Ewa raises her two sons, by two different fathers, in Stockholm. She works as a massage therapist and has a hard time making ends meet. She loves to kayak, swim, and play the flute. She is an environmental activist and participates in running the local Waldorf school.

All these people have had radical awakenings, powerful enough that their lives have changed as a result. They have all read, and can relate to, the descriptions of awakening in the previous chapter. Although they are as different from each other as people can be, they all display the qualities of emerging translucents we explore in this book. Below we will explore some of these common characteristics.

In order for widespread embodiment to happen, it had to move to the West. Until recently you had people looking at the great cultural geniuses in India, basically compassionate people looking out and saying, “This is all unreal. I’ll stand here, I’ll radiate, I’ll give you a teaching.” It hasn’t become embodied by great numbers yet, and until it does, it is irrelevant in some way. It’s a promise of sorts, nothing more.

— Saniel Bonder

Translucent n. 1. an individual who has undergone a spiritual awakening deeply enough that it has permanently transformed their relationship to themselves and to reality, while allowing them to remain involved in ordinary life in a process which is evolutionary and endless. 2. an individual with a glowing appearance, as though light were passing through. adj. an individual or object that exhibits translucence.

Translucence n. 1. the quality or state of being translucent.

TEN CHARACTERISTICS OF TODAY’S TRANSLUCENTS

We need fresh language to talk about translucence. What few words we do have for such matters have been commandeered by organized religions and reduced to cardboard cutout concepts, devoid of any real life. The implications and context of this current swell of direct experience demand an entirely fresh look at the meaning of spirituality. A number of factors make this thorough reexamination necessary. We will visit them briefly here and then return to all of them, throughout the book, in much greater depth, and see how they play out in day-to-day life.
Living Outside Traditional Frameworks

Today translucents live for the most part outside the context of organized religion and hierarchy. They no longer need to have one teacher or teaching, but rather have many teachers or experience all of life as a teacher. Ram Dass speaks of no longer being a Buddhist but being a “generalist.” Richard Holloway, the retired bishop of Edinburgh, has reevaluated his relationship to the Christian church since recognizing God to be everywhere, both behind the eyes and in front.

Cynthia, who has attended events with the Dalai Lama, Wayne Dyer, and Thomas Moore, told me: “I think I’m as much a Buddhist as a Christian, or maybe I’m just all of it and none of it. Right now I’ve got Eckhart Tolle, the Tao Te Ching, Cosmopolitan, and a thriller on my bedside table. They seem to be getting along just fine.”

Looking Beyond Enlightenment

As mentioned above, there is an important distinction to be made between translucence and traditional understandings of “enlightenment.” Very few of the people I have talked to would seriously label themselves as “enlightened.” At the same time, the overwhelming majority said that they were no longer seeking a state of enlightenment, although many had done so previously. Most said they no longer had any idea what the word was supposed to mean. This is in sharp contrast to the atmosphere of spirituality that existed even fifteen years ago, when most spiritual people were still following a guru, trying to win the cosmic jackpot.

Musician and songwriter Peter Makena and his wife, Aneeta, exemplify this change. They were both disciples of the controversial Indian teacher Bhagwan Rajneesh in the 1970s. (He has been known simply as Osho since a few months before his death in 1991.) Now Peter is less sure what the “E” word means: “‘Enlightenment’ used to have an elusive meaning, something like the...
Holy Grail. It represented a final end point, in my idealistic and dreamer-like search, of what human potential could be. Today my sense of that potential is more of a finger pointing, a hint, a direction, with no final product.”

I asked Peter and Aneeta what they would say if someone were to ask if they were enlightened. “I’d laugh,” answered Aneeta. “I couldn’t say enlightened or unenlightened, I just don’t think like that.” Yet both feel they are always learning and growing. They call it an endless exploration. Today’s translucents have fallen in love with the present moment and the possibilities of living right now as a gift of love, as a work of art. They’ve lost interest in potential future states. Translucents have seen past the dangling carrot of future enlightenment. They live for now, and now, and now.

As we deepen in familiarity with our silent, limitless, real nature, and as we broaden our forays into the uncharted territories of living from here, the very notion of some final graduation becomes obsolete. The silence is neither enlightened nor unenlightened; it cannot undergo any change. And the monkeylike mind-body organism is simply a sophisticated animal, no more. It is always undergoing change, unenlightenable. Have you ever seen an enlightened penguin or a liberated flea?

