In Dialogue

Exploring the Origins of Practice: In Dialogue with Founding Faculty of the Presencing Institute

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Presencing Institute

The Presencing Institute was founded in 2006 by MIT Sloan School of Management Senior Lecturer Otto Scharmer and colleagues to create an action research platform at the intersection of science, spirituality, and profound social change. Over the past two decades, the institute has developed Theory U as a change framework for individuals, teams, organizations, and large systems, building leadership capacity to cultivate systems change from an awareness-based perspective and using awareness-based approaches. The methodologies developed and evolved by the Presencing Institute have been used by thousands of organizations and communities around the world working to address our most pressing global challenges: climate change, food systems, inequality and

exclusion, finance, healthcare, and education. The introduction of u.lab[1]—an online-to-offline change process made widely and freely available on the Harvard/MIT learning platform, edX—brought the work to scale, creating a global ecosystem of changemakers bringing awareness-based processes and practice to systemic change work. Over the past decade, the institute has reached over 200,000 registered participants through its virtual and in-person programs.

In September 2020, Julie Arts and Angela Baldini, core team members of the Presencing Institute, brought together four of the founding faculty for a conversation on the origins of some of the institute's key tools and practices. They sought to articulate the roots of the organization's work by inquiring into the history of its practices with the people who brought them into being through their experimentation. The group shared how these tools came into being and evolved, and also 'what the work asked of them'—touching into the inner experience of holding these practices. What unfolded was a dialogue on the deeper dimensions of practice underlying not only these tools, but the field of awareness-based systems change as a whole. In the end, there was a sense that the conversation went to the heart of what the work is really about—and that it is a conversation worth sharing.

The first issue of the Journal was in process at the time, and a proposal was put to the editorial team to consider including this piece. Conversation around the proposal concluded with a decision not just to include this piece, but to create an *In Dialogue* section as a feature of every issue, leading with this piece in the inaugural issue. The intention of this feature is to surface and share the knowledge that lives in practice and is best articulated in the relational space we create through dialogue.

Participating in the Dialogue:

Julie Arts
Senior Faculty member of the Presencing Institute and co-founder of the U.Academy

Angela Baldini
Manager of Social Presencing Theater, Presencing Foundation, and Advanced programs in Europe and co-founder of the U.Academy

Marian Goodman
Senior Faculty member of the Presencing Institute and facilitator of a variety of innovation projects and capacity building programs

Arawana Hayashi
Choreographer, performer, and educator, co-founder of the Presencing Institute and founder of Social Presencing Theater

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[1] https://www.edx.org/course/ulab-leading-from-the-emerging-future

Beth Jandernoa
Co-founder of the Presencing Institute and a founding Core Faculty

Otto Scharmer
Senior Lecturer at MIT's Sloan School of Management and co-founder of the Presencing Institute

Origins

Julie: We know that tools can be used at multiple levels. They can simply be tools to help achieve a task, or they can be part of a process of transformation, which is obviously our intention. If we look at our tools, such as 3D Mapping, 4D Mapping, and Sensing Journeys, we can ask ourselves: where do they come from and why are they so powerful?

> *3D Mapping* involves creating a three-dimensional model that 'maps out' a current situation using small items such as figurines, feathers, pieces of wool to symbolise elements and dynamics.
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> *4D Mapping* is a structured embodiment method where group members embody roles within a system and, through the relational positioning, movement, and spoken expression within these roles, gain new insights about the system by making more visible its current reality.
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> *Sensing Practices* aim to cultivate a capacity to perceive oneself and the system from a new, meaningful perspective. Sensing Journeys take people out of their daily routine or context in order to experience their organization, challenge, or system through the lenses of different stakeholders while Stakeholder Interviews are structured interviews that aim to help the interviewer to see his/her role through their stakeholders' eyes.

Beth: 3D Mapping arose out of a real experience in a circle of women who were working on ourselves and helping each other see, grow, and traverse significant transitions in our lives. It wasn't a preconceived theory or model that was constructed and "lowered" onto a situation. It came out of our deep, rich, personal experience and I think that's true of how the other tools we use in PI were created too. 3D Mapping was invented in the moment because one of the women in our circle was wrestling with a real-time challenge in her life. It was an experiment intended to help her display her situation in order to become more aware of the internal and external factors at play that were invisible to her. The process was rough to begin with because we were discovering what worked as we went along. We saw that it produced unexpected and helpful results for the women involved and for those of us who were holding and observing. Once we realized the impact it had over time, and the potential for wider application, we continued to experiment, develop, and refine it.

