

In Dialogue

# Being Awareness-Based Systems Change

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The Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) Leadership Labs are initiatives offered by the Presencing Institute (PI) in collaboration with the United Nations Development Coordination Office (UNDCO), supporting the UN in systems transformation, leadership, collaboration, and innovation to advance the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. The Labs bring together leaders from various UN agencies and external stakeholders for a systems change process structured around the methods of Theory U<sup>1</sup>.

Theory U is an innovation method for transformative systems change developed by Otto Scharmer that sits at the intersection of action inquiry, social change and consciousness. The U process integrates inner work and outer action through its emphasis on sensing and actualizing the emerging future. There are five phases of the U process, outlined below.

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<sup>1</sup> For more information about Theory U see <https://www.u-school.org/theory-u>



Thirty country-based SDG Leadership Labs have been held so far. Each Lab was facilitated by a Presencing Institute Faculty team who worked with a core team from the UN to customize the process for the specific context of each country. One such Lab was held in Liberia and yielded significant and lasting action.<sup>2</sup> While the program itself was relatively short, a four-month process comprised of several online gatherings and two multi-day in person events, the prototypes for action emerging from the Lab are striking for their significance and scale. Each of the four prototypes was a practice in activating one of 4 key shifts the UN Country Team committed to as an outcome of the Lab. They include:

- *Shift:* “Power to All People: Everything we do is powered by you”  
*Prototype:* “Initiation without Mutilation” is an initiative to end female genital mutilation (FGM). The prototype de-centered the UN as the driver of change and put FGM practitioners at the center of designing and prototyping an alternative rite of passage for young girls, with NGOs and the UN in a supportive role. The key was holding the dignity and economic motivations of the FGM practitioners, who are community and spiritual leaders, as well as the social and cultural benefits of ritual, as key design criteria.
- *Shift:* “We Are One Liberia” shifting the UN’s positioning from offering “programs,” to investing in Liberians’ story-telling and shaping a new national narrative.  
*Prototype:* The “We Are One Liberia” public relations campaign was created to engage leaders and public personalities to

<sup>2</sup> For an overview of the program, see <https://vimeo.com/823838408>

promote a common, positive Liberian identity, particularly in the face of an upcoming national election. The 2023 presidential elections mirrored this narrative and were heralded as an overwhelming success, marking a peaceful transition of power in a country historically plagued by coups and political unrest.

- *Shift: “Advocacy for Resource Allocation”*  
*Prototype:* Recognizing the resource constraints of government, the Lab developed the prototype “Self-Funding Innovative Finance”. This prototype created a multi-stakeholder platform to enable sustainable financing, and is currently being embedded in new UN development contracts.
- *Shift: “Active Citizens, Empowered Communities”*  
*Prototype:* The “County Zwedru Hub” prototype provided a strong platform for decentralizing decision-making, resource allocation and operations to more local levels, and looking beyond government leaders to communities and civil society to demand basic services and drive the nation’s development. A UN Hub was created in a region of the country cut off much of the year due to impassable road conditions, allowing resources to be directed locally rather than nationally.

The experience of the Liberia SDG Leadership Lab reverberated with the facilitation team well after the Lab was finished. Simply put, the team could not get Liberia out of their thoughts. One year later, remarking on the lasting power of the Lab in their own hearts and memories, the team wondered what impact the Lab had in Liberia. Did the Lab matter as much to Liberia as it did to them? Was it actually transformative? And if it was, why? What happened? The team committed to a deep dive inquiry into the experience of the lab, for participants and for themselves. They engaged in their own self-inquiry as a team, interviewed past participants individually and held a group sense-making session, inviting everyone who had participated in the lab. They then shared their experience in a presentation and internal report to the SDG Leadership Lab faculty group, of which dialogue host and JASC Associate Editor, Megan Seneque, is a member.

In this dialogue, Megan and the facilitation team explore the invisible conditions for transformative systems change work including what it takes individually and collectively to provide the quality of holding needed to support such work. The team, who call themselves “The Choir,” turn the beam of observation back on themselves and reflect on living the tensions, aspirations, and realities of being a transformative and transforming system in service of transformational systems change. What follows is an authentic, frank and intimate look at the inner experience of holding systems transformation, including the willingness to look at one’s own role in embodying the dynamics of power, race, and geo-politics.

## Participating in the Dialogue

**Teo Iordache** is a Strategy and Organisational Development Consultant and a faculty member with the Presencing Institute. In his work, he applies approaches from awareness-based system change, ecosystemic leadership, and social innovation. He is increasingly curious to understand how collective and ancestral trauma healing plays a role in the transformation of social systems.

**Dr. Sharon Munyaka** is an Industrial and Organisational Psychologist based in South Africa. She is on the faculty for the Ubuntu Lab Institute, a part of the Presencing Institute. Accredited on various U-School programmes, Sharon is part of the global faculty for the Presencing Institute who facilitate on various programmes. Through the lens of her work in positive psychology, Sharon is a firm believer in focusing on what is right with people. Sharon is committed to contributing to large scale systems transformation, one conversation at a time.

**Liz Alperin Solms**, MPA is Co-founder of Insyte Partners, a Theory U based transformation consultancy that has been guiding and accompanying courageous organisations and leaders who want to innovate, align around shared vision, or take daring collective action for over 25 years. Liz began her career as a Peace Corps Volunteer in the south Pacific, and as a PI Faculty member finds herself today very committed to generating more Theory U capacity and presence in the US. She is excited to be part of the first Presencing Foundation Program in Philadelphia, USA, October 2025.