An Endless Journey

Translucents speak of life as a “rivering,” a process without end. Like a fountain that is always pouring forth, it is an endless and spontaneous enlightenment, not a fixed state. Unlike the goal-oriented self-improvement industry that has dominated our culture for so long, this process is an endless unfolding of discovery and delight. There is no attempt to fix a problem or to achieve a final higher state. Translucence is more a direction than a destination. Like heading East, the process doesn’t imply a specific point of arrival. It is a way of living life with art and humor, returning continuously to here, and here, and here, always steeped in the vastness of the view and blessing each moment with a gift of creative presence.

It’s much easier to have a spiritual experience than it is to live a spiritual life. It’s the life that is more important than the experience.

— Lama Surya Das
“At some point, I just stopped seeking,” says Tom. “There was a turning point, when I was about forty. I saw that I was like a rat in a maze, always thinking freedom would come later, after one more retreat or workshop. I saw how absurd this was, and it dropped. It was after that, after I stopped seeking, that I could wake up to things as they really are.”

Spiritual seeking may have a defining end; the process of embodiment, on the other hand, is endless. It is a relaxing, the allowing of more love, more presence, more creativity to flow. How can we ever say, “I have reached the outer limits of love?” or, “I now have discovered all that can be discovered of creativity, or humor, or compassion?” As we wake up, we see the very nature of things as they are: still in their essence and constantly undergoing modification in their appearance. Recognizing this may bring more relaxation, more love, or more humor to our humanness, but there can be no end point.

Andrew Cohen, the founder of the magazine What Is Enlightenment? points out that both individual awakenings and their embodiment are happening within a larger context, one that completely transcends individuality. He calls this “impersonal enlightenment”:

We are part of the developmental process. The evolutionary context is something very different from the experiential recognition of the timeless. An individual human being begins to glimpse that he or she is literally part of this 14-billion-year process of development, right now, and that their own awakening to that fact is the universe becoming aware of itself. It’s as significant and as important, if not more important from a certain point of view, as the experiential recognition of timelessness.

Many of those I interviewed have come to the same conclusion; they realize that their own spiritual experience is only a tiny part of the larger context of collective awakening and evolution.
Transcending Self-Improvement

Translucents are always evolving, but they also display an extraordinary and often humorous acceptance of themselves just as they are. Bill talked of his little personality quirks as he might describe an eccentric relative, with fondness, humor, and just an edge of cautionary damage control.

Translucents have canceled their subscription to the self-improvement industry; they no longer pin their sense of well-being, their connectedness and peace, on the process of fixing themselves. Yet they fully recognize the dysfunctional habits that hurt people and create separation, and they take a tremendous amount of energy from the simplicity of this moment, from being able to live fully and gift life. So they have no resistance to looking at these old habits, not as an attempt to improve the personal, but in service to moving beyond it and giving the realization space to breathe.

The Return of the Goddess

Whenever anyone has an awakening outside the mind, that which is realized is beyond conditioning. At the same time, the realization is always expressed through human form. For millennia, spirituality has been dominated by the masculine expression of realization. This masculine viewpoint emphasizes transcendence, annihilation of the ego, the dissolving of limits and, ultimately, all form. The male psyche leans toward the stark nihilism of celibacy, solitude, and asceticism. Religions founded by men and perpetuated by patriarchy (basically all of them) worship the written word as absolute and set unwavering moral precepts.

Feminine spirituality, however, is much softer, drawn toward deep and embodied love, open acceptance, the celebration of all life as the dance of divinity. The feminine delights in color, sex, children, blood, dance, and music as the
very expression and demonstration of divinity in flesh. Art, music, images, and sensations are just as sacred as words. The masculine energy in all of us, both men and women, is associated with the left side of the brain, which processes words, logic, concepts, and time. The feminine, in both men and women, is associated with the right side of the brain — with images, feelings, color, and now.

Translucents demonstrate a restoration of this imbalance. When the left and right hemispheres of the brain return to wholeness, words and images dance together. Our understanding and our feelings find one common flavor. Emptiness is expressed as form, form as emptiness. We are neither turbocharging through time nor lost in the soap opera of endless drama, but out of time altogether, in this present moment. Freedom from life and immersion in life are no longer seen as opposed to one another but rather as two aspects of a total incarnation.