Otto: So, Beth, the origin story of 3D Mapping that you shared with us, it came out of self-application, right? You didn't create it for clients. The beauty of this whole story of how you started was not "let's do something for *them*", it was, "we need to first heal *ourselves*". That, and the journey that followed, gave birth to the tool. I think that's very important. The self is always part of the laboratory of the tool's origination.

Beth: Yes, that's exactly right.

Marian: One thing I notice is the presence of the arc of the U[2] in all the tools. The fact that it's present, but the tool didn't originate from a desire to create a U journey. What is that about? For me, here we start to scratch into something in the deeper wisdom layers, in the inherent natural forces. The way natural creative cycles move is an embodiment of the U as well. I'm thinking also of the 4D Mapping and how we teach it, for example. It's got this kind of U movement. Or the tool we call Stuck[3] and how it's got this movement too. It can be understood with or without the language of the U journey. It's understood as a natural progression or unfoldment of something from a point of initiation.

Arawana: The origin of 4D Mapping happened before a Global Forum[4]. There had been a lot of exploration before then, in terms of embodiment. Then we had a gathering before the Forum where we invited three 'constellators' from Europe who work with organizational constellation, and we tried out a whole bunch of different things over two days. Some were embodiment practices, some were other kinds of improvisation.

Occupy Wall Street was happening at the time.

You (Otto) suggested we make a 'map' of Occupy Wall Street.

Then you got a chair and put it on the floor, you stood up on the chair and said: "Banking". Then someone came in and stood next to you and said "Multi-nationals," and next was "Mothers". Then, people just came in with names.

And that was it. We set up the map. Then we started to move, and it went on and on. We moved around—I think it was 40 minutes. It was really long. We just wandered around with each other for an infinitely long time. Then finally we stopped, and there was a conversation about it. That was the last thing we did over the two days of experimenting with different kinds of things.

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[2] The arc of the U refers to the change process outlined in Theory U. A detailed explanation of the process can be found in the references listed below.

[3] The Stuck Exercise is a practice in Social Presencing Theater (see note below). https://www.presencing.org/resource/tools/stuck-exercise-desc

[4] The Global Forum was held in 2011, 2012, and 2014 in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and in Berlin. An online version of the event was held in 2020 (https://www.presencing.org/global-forum-2020). The intention was to create a platform to connect innovators and change makers across systems, sectors, and cultures in order to co-create a society that generates wellbeing for all.

Then, Otto, you said, "well, we'll just do that tomorrow with the 200 people at the Forum."

And people did it. That was the beginning of 4D Mapping.

Beth: Arawana, what always amazed me was when Otto would say, "let's do this tomorrow, or right away," and you had never done it before (let alone with hundreds of people). You would embrace the grand experiment. I was so impressed by your willingness to dive into the deep end without much preparation.

Arawana: I was an improviser, so… I'm much better at making things up on the spot than preparing!

Deeper Layers

Julie: What other questions are interesting when we talk about the tools? If we want to share with others what they really are for and why they exist, what are the questions that would help us surface the deeper layers? Because it's more than just "how did it start?" What else brings us to the real stuff?

Marian: One thing is the role of Sensing in all of it, how the tools themselves activate or enable access to seeing into current reality. Then seeing the glimmer of potential reality, or possibility. Then bringing that through. Given also the times we're in, where old tried and trusted interpretations of everything are just falling way short of the mark, I do feel that Sensing becomes a capability that needs both a credible place in the world as well as capacity to do it.

> *Sensing* refers to expanding one's perception by moving beyond one's own 'bubble' as an individual observer to begin to perceive reality from the social field. It involves shifting the inner place of observation from the head to the heart.

Arawana: There's what you said, Marian, in terms of the Sensing, also the Presencing and then that all three tools are *doing* practices. There's something we're engaged in *making*, some kind of engaged creativity that's called upon with all three of them. If we equate creativity or innovation with *doing*, then it brings us through the whole cycle, the whole sequence of the U.