## Dialogue Facilitator

**Dr. Megan Seneque** is Associate with the Presencing Institute and Research Associate with the Susanna Wesley Foundation at Roehampton University, London. She is a pracademic with a PhD in Systems Science, whose research and praxis explore what it means to intervene in complex systems to co-shape transformative paths. This informs all her research-creation.

## Activating the System: Who and What is Being Activated?

**Megan:** Having listened to your conversation when we were all together as SDG Leadership Lab faculty, and from having read your report, what struck me was you saying that you were coming to understand the difference between “offering a program” and “being a transformation system.” That really had my curiosity, that shift from offering a program which, in some sense, the SDG Leadership Labs were—programs based on Theory U. That was the offer. What I heard you talk about was your collective journey of becoming a transformation system, as you were leading this process of systems transformation.

I thought this was an opportunity to turn the beam of observation back onto ourselves. As we think about “transformative” research, it is also we who are being transformed. There was a lovely piece in the last In Dialogue in the

Journal, where one of our conversants, Ioan Fazey, said: “Are we doing research on transformation? Are we doing research for transformation? Or are we doing transformative research?”<sup>3</sup> Sometimes it's all three, sometimes it's different ones, but it felt for me that for you guys, it was the transformative journey that you each and all went on.

So that's what I'd like to invite each of you to do—to set a context of your own intention and your curiosities around that. What did that shift feel like, that shift from offering a program to being the primary transformation system? Include your own positionality—however you want—in that introduction, because I think other things will unfold and emerge from that.

**Sharon:** What I wanted to add as a way of suggestion is maybe even sharing our “yes” to the assignment. I think the activation began right in the beginning, in acknowledging that the system where we (Presencing Institute) were intervening was in Africa, and that there was a need to include colleagues from Africa. The purpose for me, my yes, was about making sense of the space from the eyes of colleagues from the continent and creating a bridge between them and the facilitation team coming from the West.

So even my own inclusion in the team, I think that again was part of the activation by saying, “Okay, we have a core team, but actually we need to widen it a little bit more.” The work we did as Ubuntu Lab Institute<sup>4</sup> in preparation for facilitation on global PI projects, again points to the intentionality of how we dip into knowledge from different parts of the globe.

I think the activation comes right way back to: what are we (the team) wanting to do there? In our diversity, I was aware that I am entering the team as a Black woman, born in Africa, living in Africa and doing global work with colleagues from other parts of the world.

For me, it was definitely the curiosity of “I'm going to West Africa, I've never been to this country, I've heard all these stories. I'm going to be part of the broader PI system. I don't know these people, I wonder what it's going to be like.” I came in holding curiosity.

And if I just reveal “the Choir” back-end prep, there was lots of reading, there was lots of research about this place that we are going to. What is this place? What is happening in this place? So, for me, the activation started right at the onset.

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<sup>3</sup> For more about transformative and transgressive research, see Koenig et al. (2024).

<sup>4</sup> Ubuntu Lab Institute, “which is the regional expression of the Presencing Institute's u-school, catalyses a dynamic community of African change makers committed to co-creating solutions to the continent's most urgent social, economic, and environmental challenges.” (Ubuntu.Lab, n.d.).

**Liz:** It struck me that from the moment we entered that space, that world, we were reading, reading, reading. I read, of course, the autobiography of the former president and the history of the nation. But I thought, well, I also need to read fiction. And we were sensing, sensing, sensing, looking for where the energy was high and the openness was high to figure out how to position ourselves. I think that we were saying, from the beginning, where can we be useful?

I remember, too, when you start talking about the very beginning of the project, Sharon, for me not only had I never been in Liberia—I'd never been in Africa.

But from the beginning I also remember feeling love. I remember the first time I talked to the UN Resident Coordinator. When I told him our team would bring all we had to supporting him, he told me that the care in those words felt like a light coming through a cave shaft. I think his metaphor was, "when not dealing with our galaxy of partners, our go-to place among ourselves can seem a little subterranean at times." It felt like a little bit of a human connection.

I was thinking about that and realising what that signalled to me: that this is a leader who was just open to human connection. His words maybe *were* a metaphor for "come underground with us. We're really ready." This was shortly followed by "we don't want to do yesterday better." It was the combination of these things that sent this signal to me and to us that we're willing to go to the deep places, because it's that important and pretty much that desperate. I think so much about conditions: what are the conditions for transformation? I think we smelled them—I know I did.

I love your framing, Megan, how were we a "transformation system?" What I know about how to respond to that question is so general. I know a lot of it is about love and fear and surrender. I know all those things are so much a part of what was activated in me, when I think of being an agent of transformation versus offering a program. And also truth telling.

**Teo:** To continue on that, it's interesting because where my mind went first as well, was, "How the hell did I get into this? And what was there?" I got into this because another colleague couldn't travel. I wasn't even supposed to be there. It wasn't by design that I was going to do this.