We need new maps — less a linear journey from one point to another and more an illustrated guide to the endless delights of exploring new territory and enjoying the divinity of this moment in a human body.

**Embracing Life and the Body**

Until just a few years ago, the choices available to a spiritual aspirant were extreme. Either renounce the world, turning your back on sexuality, money, your family, work, and creativity, and find God and peace in the sanctity of solitude and silence, or immerse yourself in the marketplace, have sex and children, make money, pursue fame and power, but forget all about being free. Buddha’s early life story epitomizes these extremes.

Today, the choice to be a recluse is no longer attractive or even particularly available. Opportunities to turn our backs on the world are rapidly decreasing. In the West, the life of a monk or a recluse is no longer woven into the fabric of established society, as it was in medieval Europe or as it still is in many Asian countries. More important, translucents no longer accept this dialectic as valid. Instead, they are incorporating translucence tangibly into their daily lives.

Translucents are not choosing between spirit and the world; we embrace
both or we have neither fully. Spirit is expressed as form, and form only works when it is infused with spirit. The inner life is incomplete without material life, like a metal untested by fire. Material life is incomplete without spirit, like a cathedral without an altar. To be successful in a rapidly changing world, you need to be at the source of your experience, awake to who you really are. Translucents embrace life, inclusive of feelings and sexuality, the shadow as well as the saintliness, the failures as well as the triumphs.

Translucents are in their bodies, and care for the body as a sacred garden. They practice yoga, martial arts. They play tennis, ski, and surf, for the sheer joy of being embodied, not to achieve anything. Michael Murphy, Gay Hendricks, and Brad Blanton play golf religiously. Sofia Diaz and Kathlyn Hendricks love to dance as a sacred art form. And translucents are generally both sexual and sensual; they experience the body as a doorway to the real. Ewa kayaks and swims and goes to all the events at her kids’ school. Since her second divorce, she has dated several guys and recently moved in with her boyfriend, Eric. Cynthia is the events coordinator at the Unity Church. The experience that has most deepened her spirituality, and for which she is most grateful, is the painful death of her sister. Bill plays softball, sings in a band, and paints. Tom is up at five. He loves to walk by the lake before he goes to work. Then he checks stock prices online. He’s just going in for surgery as I write this, which will limit his freedom a little. His solution: “I’ve decided to spend the next couple of months writing a book.” These people are not, by the wildest stretch of the imagination, recluses. They are embracers of life.

Unresisting Experience

While translucents embrace all life, they are also aware of the deeply ingrained habits that keep Iago’s trance in place. Hence, a plethora of tools have developed, aimed not at self-improvement but at reversing our instinctive habits that lead us to, as Byron Katie puts it, “argue with reality.” “When you argue with reality,” she says, “you lose — but only 100 percent of the time.”

Katie has developed The Work of Byron Katie, Hale Dwoskin teaches the
Sedona Method, A. H. Almaas originated the Diamond Heart Work, and we offer the Living Essence Training. Although different in technique, all these approaches have the same vision: to support letting go of control and to allow the intelligence inherent in all life to flow rather than helping me to get what I think will make me happy. Unlike many traditional practitioners of spiritual life, translucents are not interested in running away from anything or amputating any part of their experience. In fact, they have learned to walk toward what they have previously run away from.

Cynthia had a lifelong tendency to avoid anger: both her own and other people’s:

I was always the peacekeeper in my family. When things got heated at home, I was the one with the soft voice, tears in my eyes and trembling jaw, trying to get us all back into one happy family. In the last few years I can see how this segregation of feelings into good and bad has not served anyone. It has created tension. When I got more distance from my ideas of how things should be, I realized that I was angry myself. And it all came out sideways. Passive-aggressive. I’ve had to learn to feel my anger. Not express it, necessarily, but really feel it. I was living in a prison defined by what I was unwilling to feel.

The tendency to resist life, to become a pattern of interference, is so strong in all of us that it takes considerable awareness, honesty, and willingness to feel what is uncomfortable, to not resist it. This is the pivotal difference between contemporary translucents and traditional mystics. Translucents are awake to the unchanging dimension of themselves and reality and also willing to question and dissolve the unconscious assumptions of the mind.

