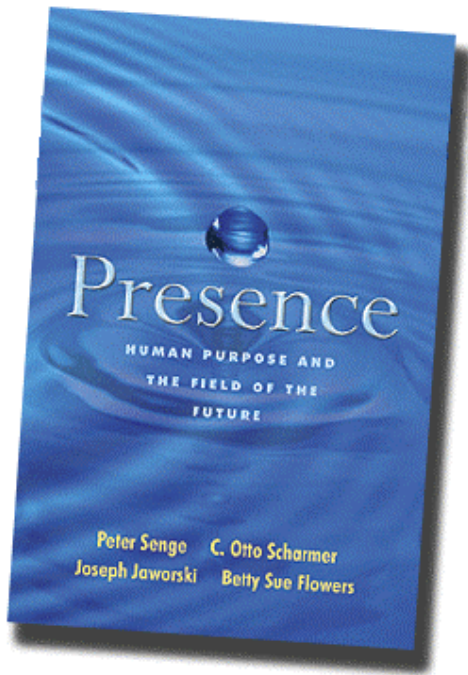


A Presence Reader

*We have no idea of our capacity
to create the world anew.*

— Peter Senge



Presence: Human Purpose and the Field of the Future

by Peter Senge, C. Otto Scharmer, Joseph Jaworski, and Betty Sue Flowers

published (2004) by SoL – The Society for Organisational Learning

Hardbound, 304 pages. Cost: \$40 US

How would the world change if we learned to access, individually and collectively, our deepest capacity to sense and shape the future? This is just one of the questions posed by the authors of a book that combines unusual personal honesty with rigorous critical thinking.

Presence: Human Purpose and the Field of the Future gives the reader an intimate look at the development of a new theory about change and learning. In wide-ranging conversations held over a year and a half, Senge, Scharmer, Jaworski, and Flowers explore their own experiences and those of one hundred and fifty scientists and social and business entrepreneurs in an effort to explain how profound collective change occurs. Their journey of discovery articulates a new way of seeing the world, and of understanding our part in creating it—as it is and as it might be.

Radical and hopeful, *Presence* synthesizes leading-edge thinking, first-hand knowledge, and ancient wisdom to explore the living fields that connect us to one another, to life more broadly, and, potentially, to what is “seeking to emerge.” Seven capacities underlie our ability to see, sense, and realize new possibilities. Developing these capacities accesses a deeper level of learning that is the key to creating change that serves the whole—ourselves, our organizations, and the communities of which we are a part.

for online orders see www.presence.net

or order from Amazon.com by clicking [here](#)

The Deeper Dimensions of Transformational Change — A Call to Collective Inquiry and Action

by David I. Rome

(from the *Systems Thinker* newsletter)

Presence: Human Purpose and the Field of the Future (Society for Organizational Learning, 2004) represents a further evolution of many of the themes presented in Peter Senge's classic *The Fifth Discipline* and its sequels. Written by Senge, Claus Otto Scharmer, Joseph Jaworski, and Betty Sue Flowers, this latest book takes a fresh, daring, and deeply felt leap into a space that can only be described as spiritual. It challenges us to ask both as individuals and in our organizational lives: What are we here for? What do we really care about? How can we serve an emerging future for our planet that averts environmental degradation and species destruction—including our own? To meet this awesome challenge, the authors say we must recognize and overcome a huge blind spot, one that "concerns not the what and how—not what leaders do and how they do it—but the who, who we are and the inner place or source from which we operate, both individually and collectively."

A Shift in Awareness

In keeping with its theme of emerging futures, the book itself unfolds as a dialogue among the authors over a period of a year and a half (tellingly punctuated by September 11, 2001). Through a series of informal meetings, the four, all established organizational learning leaders and clearly also good friends, explore and enrich their understanding of the concept of "presence."

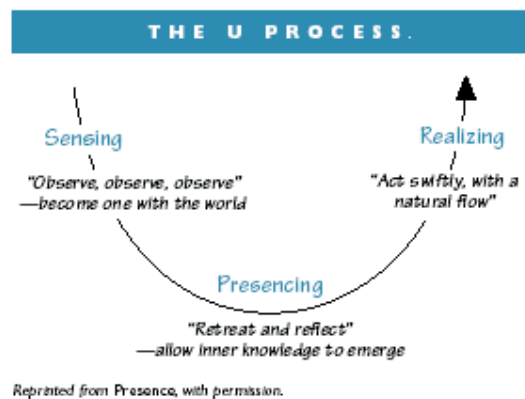
It is not easy to say in a sentence or two what they mean by this word. The nature of presence is by definition experiential—something we feel and know in certain moments of insight, inspiration, and power. The basis for presence is awareness—being present in the moment to what is happening *just now* as opposed to our habitual ways of knowing, saying, and doing (which the authors refer to as "downloading"). But presence is more than merely being in the moment; it is also a deeper way of listening that allows us to let go not only of habitual ways of understanding the external world but also of our own fixed sense of identity. It loosens our desire for personal confirmation and control in favor of "making choices to serve the evolution of life." Presence is a process of "letting come," a way of "participating in a larger field of change" by which "the forces shaping a situation can shift from recreating the past to manifesting or realizing an emerging future."

The authors acknowledge that this shift in awareness has much in common with traditional teachings and practices of Buddhism, Taoism, esoteric Christianity, Sufism, and indigenous cultures. They say that what is now needed in modern society is an account of how such a shift of awareness can be cultivated as a collective practice. Here lies the concept's crucial connection to contemporary institutions, and it is here that *Presence* makes a fresh and provocative contribution to organizational learning theory. Organizations, from small working groups to—potentially—global companies, can be the fertile ground for cultivation of a life-serving collective transformation.