The second time we went to Liberia, I was, I would say, at the "bottom of the U"<sup>5</sup> on another program I was attending with Thomas Hübl.<sup>6</sup> We had a woman who came into that program, someone who works on racial issues which is quite

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<sup>5</sup> "Bottom of the U" is a reference from Theory U, denoting a phase in the process also called presencing. Presencing "is a blended word combining sensing (feeling the future possibility) and presence (the state of being in the present moment). It means sensing and actualizing one's highest future possibility—acting from the presence of what is wanting to emerge" (Scharmer & Kaufer, 2013, p. 19).

<sup>6</sup> See Timeless Wisdom Training (<https://timelesswisdomtraining.com/>).

interesting, and I was sitting in Liberia. I had also just finished reading the biography of the former president as I flew in and I was in touch with the atrocities that took place during the 20-year war and the longer history of the country.

I was in the middle of that program just before we started our second Liberia event. I almost have this picture of a string of beads of different shapes or a stack of collective traumas that I was just witnessing and how for me, coming from Romania, at the receiving end of ‘power over’ for 2,000 years including recently 50 years of communism, being a victim or a subject of that, how that kind of applied to me. Then the layers of what happened in Liberia, from the slave trade to later on saying, “Oh, here's a piece of territory for you go back ‘home’ to, the ‘freed people.’ We've managed to free you and then completely replicated the trauma of that process by (re)colonising a part of the continent and the people living on this piece of land.”

It was a really weird sort of space, internally, just being with all this. So, to your point that we are some sort of an apparatus of transformation or change, I think I've been hugely transformed by the experience, throughout the experience.

## Catalyst for Transformation: On Being and Becoming the System

**Megan:** There's something there that you're tapping into—something that you were saying, Teo, about being in touch with atrocities, in touch with trauma and witnessing. You've spoken elsewhere that you felt like your accompaniment was one of pattern interruption. Disrupting patterns.

If you think about systemic intervention, it's that every interaction is actually an intervention—our way of knowing is an intervention, which is something that “offering a program” can forget. So that notion of noticing, observing, tuning in, noticing what was unfolding before you. You know what it made me think of is that quote from Bayo Akomolafe;<sup>7</sup> the question that he asks, “what if the way we respond to the crisis is part of the crisis?” This evokes the ethical responsibility of intervening,<sup>8</sup> and what that asks of us.

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<sup>7</sup> In some senses this conversation around “being awareness-based systems change” continues the In Dialogue on Transgressive Knowing from the last journal issue (Koenig et al., 2024), in which Bayo Akomolafe was one of the trouble-makers. For more information about his work, see Akomolafe (n.d.).

<sup>8</sup> Rose (2011) states, “Connectivity ethics are open, uncertain, attentive, participatory, contingent. One is called upon to act, to engage in the dramas of call-and-response, and to do so on the basis of that which presents itself in the course of life” (p. 143).

### Systemic Intervention

Systemic Intervention sits within the tradition of systemic thinking and action research. Flood (2001) comments, “systemic thinking is not an approach to action research, but a grounding for action research that may broaden action and deepen research. That is, action research carried out with a systemic perspective in mind promises to construct meaning that resonates strongly with our experience within a profoundly systemic world” (p. 143).

Midgley (2008) adds, “If intervention is purposeful action by an agent to create change, then systemic intervention is purposeful action by an agent to create change in relation to reflection on boundaries” (p. 66). This reflection on boundaries includes an inquiry into what constitutes ‘the system’, with particular attention paid to the issues, people and knowledges that might otherwise be excluded or invisible (Seneque, 2021).

**Teo:** I just want to name something. I am getting a very strong physiological response just now.

I see a lot of shame, my own shame...I'm sitting with a shame of being, like I feel ashamed of being a White person going to Liberia to run a process. I'm not saying I'm right or wrong, but physically I'm just in the narrative that we're having a particular issue or our own dynamic in the choir and how I showed up or even show up. There is so much stuff just going through my physical body right now as I came back into the experience and looking from where I'm sitting now versus where I was there.

**Sharon:** Thank you Teo. As I'm listening to everyone, I think we were mirroring what was going on in the system—in our own representation, in how we interacted with people.

Beyond just the facilitation team, I think what was evident is the default to Whiteness. It was apparent to me as a Black person who is part of the team but also part of the African continent where the intervention was occurring.

So while the intention right at the beginning was “We are in Africa, we need to bring an African voice and an African face to help bridge some of the nuances or help to activate something in the system,” we just replicated what was already there. Perhaps that was the purpose—to hold up the mirror and say, “This is what is happening.” The UN is trying so hard to support a country in West Africa. The UN colleagues were coming from different parts of the world to work in Liberia. They knew that at the heart of it, while they were committed, the work belonged to Liberians. The UN knew they were there to support, there to anchor. From the discussions in the Lab, people shared how some people in

Liberia perceived the UN almost being like God, “Help us, help us, help us, do this, give more, more, more, more.” Yet that is not their job.

The physiological response that Teo is transmitting through the screen. It's like, “Oh my gosh, we mirrored the system for people.” We were part of that system, knowingly and unknowingly. We represented so many layers that are there and still exist. I think that's why this work continues to matter. You can't just go in there and not be changed.

So the love, Liz, that you are speaking about. That's it for me. It's hard going through that fire. It was hard holding the complexity, but the work matters much more than our own discomfort. As a choir, we had to grapple through those many layers and try and figure out how we are with one another and how we show up in the Lab. In hindsight, we all participated in that transformation, through its ebbs and flows. The system demanded it.