Engaging in Translucent Practice

In some ways translucence is just another way to describe a human being’s most natural state. This is how children live, with an open, playful, total
involvement in life, free of concepts, glued to the present moment. But to sustain this way of living, awake to our unchanging nature but without resisting the natural flow of life, is to take a stand against a lifetime of habits. Translucents embrace spiritual practice not as a means to achieving a future goal but as a way to a more fully lived present moment, with open heart, open mind, and open body.

We face a mountain of habits at odds with our heart’s deepest knowing. This schism can be profoundly frustrating and painful. We have no choice, those of us with feet of clay and hearts on fire, but to face habits as they arise, allowing them to be alchemized through honesty and courage. As we encounter our old ways, passed down through generations, we must use increasingly creative tools to crack the concrete of our routine life and to wiggle our love and clarity into the crack. Anything short of this leaves us compromised and restless.

We find ourselves walking a razor’s edge. We have realized the ultimate truth in snapshots, that all is perfect as it is. Hopefully, we also have the humility to see that we all have habits of thought that are in constant rebellion with this lucent reality, this living in the now. If we lean too far in one direction, we fall into self-congratulation and delude ourselves that a glimpse of a restaurant will satisfy our hunger. If we lean too far in the other, we get lost in the masochism of endless self-improvement, always creating new and different character defects to tweak before we can relax. We set up house with the ghosts of our childhood and live in a war zone of our own imagination.

Right down the middle lies this edge. It requires of us a continual process of meeting with old pains and habits of demarcation, lingering only long enough to feel them deeply, and then returning as fully as we know how, to this, and this, and this, allowing love to flow through us. No one living a translucent life claims to be an expert at this, but many of us now would rather live clumsily in this way than successfully in self-deception. It is a glorious failure.

In the maturing beyond dogma and the rules of tradition, translucents

Realization is a boundless inability to come to any conclusion about anything in life, period. There’s no judgment, no opinion, no conclusions that can be reached, no theory that has any sound basis. Life itself is the process, but the realization itself is not subject to any process whatsoever.

— ShantiMayi
have also grown beyond hierarchy. The traditional setting of one Enlightened One sitting on a raised podium, answering questions from deferential devotees, is being replaced by the sacred circle, where wisdom is everywhere in the room at the same time, where the meeting is eye to eye, heart to heart. Realizing the deepest truth of who we really are may occur on the meditation cushion or in a cave. To discover our potential to live as radiant love and humorous art requires involvement with other people. Through the alchemy of meeting with others in honesty and trust, we can take our inner wisdom for a test-drive and find out what happens when the rubber meets the road.

Life as Art and Generosity

“I can feel the possibilities, more and more,” says Bill. “I’ve had moments where it’s really pouring through me, and then I just walk into a room, and I know people can feel it. They are touched by what has touched me; it’s coming through me, not from me. Funny, you know, I don’t think I even know what ‘it’ is. I can’t describe it. But that is what my life has become about now: to allow this magical mystery to live through me as it wants to.”

However much an awakening may have touched us, if we stay entrapped in the habits of separation, the gifts that love intends to give through us will never be given. Do you have a family? A husband or wife or kids? Perhaps you have nephews and nieces. Suppose you buy them all wonderful gifts, those things they most want in life, the latest, the greatest, the best. Then you store them in your closet, all wrapped up.

Imagine that all the gifts you have for your children, your wife, your parents — for everyone — are never given. This is human life. We may dole out a Lego set now and then, but the real gift of potent love remains mostly ungiven. In this recognition lies an urgency to move beyond habits of separation, to really inquire and discover what we are when we’re not living in strategic fear. Who are you outside the game? When we see and question...
these habits, we will be able to give all these gifts, the ones with our children’s names written on them, the ones with our spouse’s name, and the ones with the planet’s name too.

This is our work, the discipline required beyond an awakening: to take a stand against the habits of separation, to recognize them, to be honest about them, so that the current of real love can flow through them. Then our children and our spouses and the planet can receive the love of an open heart. Then our husband or wife can say to us, “I could die tomorrow, I have been so completely loved.” Nothing has been held back. It might even be the husband or wife we have not yet met, and maybe will not meet until we let go of the old. Real love is urgent. It can only happen when we bring a sober relationship to the habits that keep us separate. There is work in it.

Translucents are willing to do this work, not for themselves, but for love itself.