> *Presencing* blends sensing and presence. Similar to the concept of 'sensing', presencing involves shifting the inner place of observation from the head to the heart, but rather than perceiving from the current whole, perception begins to happen from the source of the emerging future. Presencing processes aim to help individuals and groups connect to the source of the highest future possibility and bring it into existence.

Otto: I have two reflections related to that. Marian, linked to your two comments earlier, one reflection is: how does that relate to the U? And the other is the importance of Sensing. Some people say, "well, now we all need to go out and bring the U into the world". I always feel that exactly the opposite is true, because you don't need to bring the U anywhere. It's already there. It's just not attended to. And all we do is provide methods and tools to attend to it and then follow the path which moves you, one way or another, into a U-type of process. Let's put it that way. So, it's already there. It's about paying attention to what's already there, at least in a dormant capacity.

The other thing—listening to the earlier conversation, I thought it was fascinating to listen to the origins of the 3D practice that you, Beth, and the 4D practice that you, Arawana, were sharing. It is always insightful to go back to the origin because that's the spirit we want to re-invoke and hand as a gift to others. What I see there is almost a triangulation of three things that are at the origin of each of them.

The first thing is: it's applied. There's an applied situation. You're doing real stuff. It's not like "I want to imagine something that's good in the world". No, it's the opposite. We're in trouble because tomorrow we have 400 people coming and we need to do something. It's being confronted with the needs of a real application context, and then not just projecting onto the people but really listening. That's the first element, connection to that situation and context.

The second element, I would say, is an aspiration or a deeper sensing capacity—really sensing with the heart and connecting with the highest future potential. So, yes, the Forum brings people together. But what is the highest potential of such a group? Imagine a possibility of science, consciousness, social arts, and societal transformation really coming together in a new way. It's not just an aspiration you project, but it's a deeper sensing capacity. Arawana, yesterday, in the Awareness-Based Leadership Program[5], you said: Awareness is not only awareness of self and of others, but also awareness of the field of possibility that's dormant within and around us. I think that's the second aspect—sensing into that future, sensing into what might be possible.

The third one is action confidence: Doing. It's having the confidence to say, "Yes, we'll do it tomorrow." Then we do it. It's really stepping into the unknown. And that is very, very applicable to people, because when you bring in 3D Mapping, or 4D Mapping into a traditional context—everyone is facing this threshold. Embodying action confidence does not mean being crazy. In the case of the 4D Mapping, it was grounded in competence, by which I mean YOUR competence, Arawana, to hold the space for that, and it was grounded in feeling it. Before you do something, you can sometimes FEEL whether or not it's going to work.

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[5] Awareness-Based Leadership is a capacity-building program for professionals. https://www.presencing.org/uacademy

Feeling it forward. When we ended our first mapping prototype with the constellators, Arawana, I could feel it. And then I said "let's do it tomorrow." That was not a crazy move. It was based on data. The data was that feeling we had at the end of that prototype the day before. Those were some of the core elements at the point of origin. And it's worth mentioning, because sometimes you may have the other two ingredients but without that confidence to step into this unknown territory (that no one requested, let's say, in a client system) you are not likely to activate this deeper territory.

Marian: Linking to the action confidence, for me, is something about courage and the threshold of risk. There is a questioning there, I think, around what do you have to overcome in order to step into this bold gesture or this unusual way of doing things?

Arawana: I think the confidence comes from the fact that we feel that quality, and that we in fact have faith in this potential of human beings to really be human in the best possible way. And that's where the confidence comes from. That's where action comes from. It is being able to feel that. All three practices [tools] are set up in a certain way to let that come to the surface or to uncover that in some way.

Becoming the Change

Julie: What I was also thinking, listening now and preparing this afternoon, was that they are tools and practices that all help an individual and a collective to clarify what the potential is. They're usually used in a process of change, so it's to help clarify what is becoming or what could be done. But the actual intervention is the transformation. It's not only a practice that helps you clarify what can be changed. It's changed by doing it.

Arawana: I think that's an important fact, that it's personal in that way. Everyone doing all three of these practices has to soften into something. We call it sensing, but you have to kind of sink into something, in order to move forward. You have to touch into something in order to collectively or individually move forward.

Marian: When we talk about dialogue, or actually any level four activity, we talk about the shift of sense of self, or identity. But basically, we're talking about a profound inner transformation that happens. You come out the other side different than you were when you went in. That, to me, links to what you're talking about, Arawana and Julie. The willingness to put yourself into the service of the change process. This then comes to, "be the change that you want to see," which is such a trite phrase now.