If I think about the work that's needed in the world right now, it's those brave souls that are saying, “Yeah, I'm putting my hand up. I want to do this.” I think there's that signalling of hope. It's that saying “wood touched by fire is not hard to set alight.” The fire lives in all of us. It's just the nudging, whether someone comes with some big audacious idea about how we can enter a space, or someone saying, “This is what worked. Are you willing to try?” Or “can we really be brave and try something different?” “Yeah, we can be brave.” “Are you sure?” “Yeah, we can be sure.” It creates the condition for shifts to really happen.

It's that stepping into courage, which even when one is feeling like it's too much, there's someone else with a fire that's burning a little bit harder or a little bit brighter that ignites the next person to keep going.

**Liz:** A couple of things. Megan, when you said earlier that we witnessed something, it felt deeper than witnessing to me. I think we *felt* something. I feel like everybody was sitting on the edge of their seats hoping that it would go well or hoping to learn something. We could feel possibility moving through us and wanted to be vessels to activate something new, something difference-making. We didn't want to “do yesterday better” anymore.

To Teo and Sharon's reflections about us as a team and the racial and national complexity of our group...I mean, I'm White too...it's impossible not to be hyper aware of race and nationality in a place like Liberia. In the Lab, though, I felt something else beyond my Whiteness. I felt a sense of bridging, of bringing our Theory U framework and practices and my American-ness to a place and group of people as a bridge from what is to what might be. I hadn't recognized the deep history and connection between Liberia and the US, but once I did, I felt there was something useful in me being there and being American. As the oldest member of the facilitation team, and in what is probably the last season of my practice, in me is a sense of handing over, passing off and stepping back for others. I guess these factors mitigated feelings of being part of a “colonial” enterprise. Also, I guess I felt we were the best option this group of amazing

humans had at the time to see and sense the larger forces of development and shift them.

## Revealing Shadows and Disrupting Patterns

**Megan:** I've just come across a really interesting book by Kira Celeste, called *The Colonial Shadow*.<sup>9</sup> It resonated when Teo was talking, and what you just said Liz. She says (in the context of Turtle Island) “may we unsettle and disrupt all the loose colonial rocks we find in the shadows along our way” (p.14). She also says, “may we find the golden vitality of integrity in our own hearts and souls” (p. 14). It's not work for the faint-hearted. That's why I was so inspired when you presented. It was so heartfelt, the journey that the three of you had been on.

So to your inquiry, what is this asking of us? What is this asking of us as an organization, as change makers, as people deeply committed to making a global contribution? Let's explore whatever you feel is going to be revealing and helpful for people who are wanting to navigate this kind of complexity, both local and global.

**Sharon:** I'll jump in again around activating those three intelligences, open mind, open heart, open will, and the comment around the Presencing Institute as an organization becoming more diverse. I think there's that open mind around recognizing that for the work that we're doing globally, our constellation needs to shift. I think there's some courage, but it's not consistent. I'll just reflect on our Liberia experience, where the stakes were high and the Lab needed to work. There's this understanding that we need to broaden our team. We need to make sure our team is representative of the space where we're going to work and, because the organization doesn't have enough representation, new people are brought in. But at the same time, we're holding this need to make sure this goes well. There are lots of moving parts. We were dealing with dynamics of newness: we don't know each other. We're dealing with the complexity of the space we're working. We're dealing with our own blind spots. And we cannot ignore the realities of other diversity markers like race, gender, where we were coming from and how that contributed to the space we created.

I reflect on how we interacted as a team and how it influenced the rest of the system. The reflection for me was on how we either perpetuated or disrupted patterns. So, if we are there to disrupt, if we are there to change systems, part of our work is to continue to notice. Part of our work is to name those disruptions when we see them or experience them... I think there were missed opportunities when we remain silent because the disruptions are not scripted, it is happening in real time. This is real life, it's not a dress rehearsal.

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<sup>9</sup> See Celeste (2023).

I think for us as a community, part of that movement to realize that possibility that there's so much that can be offered from our global community, and it is going to require large doses of courage to actually do the thing. Courage to move beyond just noticing and saying, "Oh, this under-representation is not great because the world is changing." How do we align with those shifts? How do we live out the work that we're trying to do? For me, it requires all of us. Our awareness is going to be critical in this work. We can't go in blind. There's something beyond the slides [used on a program]. There's something else that you are doing, something else that you are bringing that helps to take people from one place to the other. We are active players, and I think we keep going in with that responsibility and awareness of being active players in the system. That contributes to the change that we want.

**Teo:** I want to come in with a couple of things. Tuning back in, I think that it was uncomfortable and it felt to me we actually did honour or kept ourselves into a space of awareness. I think probably there were moments of arrogance and closedness, but there were a lot of moments of being open and also moments of basically dropping our plans, our pre-made scripts and mental models and switching into a posture of acutely paying attention—"What's happening here?" and "I have no idea but I'm just going to listen and see what's happening and then I'll respond to that."

It felt like we were heading through difficult terrain ourselves, along with the clients. There was this opening, opening and opening, opening. It was individually—but also collectively—kind of developing that muscle. We took our own medicine across the experience. We didn't preach something we were not doing, even if we were maybe less perfect and less than competent in moments. We made good use of our tools and approaches to connect with the system and with our own blind spots.

