourself” is very close to the concept of self-expression. The idea of “being yourself” could also be described as acting in a way that represents an element of the person. It might seem as if we could not help but be ourselves; after all, we can’t be somebody else! However, the idea of being yourself involves the idea of expressing feelings, desires, and emotions that are truly your own. This is to be contrasted with the idea of trying to behave in some expected way, or doing what you think someone else expects or wants to do. It is in reality very hard to be yourself in today’s society, because there are so many situations in which we are expected to act a certain way or to do certain things.

Unresolved feelings and emotions act like weights on our soul and spirit, and drag us down. If you feel conflicted about someone, you may be unable to deal with them honestly because your conflicted feelings get in the way whenever you talk to them. Likewise, if you feel ambivalent about your profession or your job, you may find it

difficult to throw yourself into your work with much enthusiasm. Even if you can't fully resolve these issues, simply being aware of them will help you deal with them, and may lead to a resolution at a later time.

Of course, there are those people you may feel you can't be completely honest with. For me there are certain people I deal with that I pretty much shut down emotionally when I talk to them because I don't feel that I can be honest with them (for example, my mother and certain other family members). Well, how do I deal with these people? I am striving for honesty in most relationships, but where this is not achievable, I resort to dealing with them in a less-than-straightforward way. Some people may find that they deal with their boss in this way. Self-expression is the ideal in all situations, but realistically it has some limits.

Despite those few cases where I find there are still limitations on my ability to express myself freely, I have found both a new joy and a new freedom in the philosophy of self-expression. The "old me" would get angry about something, bottle it up inside, and then let it out later with some type of sarcastic or negative comment. The "new me" simply lets it out now by saying almost anything I feel like saying. This is much healthier than letting anger build up inside. Of course, there are limits here as well.

I find that with my newly integrated self I am happier than I've ever been. The "newly integrated self" is the core self, which is the central circle in the above diagram. While I recognize that there are still issues to resolve, I for the most part feel completely free to be myself at all times. And since I have resolved many of the personal dilemmas I have faced in the past, these unresolved issues no longer hold me back. I can say with complete conviction that becoming an integrated self, with the resulting power of self-expression, is the key to happiness. The concept of happiness refers to the internal harmony and absence of conflict within and among mind, body, soul, spirit, and core self. Self-integration brings about this harmony and absence of conflict, which is why it leads to happiness.

Feel Like You're Twenty Again

Why does this work? Because when you strip away all those negative forces in the form of unresolved dilemmas and fragmented feelings, you free up your emotional energy to be channeled fully towards your internal goals. This might mean telling someone you love them, going full-throttle towards achieving your professional goals, or spending the weekend in personal exploration on a road trip. Whatever your innermost goals and feelings, you now can be free to express them.

Your soul and spirit will return to the free state they were in before society came in with all its rules and regulations. **You will feel like you're twenty again!** And you'll have the inner strength to carry this out because you have removed the barriers to self-expression that have weighed you down.

How to Get There

If you've read this far, obviously you're interested. You can get started on the path to integration, self-expression, and happiness today, by following these ten steps.

- 1. Sit down and write out an account of any one or more of your childhood experiences.**
- 2. Now write out descriptions of one or more experiences from college or young adulthood.**
- 3. Now write out descriptions of some of your recent experiences.**
- 4. See if you can find any links in any of these experiences.** If so, write them out. For example perhaps you can see the roots of your pursuit of science or computers in college in a love for math that you exhibited in grade school.
- 5. Write out any more experiences from your past that you feel inspired to describe.**

6. If you have photos from your past, spend some time going through them and recalling the experiences they are connected with.

7. Write out the names of any persons that you feel you have unresolved relationships with. Take some action with respect to each person. For example, you might call them, write them a letter, send them an email, etc. Whatever it is, take one step, however small, towards resolving your relationship with that person.

8. Think of unresolved dilemmas or conflicts that are not directly related to one person. For example, perhaps you would like to try an alternative profession, want to buy a new car, would like to become gay or lesbian, want to eat a different kind of food, are sick of someone telling you what to do, want to buy a fishtank, etc. Whatever it is, if it presents a conflict, write it down. Now, these are hard, so I won't just say "And take a step towards resolving the conflict." What I will say is "Either take a step towards resolving the conflict or understand in your own mind why you can't."

9. Start telling people how you really feel in more situations, except when doing so would create more problems than it solves. If the service is bad at a restaurant, complain about it! Are you tired of hearing someone complain about your behavior? Let them know about it! Don't come to blows, but don't let people push you around either. Some people are so internally conflicted that they wouldn't recognize a genuine feeling if they had it. You are doing the healthy thing because instead of letting anger build up, you are letting it out. If someone can't deal with that, it's their problem, not yours. Of course, be careful to stay within the limits of the law. Also, be aware that you may need to restrain your power of self-expression at work in order to keep your job.

10. By writing out your experiences from different parts of your life and finding links to connect them, you are building a new self – a newly integrated self with points of experience that are connected to each other with links you have discovered. By resolving conflicts and dilemmas with other people, you have freed yourself from the

negative forces that hold you back from expressing yourself freely with them. By resolving other dilemmas, as much as possible, you are eliminating those forces that prevent you from moving ahead in a positive way to achieve your goals. You can now express yourself freely, and focus your energies on achieving your main goals. If you reach this state, you will know it, because you will feel a surge of energy and happiness that you've never known before!



How to Get Started

The above is a ten-step process towards personal integration. But how do you get started? What can you do to put yourself in a position to integrate? Everyone has to find their own path to integration, but here are some suggestions:

1. Listen to music from the past. Whether you listen to albums, tapes, or CDs, music from the past can be an important way to get in touch with past feelings. This is what started me on the path to integration.

2. **Look at photographs from the past.** Whether or not a picture is worth exactly 1,000 words, pictures and photos can stir up many feelings and emotions from earlier experiences. If you have a lot of photos, you might try to organize them chronologically, or according to theme.

3. **Go retro: Wear old clothes.** I find that wearing old jeans and t-shirts can be very liberating – especially if it is the result of a hard-won battle to lose weight. If you still have old clothes from college or from other earlier periods of your life, try them on! You might find the experience to be a very rewarding one.

4. **Read through any diaries or notebooks you kept as a record of your life at earlier times.** Again, if you are fortunate enough to have them, these can be an excellent way to connect with early feelings and emotions.

Again, **this is not just a nostalgia trip.** The purpose of doing these things is to find a way to integrate your past experiences into the present, instead of hiding them away in a “feeling box” where they just get in the way and create a weight on your powers of self-expression.

Once you’ve integrated your past feelings and experiences into the present, you can go back to them at any time – or simply allow them to serve as background for your current experiences. But try not to put them back in the “feeling box;” once they’re out, throw the box away! You won’t need those feeling boxes any more. Once you’ve become an integrated person, you won’t want to go back to the old days of fragmentation anymore.