

Book Review

Sowing Seeds of Change:

A Review of *Presencing: 7 Practices for Transforming Self, Society, and Business* (Scharmer & Kaufer, 2025)

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When a system is far from equilibrium, small islands of coherence in a sea of chaos have the capacity to elevate the entire system to a higher order.

– Ilya Prigogine (in Scharmer & Kaufer, 2025, p. 11)

You, the reader, are invited to become one of these islands.

In a world marked by accelerating breakdowns—ecological, social, and spiritual—*Presencing: 7 Practices for Transforming Self, Society, and Business* (Scharmer & Kaufer, 2025) arrives as both a timely guide and a profound, enticing invitation. Scharmer and Kaufer do not merely diagnose the malaise of our times; they offer a living, breathing pathway for those who sense that another future is possible and are ready to become agents of its emergence. This book is not just for theorists or practitioners of systems change, but for any human being whose heart feels the call to participate in the great work of our era: the cultivation of the social soil from which new forms of life, work, and community can grow. This is a book for those hopeful gardeners.

I first encountered Theory U after fifteen years of working in international development, collaborating with think tanks, NGOs, and government agencies committed to evidence-informed policy. Despite extensive research, capacity-building, and on-the-ground efforts, I kept running into the same systemic bottlenecks that stalled meaningful change. I sensed that the real obstacles were rooted in invisible dynamics—factors we acknowledged but struggled to address without feeling exposed to criticism or resistance, or even risking being seen as outliers in the field. Theory U offered a way forward: an organic, courageous approach to creating spaces for reflection and co-creation, where we could open not only our minds but, more importantly, our hearts and will to allow the new to emerge. Through iterative practice, I learned to harness its power to spark collective intelligence and enable conversations that shifted how we spoke, felt, and acted around persistent challenges.

Presencing builds on these foundations, introducing seven practical disciplines that help individuals and groups cultivate the “social soil” from which regenerative futures can grow. These practices are not abstract ideals—they are actionable tools for anyone seeking to lead change from a place of deep awareness. Like many others featured in this book, I have experimented with them alongside colleagues, discovering how they can transform not only processes but relationships, unlocking possibilities that once seemed out of reach.

The Pando Metaphor: Interconnectedness and Hidden Strength

One of the book’s most evocative contributions is the pando metaphor. The Pando is a vast grove of aspens in Utah, covering over 100 acres, which appears to be a forest of individual trees but is, in fact, a single organism connected by an immense, invisible root system. This metaphor captures the essence of the planetary movement for deep change: while our efforts may seem isolated, beneath the surface we are already connected—part of a living network whose strength and resilience far exceed what is visible.

The authors invite us to see ourselves as part of this pando: a global, subterranean web of changemakers, innovators, and communities who, by nurturing their own patch of social soil, contribute to the flourishing of the whole. The pando metaphor is not just poetic; it is practical. It reminds us that the most important work often happens out of sight—in the quality of our attention, our relationships, and our willingness to hold space for the new to emerge.

Islands of Coherence: Readers as Catalysts

Building on Prigogine’s insight, we can consider ourselves as part of an archipelago of “islands of coherence”. In times of chaos and uncertainty, it is easy to feel insignificant or powerless. Yet, as the authors show through both theory and example, small groups—indeed, even individuals—can become nodes of

stability and creativity that help lift entire systems to a higher order. These islands of coherence are not abstract; they are the readers, the practitioners, and the communities who choose to embody the seven practices and, in doing so, become catalysts for transformation.

This is not a call for heroics but for presence. The book gently yet persistently returns to the idea that the smallest unit of change is the self and that by aligning our attention, intention, and agency, we participate in the emergence of new realities. The invitation is clear: you are not just reading about change—you are invited to become it.