**Liz:** Speaking for myself, I had never been to the continent; I had led many Presencing Institute projects with my own team, but not many with the global team as faculty. I had never met Teo or Sharon before in my life. We were entirely new to each other and we're going into this place where, I think it's fair to say as Sharon did, it felt like the stakes were really high, on behalf of the organization and also because we did fall in love and cared very deeply about these people we had formed a relationship with. We wanted to do good work. It felt like there was so much fear and courage and bravery and sometimes panic—we were always on our edge—there was no settling into "let me just go through the motions" but rather we were attuned to what we were feeling, sensing at every moment. I know I was fully paying attention because I felt I just had to "read" the people, the shared space. I remember all of us saying it feels like we really planned a lot, but then in the moment we just paid attention to what was needed. We really did just let go and tried to see what would show up with each other. I remember just trusting the team that we would know what to do at each decision point as they arrived.

## Everything Participates: Love in Times of Disruption

**Megan:** What I notice is unbelievable whole-hearted engagement. That's what I hear. Probably each of you, in different ways if we're talking about being pattern disruptors, disrupted your own patterns. Your own patterns of being, of working, of being in relationship, of being in non-hierarchical relationship, those patterns were disrupted also. I'm curious about your having experienced the depth that you have.

You allowed your own patterns to be disrupted. You surfaced them, made them visible, and you had the courage to explore those together and not allow relationships to be broken. And the trauma that you were stepping into—if we look at that question of Bayo's, what if the way we respond to the crisis is part of the crisis?

You stepped into an incredibly complex situation from a very complex place full of ambiguity of different kinds. You held it. You learned through that difficulty to become a container. You stepped into tuning into the space, tuning into one another with all the complexities that that takes, and modelling something for the whole.

That's what I notice and what I hear, listening.

**Sharon:** One of the things I think that worked in our constellation was the constant checking in. Even after the Lab, we had standing zoom meetings that we put in the calendar. There was a general willingness: we had a black belt in disruption with our own stuff. We could say, "Okay, we're not happy with each other right now, but you know what? We have work to do. Let's keep it moving." And we would still come back to it: "What could we have done differently?" Then carry on and try and make adjustments as we go. But I think the professionalism and ability to stay focused on the requirements of the assignment provided a container for us to keep working in. We had a job to do, which was much bigger than us and kept on being revealed by the system, especially in the second time that we went in.

One of the reflections also was in looking at the hotel where we were staying and then just outside looking at the conditions. Liz and I had the opportunity to go out and see. Man, that's a paradox and the complexity is alive and well. Knowing the stories of Liberia, witnessing it, listening, holding it, and trying to make sense of it even for me as an African was hard. I was never prepared for this kind of environment. The venue we used for the second Lab was built, as we discovered while in the event, on a burial ground for many slaughtered in the civil war. Knowing the history of that space, I still get chills when I think about it.

The love was there, the compassion for ourselves and for others was there. We were doing our own U-process over and over and over. So we are part of that crisis and we lived it. I don't know if we could have done it differently for sure.

And our group with all that fire that was burning within us, it really kind of held up the mirror.

**Teo:** This is probably the most perceivable—if I could put it like this—perceivable professional experience where I felt there was stuff happening beyond the visible. There was a lot of the invisible and a lot of the stuff that was in the in-between.

We had this conversation before between the three of us. Particularly with some cultures, and this is not specific to African cultures alone, there is this thing that you know what's going on here is not about you, you alone. It is not about us as three people and it's not even about the forty people that were in the second workshop. *Everything participates*.<sup>10</sup> There is a participation, a soup that is flowing through, that includes minerals and it includes electricity switching off and on again and it includes the Nigerian finance minister showing up at lunch randomly, unexpected. It includes me (actually, I remember freaking out) almost not making it to the first lab because of flight disruptions while having back pains, massive back pains. It was almost like somebody was saying if you're going to cross this threshold, it's going to be painful personally. So much is interstitial.<sup>11</sup> I remember that one of the first things I noticed, I think I've mentioned—the first morning after we arrived. I woke up and looked outside and thought, where is the sound of nature? Why is it so quiet here? Where are the birds? Where is nature? It was such a quiet place. It felt like a muteness, a huge absence. It felt as if the place itself was talking to us through that muteness and at the same time it was taking an active part in our work. There were many layers that felt palpable throughout the experience.

**Liz:** You're bringing something up for me. Megan, when you were talking about pattern interruption, I think it's important to say that one of the things we were able to do was to do a giant pattern interruption in terms of how the UN system sees its role in Liberia. It's probably the most important thing we did, and I don't want to forget about it, because I think, and here's where I want to give ourselves some credit, I think one of our capacities as a team is that we were pretty seasoned, all in our different ways, and we understood systems. We were able to hold a group of humans so that they could actually see the system that they

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<sup>10</sup> For many Indigenous cosmologies, everything participates in (knowledge) creation. In such Indigenous paradigms, knowledge is seen “as belonging to the ‘cosmos’ and we humans are only interpreters of that knowledge” (Goodchild 2022, p. 55).

<sup>11</sup> Wikipedia describes interstitial space as, “a space between structures or objects” (Interstitial, 2024) while the Cambridge Dictionary defines interstitial as “relating to spaces between cells, tissues, or organs in the body; relating to connective tissue that supports the working parts of an organ in the body; and relating to the space or time between things” (Cambridge Dictionary, n.d.).