> *Theory U* refers to an evolution of awareness from which action arises.
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> Level 1: Habitual – inherited/automatic awareness

> Level 2: Subject-Object – awareness of self and self-interest
>
> Level 3: Empathic-Relational – awareness of other and inter-dependency
>
> Level 4: Generative – awareness of the whole

Julie: I think that's an important one. It's the shift from talking about what should be changed to becoming what is changing. Through the tools, you're becoming one with the process. You don't have that distant look of, "well, this is the problem, that is the situation out there." The process of how we build in certain elements means you cannot do that. You become part of it. You change with it.

Arawana: As Beth said earlier, part of the change is recognizing that there is natural sanity, and there is natural health in the system, whether it's a body-mind-individual system or the team system or the larger system. It's what is hidden because of all of the conflict and fears and confusions and whatever. We're looking at shifting our attention and energy toward the basic sanity and healthiness and potential humaneness, humanity, that's in the system.

Beth: Maybe another way of saying this is that trusting is a part of holding. Trusting that this process is going to work, even at those points where it feels wobbly, or you might have doubts, or the person you're working with is confused, or even you're confused. A facilitator has to have the capacity to hold herself and to hold the process, knowing that it is tapping into a deeper wholeness.

Julie, I also loved your saying: "you are changed by doing it, you become the change." Again, it's not something imposed from the outside or a step-by-step formula. It is holding the process and the person all the way through, and trusting.

Otto: What I'm hearing over the past few minutes is different levels of the same larger theme. Ed Schein, for example, always pointed out that traditionally, people think first there's diagnosis and then there's intervention. He always said that every diagnosis is an intervention. The moment you connect with anyone in the field, the moment you start the sense-making process, that's already the intervention—that's the first intervention. There is no such thing as separating these two things from each other. The sense-making is already changing the field.

## Sensing and Holding the Social Field

Otto: The second thing I'm hearing is the more vertical dimension of what you pointed out, which is actually connected with the core of co-sensing. It seems to be the case that all these tools are connected with a co-sensing phase. When I think back to my own experience of how this really works, I would say there is a horizontal and a vertical dimension that come together. The horizontal is: you

step into different perspectives. That's particularly evident in the co-sensing process. But it's also very evident in the 4D Mapping with the different voices. That's the first. But then the vertical dimension is that it's not just in your head, but you really sense into that with an embodied experience that is very organic if you move into another community and empathize with people there. That also happens in 3D or 4D Mapping environment. It's really the embodied experience of the social field that you go through which activates a deeper level of awareness, not only individually, but also somehow on a collective, a field, level.

That's really the instrument we are working on. I think at the end of the day that is why these things work. We activate and bring awareness to this deeper dimension of a social field. What do I mean with 'deeper dimension'? I mean, on the one hand, the gateway into that as a felt sense of all the different participants in the field, particularly the most marginalized—that's the gateway. But it leads you to the larger space of possibility. Because the surface part of the social field is current behavior. Current patterns. Then when you drop deeper, you sense into the field of possibility, which moves you into the domain of presencing, of course.

That's the bigger change territory that all these tools are components of and that's why, in a specific context, they can have such an impact.