**Being in Good Company**

Finally, the sheer number of contemporary translucents is noteworthy. When I spoke at a Texas church, I described what I meant by translucence. Then I asked, “How many people here know what I am talking about, from direct experience, rather than from reading about it?” All but one person raised their hands. This is a church in Texas we are talking about, not an ashram in the Bay Area. In Sweden, I spoke to eight hundred people at the No Mind Festival (the name itself indicates something interesting blowing in the wind) and asked the same question. Again, almost all of them raised their hands. And this is a recent occurrence. More than 95 percent of those who have talked about awakening and its embodiment for this book described a shift that has happened since 1990. At the time of writing, that means we are witnessing a shift in collective consciousness that is less than two decades old.

Translucents are lions, not sheep. They walk alone, although sometimes in each other’s company. Thus, the number of people who have undergone such

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**The goal is to move from a self-centered interest in transformation and enlightenment to one that ultimately transcends it completely. To where one’s interest is really no longer for one’s own liberation but in becoming a catalyst for the evolution of consciousness itself.**

— Andrew Cohen
shifts is not easily measurable. They do not belong to an organized group; there is no membership list. In fact, many translocents have dropped out of organized religions and spiritual groups. There are really two reliable ways to estimate how big this collective awakening has become. The first is through surveys and research, conducted by sociologists who have a feeling for this level of reality. The second is by talking to the troops on the front line: teachers and writers who focus on these issues and have direct contact with the people who are in the process of shifting.

Paul Ray, one of the foremost sociologists researching changes in the collective consciousness, has broadly defined three groups within Western society: traditionalists, moderns, and cultural creatives. The third group is distinguished from the first two by values such as environmental and social responsibility, placing quality of life above material success, an acceptance and deeper understanding of values of other cultures and of subcultures within our own. Ray has conducted enough surveys to be confident that this third group now comprises more than fifty million people in the United States, more than eighty million in Europe, and is rapidly growing.

Ray has now identified a core group within the cultural creatives. This core is the emerging spiritual group, those whose lives have been touched enough by a glimpse or sustained knowing of themselves as limitless to irreversibly affect their lives. “They live in significantly reduced egoic referencing,” says Ray. “They have some degree of access to the divine or no-self.” He estimates this group to be somewhere between one and two million people in the United States, although he cautions, “Big surveys are not going to catch this because you need in-depth interviews.” Duane Elgin, another sociologist, has come to similar conclusions and is even more optimistic in his estimates. If researchers like Ray and Elgin are right, this is very significant and very good news. It is this shift, in these kinds of numbers, to which every spiritual tradition has aspired.

A second way to get a feel for the size of this collective shift is to ask the
people who travel and teach and thereby meet those who are in the process of transformation. “I sense a huge movement with this,” says Catherine Ingram. “I think it will keep growing. This is the perspective that all spiritual seeking eventually has to come to.” Saniel Bonder agrees. He shared with me that almost all the people attending his retreats now are more interested in deepening and integrating than in seeking after something.

Isaac Shapiro, who travels internationally throughout the year and meets with groups of several hundred people at a time, tells us, “There are always new people showing up, and the crowd seems to go deeper and deeper. The new people who come may have no preparation or conceptual understanding, but what’s gone before makes it easier for them.”

Michael, who woke up in prison in chapter 2, now writes and teaches with the name Satyam Nadeen. He talks to groups in the hundreds, and feels that about 1 percent of the world is going through this shift: “There is some sort of evolution occurring. More people are raising their hands in the hall when I ask who has had similar experiences to mine. It has gone from about 10 percent to 80 percent over the last six years.”

As a consequence of this acceleration, more and more people are willing to come out into the daylight and speak openly. God is unmasking herself in millions of forms. We can ask, “Will the real World Savior please stand up?” and the whole auditorium rises to its feet. As more and more people speak openly about these rips in the veil, about their direct experience of being everything and nothing, it allows more and more people to recognize that it has already happened to them too. It was already there, behind the eyes, just waiting to be celebrated. Eckhart Tolle, who has met with tens of thousands of people worldwide since the success of The Power of Now, concurs: “There are many who have never read a spiritual book. They have had the awakening, but they didn’t quite recognize it yet. For them, they only need to hear one or two statements, and then they know, ‘Oh, so that’s what’s happening.’ ”

The mouth of the funnel is getting wider all the time, and each shift today makes many more possible tomorrow.