Teo shares, “I used it to point to the things that were happening in between more known and definable moments, elements of the intervention” (personal communication, November 11, 2024).

worked in and see the opportunities to crack it open and recast it. When you were talking about the ether, Teo, of what was moving through, the confidence to “be” a different system, and the knowing that it was necessary, that also moved through all of us.

You called our presence whole-hearted, Megan. But we were also very clear on what was our work and what was not our work. Our sense of purpose felt personal and yet we did not do work that was not ours to do. The system made its own decisions about what it was ready for... and what they were ready for was a pattern interrupt. We cannot claim credit for that. The UN leaders were suffering in terms of their frustration to break through the status quo.

Because they were at that place, and we were at that place of desperation, we were at a place of being so on edge, they could make some big decisions about how to recast the role that we were just useful for, in terms of helping them make those decisions and codify them.

I don't even know the right word for this—I felt so close to so many people in that Lab. It did feel like love, honestly. There's just something about how we touch sacredness coming together in such intimacy in a situation like this. It's kind of its own kind of terrain. It's got an intimacy that's different than others.

**Megan:** I actually noted that theme of love when I was thinking about and preparing for us. You speak about love and how it was manifest. I'm deeply curious about love, and love as part of content of what that means to be a container—to hold the fire, Sharon. What is the quality of love and being and relationality. That, for me, is a deep curiosity in relation to awareness-based systems change. If we say that it is relationship that is the unit of analysis and change, not the individual, what is that asking of us?<sup>12</sup>

I listen to you, you've been part of an alchemical process. It feels like alchemy. As much as it feels like anything else. Yes, you've had your professional expertise, your integrity, your experience, but there's something else that has been released. In the article in the last journal on Fourth Person Knowing<sup>13</sup> “high quality or generative social fields provide the conditions for making fourth person knowing accessible.” I'm wondering if love isn't a key dimension of fourth person knowing. So, as Bayo would say, we don't own knowledge. We don't own intelligence. We don't own love. These are forces, they are generative forces. And to the extent that we are open to them, we can become tuning instruments and they move through us.

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<sup>12</sup> For more on relationality in systems change, see discussion of Marilyn Strathern's work in Koenig et al. (2024, pp. 3–4).

<sup>13</sup> Fourth person knowing is an epistemology proposed by Scharmer & Pomeroy (2024) that is trans-subjective in nature. It denotes knowing that arises and becomes apparent in individual, subjective experience but originates from the source knowing of the social field.

When I listen to you, that is what I hear.

### Love, Power and Justice

The theme of love runs through systems change and social justice work. Martin Luther King, drawing on the work of Paul Tillich, famously stated “Power without love is reckless and abusive, and love without power is sentimental and anemic. Power at its best is love implementing the demands of justice, and justice at its best is power correcting everything that stands against love.” (p. 37–38). This frame continues to inform civil action and social change movements.

More recently, Adam Kahane has expanded on this theme in his book his book *Power and Love*, where he describes the complex and intricate interplay between these two impulses as we address tough problems together. Comparing systems change work to the experience of learning to walk, he states “at first falling, then stumbling forward, and finally moving purposefully toward true, lasting reconciliation and progress” (p. xi).

He further develops this thinking in Kahane (2023).

<https://jabsc.org/index.php/jabsc/article/view/6709/5767>

**Sharon:** One of the quotes that come up for me is from Liz in explaining compassion, “We have our hearts cracked wide open.” I can literally feel our hearts being cracked wide open.

For me, that's what Ubuntu is all about. Ubuntu means, I am because you are. In my view, Ubuntu is understanding that when it rains, it not only rains in my yard, but the rain will also fall in my neighbour's yard. So my wellbeing, my happiness, my existence, all of it is intrinsically tied to the next person. I sincerely believe that Ubuntu is Africa's gift to the world.

When we access the world with the Ubuntu orientation, we get to understand that it is not only about me. Continuing with the rain analogy for Ubuntu, when it rains in my yard, it's also going to rain on my neighbour's yard, even the neighbour that I don't like. That's how it works, right?

I'm so glad love is coming back into the world of work. Love is coming back into how we do things. Because it's forcing us to actually notice the opportunities to strengthen that core muscle up—let me care. Let me care so deeply. Let me care so I can navigate. I can show up. I can be with others in a different way. It changes you. You can't be the same. You actually have to show up differently. I know for myself loss, grief, drama have shaped me in incredible ways that couldn't have happened by just being at school and acquiring intellectual knowledge.

I think that also with the leaders saying, “I'm giving it all. My heart is in this. I love this country. I love my work. I love my colleagues. I am doing whatever I can,” it activated our ability, our confidence. What is at the back? The back is a leader who is saying we are giving it everything that we've got. This is it. The potential is here, and we've got to make it count. It's not about ticking a box. I think that really infused the system.

So, for me, this is real life. Love has a space. Love is the thing. It's that secret sauce when we care about this work, when we care about one another, when we understand that we are connected. It helps move things. Liberia is etched in my memory for that. We did that thing. We did the whole U. We were curious, we were compassionate, we were courageous. We did the thing. And fourth person knowing is alive and, wow, we saw it.