The Social Soil: Making the Invisible Visible

A central theme of the book is the social soil—the invisible substrate of relationships, trust, and awareness that underpins all visible outcomes in society. Drawing on the metaphor of regenerative agriculture, the authors argue that just as healthy soil is the foundation for flourishing ecosystems, so too is the quality of the social soil foundational for sustainable change.

This insight is particularly resonant for those investing in social change, designing and implementing social change projects, and/or working in fields like monitoring, evaluation, and learning (MEL), where the focus is often on tangible, above-the-surface results. The book challenges us to look deeper—to attend to the “roots” and “soil” that sustain visible outcomes. It offers a compelling critique of approaches that neglect the invisible dimensions of change and provides practical guidance for nurturing the social soil through the seven practices.

The Seven Practices: A Pathway for Agency

At the heart of the book are the seven practices of eco-system leadership:

- **Becoming Aware:** Bending the beam of attention back onto ourselves; cultivating mindfulness and self-reflection.
- **Listening:** Holding the space within; listening with mind and heart wide open.
- **Dialogue:** Creating spaces for systems to see and sense themselves.
- **Presencing:** Meeting the future that remains in need of us in the now.
- **Co-imagining:** Crystallizing the future we want to create.
- **Co-creating:** Exploring the future by doing; prototyping and iterating.
- **Eco-system Governance:** Coordinating around shared intention.

Each practice is described not as a rigid technique but as a living capacity that can be cultivated individually and collectively. The book is rich with real

stories, practical tools, and concrete exercises that make these practices accessible and actionable. Importantly, the authors emphasize that these are not linear steps but interdependent capacities that, together, enable the emergence of new possibilities.

Openness to the Underrated: Not-Knowing, Discomfort, and Non-Action

A distinctive feature of the book is its openness to the underrated dimensions of change. Scharmer and Kaufer invite us to embrace not-knowing, discomfort, and non-action—not as obstacles but as gateways to deeper transformation. This is a radical stance in a culture that prizes certainty, comfort, and relentless activity.

The book draws on the wisdom of Francisco Varela and others to show that accessing our ignorance, leaning into discomfort, and allowing space for stillness are essential for sensing what wants to emerge. These “underrated things” are not merely philosophical; they are practical capacities that can be developed through the seven practices. By cultivating humility, love, and stillness, we open ourselves to the future that is seeking to be born through us.

Global South Perspectives: Evidence of Change

One of the book’s great strengths is its inclusion of examples and stories from the Global South. Too often, narratives of change are dominated by experiences from the Global North, with little attention to the unique challenges and innovations emerging elsewhere. Scharmer and Kaufer correct this imbalance by offering rich case studies from Latin America, Asia, and Africa.

These stories are not mere illustrations; they are evidence that the seven practices are not only possible but already happening—often in contexts of profound adversity. The Ecosystem Leadership Program in Latin America, the IDEAS initiative in Indonesia, and work with Indigenous communities are just a few examples of how awareness-based change is taking root and flourishing in diverse settings. These cases demonstrate that the practices are adaptable, scalable, and capable of generating real, lasting impact.

Reach and Impact: A Pando of Practice

The reach of the seven practices is both global and local. Through initiatives like the u.lab at MIT, the Presencing Institute, and countless grassroots hubs, the book documents a pando-like network of practitioners and communities who are experimenting with, adapting, and spreading these practices. The evidence is compelling: over 260,000 participants from 194 countries have engaged with u.lab; hundreds of local hubs have emerged; and new forms of governance, business, and education are being prototyped and scaled.

What is most striking is the diversity of contexts in which these practices are being applied—from UN leadership labs to rural cooperatives, from climate negotiations to neighborhood dialogues. The book makes a persuasive case that awareness-based change is not a niche concern but a movement with the potential to transform systems at every level. The best is yet to come.

Theory U Revisited: From Framework to Living Practice

While the book is deeply rooted in Theory U, it goes beyond theory to offer a living, evolving practice. The authors are candid about the challenges and limitations of their earlier work and respond with humility and openness to feedback. The result is a book that feels both grounded and generative—a field guide for those who want to move from knowing to doing, from intention to action.