Julie: The question that also comes to my mind and that people often ask me, is "what do you do?" Then when I answer, they say: "Yeah but what do you *really* do?" There is a complete difference between the words coming out of my mouth, let's say, and the work that we're doing, and then being able to articulate that as well.
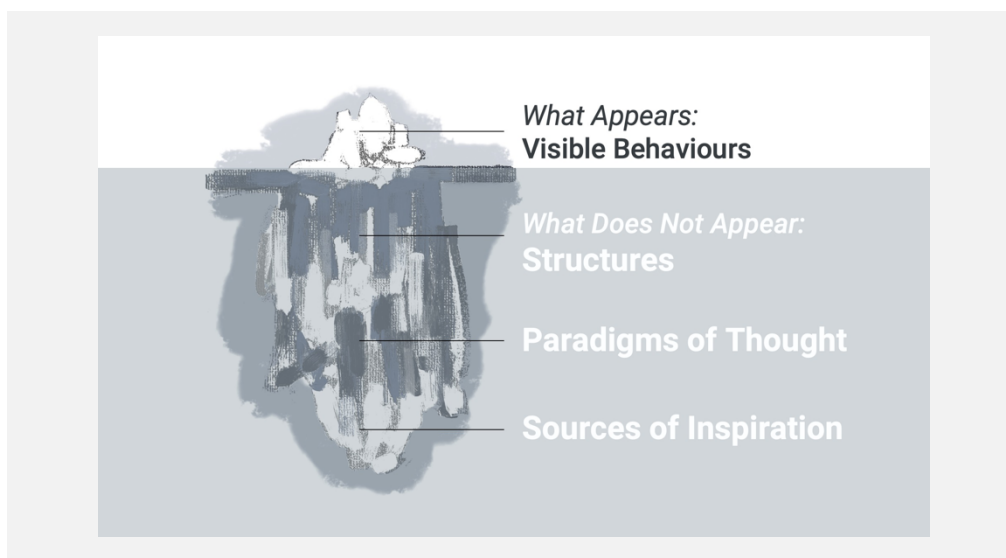
When I used the iceberg model [above] to think about the visible and less visible dimensions of 3D Mapping, the dimensions were:

Collective practice to have shared understanding about current reality

Making structures visible

Uncovering qualities of relationships and their the coherence or lack thereof

Transformational shifts

Those were the four layers that I wrote to describe what is happening in 3D Mapping. But describing the exercise is very different.

If I facilitate a 3D mapping, I am super strong and crystal clear. It comes out as the instruction or like [machine gesture]. There is no uncertainty or confusion. At the same time, I'm actually a Barbapapa. A Barbapapa is this animation figure that is completely fluid, and that can become whatever it wants. So, I become a Barbapapa and become fluid around everybody who's listening. While their head is listening, you're also talking to other parts of them. Remember when I spoke to you, Marian, I said "what you did in the ELP[6] was magic. What did you do?" and you said, "I was talking". You sit on your chair and you're talking, but you then added, "with my attention, I was walking around the room, around the [back of the] circle, and really holding all with my whole intention." You were doing that [*open-armed gesture*]. If we can articulate, "that's what I do."

And yes, I'm doing [*machine gesture*], but at the same time, I'm doing that [*wide-armed gesture*]. That seems like a fascinating conversation. People see what we do, and say, "Okay, I'm going to do that as well, like, [*machine gesture*]". That's not the work. That's just the easy part.

Beth: What I hear beneath what you're saying, Julie, is the question "how do we make the invisible visible? How do we make explicit what we are doing inside ourselves while we're working with a group?" I think we might all articulate this slightly differently. Julie, you described Marian's inner process of attending to the whole room. I think it's important for each to be able to describe this inner stance. For example, I am aware of my heart filling the space and I can therefore sense what is going on in the "heart-field." If we can each articulate our own specific inner practice, it makes it easier for others to access and describe theirs. Marian's description helps me to surface my approach.

Arawana: I wanted also not to diminish the importance of the instructions. We say, "oh, well, there's this deeper level." But I actually think that the instructions themselves are a certain kind of container that allows the participant then to relax a little. One container is just the clarity of the instruction: what the point is and how you do it. And even though we say, "the essence isn't in the tool" there's something about the quality of that level of container. At least for Social

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[6] Eco-system Leadership Program is an eight-month advanced professional development program run by the Presencing Institute.

Presencing Theater it seems very important that people aren't confused about what they're doing; that their mind doesn't jump up because of anxiety and then suddenly they can't understand anything. They're not hearing because they're thinking about how they don't want to do this or don't understand.

> *Social Presencing Theater* (SPT) is a methodology, developed under the leadership of Arawana Hayashi, for understanding current reality and exploring emerging future possibilities through embodied practice.

So, it's the way that we give the instructions, the pacing, the language, the words we use. I've heard people give instruction in Social Presencing Theater where they have the steps, but the words they choose are not the essence of the practice. The words aren't right. Even though the content—the steps—are right. So, the language that we use, even in the instructions, can set up a certain kind of relationship between spaciousness and freedom, but also the simplicity or restriction necessary to get to the point. I don't want us to think the instructions are the least important, because I do think that they carry a certain kind of transmission.

In Closing...

Otto: So, here's my closing question. If we now look back at the conversation that we had, it is really not just about tools, but about the essence of our work and how the tools relate to social fields—and also the essence of what we mean by awareness-based systems change and activating deeper agency in that. If you reflect on the conversation now, what comes to mind?