## Witnessing the Past, Re-Telling the Future

**Liz:** The other thing that's been striking me is all our work is about activating the highest potential future and tuning into the future that's in need of us. Another part of our story in Liberia—and everything we did—was about history, about the past.

I think maybe it always is but here more than usual. I think we all read the history of Liberia. But we also interviewed [before the Lab] every single person on the leadership team and asked them their story. We spent time on their stories and we knew each of them. We knew each of their stories. There was someone who grew up during the giant civil war in Nigeria who said: “It was the people from outside who saved my life and brought us food and enabled my family to survive. I swore in that moment as a child that I would return that.” Everybody who was on that team had a story from their past that they were bringing to this moment that we were all in.

We also did something that we don't, at least I don't always, do in these Labs. We asked the group when they first convened, what is Liberia's story of the past? And how does it want to be carried into the future? One of the first things we did in curating the culture of the space was we asked that question. We also asked everyone to say who they want to dedicate their work to. I remember one person—it was so important to him to dedicate his work to his mother. Everybody had somebody, and I think it just charged the space with the connection between the past and the future and charged the space with that feeling that this is it. This is our moment. This is our chance.

**Sharon:** I agree. It's part of the many stories that were there. Everyone had such a unique story that brought them to that place and people just willingly showed up. There was a signalling right from the beginning—this is not just a workshop. We're here to do this work. We are here to work. We are here to support. For me, it took a lot of courage because the context puts the UN on a pedestal. The context makes them the saviour and yet in this moment acknowledging, allowing the space for the Liberia story to surface and the

respect of knowing we are here to do something but acknowledging there are others who are of this land. For me, it was quite something.

**Liz:** It was one thing for everyone else to narrate Liberia’s story, but for the Liberians to tell their story and be witnessed by others was a big deal. And that was when we got the first glimmer of the sentiment one participant voiced, “Liberia, you are my problem child.” This “truth telling” from a Liberian participant opened up a permission structure to re-tell Liberia’s story of the future.

### **Teo**

Yes, I recall that moment. It really felt like we brought the system into the room. It was a panel session early on where we had UN heads of agencies and other senior staff, we had a couple of senior government members, both local and national and one of the key diplomats in the country. These were people who met many times before, in maybe more traditional, more formal settings. We were sitting in a circle, in a room just big enough to fit everyone but not more. There was a perceived feeling of intimacy that one could not avoid. The physical set up made sharing these sentiments almost unavoidable. The conversation was very fresh, very open, quite uncomfortable at times. It couldn’t stay only mental, there was a lot of emotion in the room which in the end brought that message forward with a lot of force. It was a form of witnessing what maybe everyone knew, but for the first time in an open and collective way. It opened the space for the group to move together towards the future as you mentioned, Liz.

## **The Power of Storytelling to Unlock Time—and Bring us to our Present Story**

**Megan:** I have a curiosity. You created the conditions for those personal stories, the Liberian story, to be told, to be heard, and to be meaningful. I’m curious about that. I’d like to pursue that thing about time; the non-linearity of time. So, deeply understanding the past. But as Bayo Akomolafe (quoting Karen Barad)<sup>14</sup>, says “what if the past is yet to come?” He’s speaking as a Nigerian—a Yoruban conception of time.<sup>15</sup>

Many of us in Western contexts have a dominant, very linear orientation to time. There are many cultures that don’t have this concept of time. They hold a view that everything is flowing through, everything participates, that all participates and is interconnected. There’s some very beautiful work, on *Three Horizons*,<sup>16</sup> on futuring work, where Tony Hodgson talks about the ontology of the present

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<sup>14</sup> See Barad (2007), p.ix.

<sup>15</sup> See <https://www.bayoakomolafe.net/post/a-slower-urgency>.

<sup>16</sup> For more on *Three Horizons*, see Sharpe & Hodgson (2019) and Koenig et al. (2022).

moment.<sup>17</sup> The present moment is infinitely “thin” if you believe that time is just a real-world arrow from the past into the future, rather than a feature of our experience and level of awareness, which allow for ‘thicker’ present moments. What this calls for is an anticipatory future consciousness, an alertness in the present moment to knowing that other futures are possible. So I’m listening to you describing this presencing and futuring at the same time; what Scharmer describes as “leading from the future as it emerges.”

**Liz:** The other aspect of time, the convergence of the past, present, future, is the power of storytelling to unlock time. When you were talking, Sharon, about the future, I think one of the moments in the Lab was when people realized that the story Liberians tell themselves about who they are and what their country is about, is a problematic story, and that it's a story that is stopping them from activating what's possible there. I mean, everyone in Liberia seems to know that they are a place of riches, in the land, in agriculture, mining, their culture, but that they can't get at it. They can't get at it. The corruption, the lack of roads. They can't get at it.

I think in the storytelling of past, present, future, when they realized the story we're telling ourselves is a problematic story, and we should try to change that story. The UN can't change that story, Liberians need to change that story. There were four strategic goals that came out of this lab, where the UN essentially said we are going to break our pattern of how we operate in this country and we're going to choose different approaches to intervening—to shift the way we create the conditions for development to happen.