The integration of the “islands of coherence” and “pando” metaphors, the emphasis on the social soil, and the practical articulation of the seven practices represent significant advances in the field of awareness-based change. The book is not content to rest on past achievements; it is a call to ongoing experimentation, learning, and co-creation.

Why Read This Book? Why Now?

Presencing is more than a book; it is an invitation to participate in the most important work of our time. For researchers, it offers a robust, evidence-based framework for understanding and facilitating deep change. For practitioners, it provides concrete tools, stories, and practices that can be applied in any context. For funders, policymakers, and evaluators, it challenges prevailing assumptions about what counts as “impact” and points to the invisible dimensions that sustain real transformation.

Perhaps most importantly, the book speaks to the reader as an agent of change. It does not promise easy answers or quick fixes. Instead, it offers a pathway—a set of practices, metaphors, and stories—that can help each of us become an island of coherence, a node in the global pando, a cultivator of the social soil.

The timing could not be more urgent. As the authors note, we are living in a threshold moment—a time when the old systems are breaking down and the new is struggling to be born (though its signs are increasingly visible, as the included cases and stories reveal). The book does not shy away from the enormity of the challenges but refuses to succumb to despair. Instead, it offers hope grounded in practice, evidence, and a deep trust in the capacity of individuals and communities to rise to the occasion.

How to Use This Book: Becoming Agents of Change

The true power of *Presencing* lies in its practical orientation. This is not a book to be read and shelved; it is a companion for the journey of change. The seven practices are accessible to anyone, regardless of role or context. Whether you are a researcher, a practitioner, a policymaker, or a concerned citizen, the book offers tools and guidance for cultivating your own patch of social soil.

The stories and examples provide inspiration, but the real work begins when you apply the practices in your own life and work. Start with becoming aware—notice your patterns of attention and intention. Practice listening—hold space for others with an open mind and heart. Engage in dialogue—create spaces where systems can see and sense themselves. Experiment with presencing—allow the future to speak through you. Co-imagine and co-create—prototype new possibilities, however small. And participate in eco-system governance—coordinate with others around shared intention; there are many waiting for connection.

The book is clear: no one can do this alone. The work of transformation is collective, relational, and ongoing. But each of us has a role to play, and each small action contributes to the emergence of a new system.

Nurturing the Social Soil: A Closing Reflection

As the review draws to a close, it is fitting to return to the metaphor of the social soil. The health of our societies, organizations, and communities depends on the quality of the soil in which they are rooted. This soil is not given; it is cultivated—through attention, intention, relationship, and practice. And each of us is a gardener: we can choose how to treat our surrounding social soil, day by day, decision by decision.

The book ends with a call to protect the flame—to nurture the inner and outer conditions that allow the highest future possibilities to emerge. This is not a solitary task, but a collective endeavor. The pando, the islands of coherence, the global movement for awareness-based change—all depend on the willingness of individuals and groups to tend the soil, to hold space for the new, and to trust in the power of small beginnings.

Presencing: 7 Practices for Transforming Self, Society, and Business is a gift to all who are engaged in the work of change. It is rigorous, inspiring, and deeply practical. It honors the complexity of our times without losing sight of the simplicity at the heart of transformation: the alignment of attention, intention, and agency. And it resides within each of us.

To the reader: you are the island of coherence. By engaging with this book, by practicing its teachings, by nurturing your own patch of social soil, you become part of the pando—a living network of change that is already elevating the system to a higher order. The future is not something that happens to us; it

is something that emerges through us when we are willing to be present, to listen, and to act.

Now is the time to cultivate the soil. Now is the time to be the change we want to see in the world.

References

Scharmer, C. O., & Kaufer, K. (2025). *Presencing: 7 Practices for transforming self, society, and business*. Berrett-Koehler Publishers.