Beth: Otto, I think your articulation of the three dimensions—aspiration, action confidence, and application to the need—crystallizes the power of the tools, the power of the process, and the intention of the facilitator. This goes to the heart of what we do.

Julie: Something opened around the power of the instruction, how that creates a container. By being crystal clear with our instructions—the when, why and how—we create a container of safety that allows people to surrender to the process and open to the potential for transformation at the bottom of the iceberg.

Marian: For me, the thing that stands out from this whole session is something about a coherence of resonance, if I could put it that way. It started from the first opening words, of how good it is to be here, and how you called it Beth—stepping into a coherent space. Where there's an assumed, a rightly assumed, resonance. That then has become the sort of ground base to build on ideas or thoughts or somebody else's comments. How that's curated, how that's cultivated [is significant] because I think it's a very specific ingredient.

Angela: I think what stands out for me is the social field aspect of it from both sides: from the holding and being aware of it, and also from the other side—what does that mean for that field and its highest future potential? That also stood out for me, to always see the social field aspect of the work. Then the third thing, and they're all connected, is the trust that you brought in, Beth. Trusting that this is even there, that this is there, if you feel it or not. That this is already in the situation, that social field part of it.

Arawana: This is maybe off in left field, but it made me think that in Buddhism there are what are called three yānas: the Hīnayāna, Mahāyāna, and the Vajrayāna. The Hīnayāna is, "do no harm" and self-reflection and developing gentleness and kindness within oneself. Then the Mahāyāna has to do with the sense of bravery that you can go out and actually help other people and much of it is very high aspiration. Then there's a lot of mess, trying to actually be useful and skillful. But it's very much from one's heart. But then the Vajrayāna is this completely messy issue. Every life experience has this wisdom quality. There isn't any difference between what you aspire to and what is present now, which is extremely difficult to conceptually put one's mind around. But there's something about the conversation in which I feel there's a kind of 'this is the level at which you care for yourself, and you care for the instruction, and this is the part that really connects with other people and the field shift, and the kind of love we have for humanity'. But then the action part is how every single moment is the practice.

Otto: There are various things that come up for me. The first thing is how much I enjoyed the past 90 minutes, the pure joy of that. Which makes me aware—I think Peter [Senge] said it first before I started observing it myself—that the quality of a workshop is a function of the quality of relationships among the facilitators, those who hold the space. So the quality of what we saw being activated in the fields of the programs we have been doing together is a function of the quality of our relationships with each other. Maybe that's a fourth source condition—basically love of each other. I think that's the simplest way of describing all our relationships, which are really at the core, the source, of the generative nature of the field which we experience with each other. That's the one thing that's resonating with me, and also real appreciation for that.

If I think about what is the one thing that I learned over the years—when we look back now, 21 years of doing this work together—I would say one thing that I learned is: everyone is interested in impact, but before you go broad, you have to go deep. So that's what we learned, really, with u.lab. Before you have a broad, horizontal impact, you need to create the local roots, really deep, first. So, there is also this—what is the relationship between this deepening, which is often place- or community-based, and then the rippling out to a more democratized access of things. Maybe there's a rhythm between them. But personally, when I feel into my own situation, I feel I need to—at the same time—deepen vertically and also stretch horizontally. I wish it was first one and then the other, but it doesn't always feel like that. So, what is the right rhythm there?

But the main thing for me, I think, is gratitude for being part of such a field that is nourishing, also on the level of the being, and the level of the core. And that allows us to respond to a situation in ways that no one could have done alone, or no one could have done in subsets even. Together we activate this level of possibility, of connection, and also of confidence that is so much needed today.

Further Reading

All of the tools, concepts, and initiatives described above are part of the ongoing evolution of the Presencing Institute's work. A more detailed description of these can be found in the Theory U literature below:

Scharmer, C. O. (2016). *Theory U: Learning from the future as it emerges*. Oakland, CA: Berrett-Koehler Publishers.

Scharmer, C. O. (2018). *The essentials of Theory U: core principles and applications*. Oakland, CA: Berrett-Koehler Publishers.

Scharmer, C. O., & Kaufer, K. (2013). *Leading from the emerging future: From ego-system to eco-system economies*. Oakland, CA: Berrett-Koehler Publishers.