One of them was about supporting a different story by getting the women leaders, the cultural leaders, and the influencers in society to talk about a united Liberia with a strong future. You saw a lot happen after that—a lot of energy. That's when one agency leader who had just arrived in the country said “Who wants to come over to my house between the first Lab and the second Lab and we're going to figure out how we're going to do a prototype on this. I'm going to make you dinner and we're going to pull together a team who is going to do something different.” That was a huge moment—because remember when we got there these people didn't know each other's personal lives. They didn't know who had kids, who didn't have kids, and all of a sudden, I'm inviting you to my house to make a meal for you and we're going to create the conditions for a different story to be told.

That was huge. It brought in humility.

**Sharon:** They were more connected after the Lab. I think just seeing themselves beyond their roles, sharing at that level, I think just enabled so much connection and possibility. And because it was a shared language, it also created

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<sup>17</sup> See Hodgson (2013).

momentum. So, timing. Everything converged. The elections were coming. We went in knowing that new leaders are coming and so that whole concept of time comes alive because we could have deferred the whole thing and said, this is not a good time. Everything is working against it, but actually it turned out to be a beautiful thing.

**Teo:** Sharon, what you share brings up for me another aspect relating to timing and storytelling. There was a particular quality of layering in the timing, or the river of time of our journey in Liberia. Different, I am going to call them, “participating energies” showed up at different moments, as in a snowballing movement, nudging forward and amplifying the work of the collective. Take Liberia’s Honorary Cultural Ambassador, for example. She shows up with her entourage in the middle of the agenda during the second workshop and she bestows on the departing RC the cloth symbols of a traditional chief. Then at the end of the day as the group is building up commitment to take the prototypes forward, she brings everyone together with song and dance. The next day, in the middle of a systems 4D Mapping session (a Social Presencing Theatre approach that helps participants have a deep sense of the system they attend to), the Minister of Interior Affairs walks into the room and after witnessing the process, voices a strong commitment on behalf of the Government of Liberia to support the work of the Lab.<sup>18</sup> There were many such “unplanned” events throughout the journey and it seemed they all fitted with the emergence in the system.

## Confident Vulnerability: Creating the Conditions for Transformation

**Megan:** There's something about transition and transitioning, shaping a new shared identity together. That requires incredible courage and vulnerability together. It's sort of like a kind of a confident vulnerability. It's holding a vulnerability, but feeling it without fear or shame.

When we think about synchronicity, that is a function of understanding how everything is connected and all participates. We are in participatory moments all the time and we don't notice them. We don't tune in. So there's something, you know, when things happen and you go, my goodness, I mean, how could that have possibly followed from that?

A friend recently quoted this Rumi poem, which I'll read to you, because it so speaks to me about your experience.

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<sup>18</sup> See <https://www.u-school.org/4d-mapping>

“The way of love is not  
a subtle argument.  
The door there  
is devastation.  
Birds make great sky-circles  
of their freedom.  
How do they learn it?  
They fall, and falling,  
they're given wings.”

**Liz:** The term you used, “confident vulnerability,” I think that's good language for the feeling of being present in the moment. The other thing is that you *know* when you're in that space. You know that kind of confident vulnerability. I guess that's a more nuanced way to describe authenticity, when you're really present for whatever is going to show up. I think that is really what we are all moving in and out of accessing in our roles. It feels like something you dance with.

**Teo:** While we're speaking of birds and wings, finally an image is crystalizing for me, or more of a felt sensation, which speaks to our experience as “the Choir” and also that of working with the group and the system, the field in Liberia. Though I am not a starling and therefore I cannot claim first person knowing, our “dance” did feel like a starling murmuration, the way starlings swarm, particularly in winter here in the Northern hemisphere. What kept me in flight was a constant sensing with my nearby fellow birds and with the bigger body that was in movement. This was a lot more important than—though critically collaborating with—pre-existing knowledge and competence. It ties in with this notion of “confident vulnerability.”

**Sharon:** There's a quote by John Schaar that I have referenced over the years. “The future is not some place we are going, but one we are creating. The paths are not to be found, but made. And the activity of making them changes both the maker and the destination.”<sup>19</sup> Something is happening. You will get touched.

It's being okay with not knowing. So that shift, you're kind of playing in that shift, I guess, that bottom of the U- type place where something is going to come up. I don't know what, but I need to go there. I need to just put one foot forward.

**Megan:** There's some beautiful literature about how we are changed through our intra-actions. So we talk about interaction, but Karen Barad, the quantum physicist I mentioned earlier, talks about entanglement, intra-action, and how

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<sup>19</sup> See [https://www.goodreads.com/author/quotes/7132358.John\\_Schaar](https://www.goodreads.com/author/quotes/7132358.John_Schaar)

we are constantly being shaped through every interaction.<sup>20</sup> In the book that I'm reading at the moment called *The Minor Gesture* by Erin Manning, her description of a pluriverse of practices is what struck me when I was listening to you.<sup>21</sup> She describes a pluriverse of practices or an ecology of practices: "...the ecology of practices is not straining toward homogeneity, but toward a bringing-into-relation of difference. An ecology of practices activates the relational field at its point of inflection, creating a new composition that is capable of keeping difference alive" (p. 234).

People are writing about it, you've practised it.

It's a deep privilege for me to have been in your company and presence today, really. In some sense, I feel that you have a good idea and that you have no idea what you actually did—and the word is not succeeded—what it is, that you lived, what you enabled, what you were catalyst for, in yourselves, amongst one another, and in the whole.

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<sup>20</sup> See Barad (2007).

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