“Theory of the U”

The unfolding conversation presented in this book is by no means random or lacking in rigor. It is built around a strong theoretical skeleton that itself is based on research carried out over several years prior to and during the conversations. The research, conducted by Scharmer and Jaworski, consists of more than 150 probing interviews with “thought leaders” —leading scientists and business and social entrepreneurs around the world. Among the most frequently cited are Francisco Varela, the Chilean-born biologist, cognitive scientist, and practicing Buddhist who developed groundbreaking theories about the nature of life and living systems before his untimely death in 2000 (*Presence* is dedicated to him), and Brian Arthur, Santa Fe Institute economist, complexity theorist, and practicing Taoist.

The theoretical skeleton, developed by Scharmer from the interview material, is called “Theory of the U.” It proposes a three-stage model for deep change, with the letter U serving as a simple and elegant visual device (see “The U Process”). The lefthand, downward stroke of the U is called “sensing,” the turn at the bottom is “presencing,” and the upward stroke is “realizing.” The authors make the point that these three stages are not in themselves so different from standard models of learning and innovation that involve a progression from observation and data-gathering to reflection to action. What is different, and crucial, is the *depth of experiencing* achieved in the U process. In other words, a conventional observe-reflect-act model is a sort of shallow U. It may produce innovation, but only within the same frame of reference from which it began. The standard model “pays little attention to the inner state of the decision maker.” It does not challenge and remake the identity of the change agents themselves.



To arrive at the deeper experience of presencing, we must first cultivate a deeper kind of observation, called “sensing.” This involves a specific set of experiential capacities that, though innate, must be developed. Based in the work of Varela, these subtle internal gestures are called “suspending,” “redirecting,” and “letting go.” Roughly speaking, “suspending” is the ability to pause one’s habitual flow of ideation and mental models built up in the past, in the service of opening up a space of consciousness that is free from already-formed concepts.

“Redirecting,” also described as the ability to “see from the whole to the part,” is especially subtle and crucial. It is essentially a psycho-spiritual capacity to dissolve the boundaries between seer and seen, subject and object. “What first appeared as fixed or even rigid begins

to appear more dynamic because we are sensing the reality as it is being created, and we sense our part in creating it. This shift is challenging to explain in the abstract but real and powerful when it occurs.”

The third gesture, “letting go,” is the capacity to “surrender our perceived need to control.” It is the antidote to fixed views and attachments, self-concepts, and even ideas that form during the process of innovation. The gesture of letting go brings us back to the present moment, the here and now, as both concrete reality and an endless open field of fresh possibility.

The bottom of the U is “presencing,” the mysterious, transformative moment of “field shift” – a deeply felt paradigm shift in which participants’ sense of who they are alters in synchronicity with the arising of new, previously unimaginable options for action. The authors give dramatic examples of this moment, drawn from both individual and group experiences. The two most powerful examples of collective presencing are from conflict-mediation situations. In one, a meeting among black and white South Africans during the Apartheid era leads to a stunning, in-the-moment realization by a taciturn Afrikaans businessman of the deep racial prejudices ingrained in him from childhood. His anguished but genuine confession generates an extraordinary collective experience of pain, mutual recognition, and breakthrough. In the second instance, an eyewitness account of a mass grave site from the Guatemalan civil war produces one shocking detail that dissolves the conceptual and emotional barriers among a group of former enemies. A long and pregnant silence ensues, in which a deep commonality is recognized and a commitment to building a life-affirming future for the country is born.

The final movement of the U is “realizing,” a three-stage process of operationalizing the radical learning achieved in “sensing” and “presencing.” A key injunction here is that, after the slowing down and deepening of the earlier stages, realizing must be executed with swiftness and courage. Given that many of our organizational situations do not lend themselves to abrupt change, how is this possible? The authors recommend “rapid prototyping” – quickly enacting innovative ideas as small-scale, real-world experiments. They make the point that, in prototyping, you construct and test a model before you understand the whole of the emergent situation. It is only through a rapid cycle of experiments involving the “capacity for self observation and course correction in real-time” that a sustainable new operational design can emerge. “Prototyping is not about abstract ideas or plans but about entering a flow of improvisation and dialogue in which the particulars inspire the evolution of the whole and vice versa.”

The end point of the U comes when innovation is institutionalized. Scharmer says, “[Institutionalizing] can sound like making something that is rigid and fixed. I think of it as more like the collective equivalent of embodying – we know we’ve learned something when it becomes part of how we do things. Until the new becomes embedded in its own routines, practices, and institutional laws, it’s not yet real.”

As an example of this kind of institutionalizing, and of the whole U process successfully carried through to unforeseen and powerful results, the authors describe the creation of Visa in the late 1960s and early 1970s under the leadership of Dee Hock. Visa is now one of the largest businesses in the world, but rather than being publicly traded, it is owned by its 22,000 member institutions, which are simultaneously one another’s suppliers, customers, and competitors. Its groundbreaking network design – Visa operates as a worldwide democracy governed by a common purpose and set of principles but with an unfettered capacity to grow and change in response to local conditions – emerged through a multi-year

process of dialogue among key players in the industry. "Visa was born out of deep immersion in the chaos of the early days of the credit card industry. That chaos ultimately gave way to a sense of the unique opportunity that was available – if people could suspend their established assumptions about banking, set aside their self-interest, and truly see what was needed to serve an emergent whole." The ultimate breakthrough came about when Hock and his colleagues were able to imagine a business model patterned after a complex living system built up from genetic code.

Senge emphasizes that both the process of reinventing the credit-card industry and the innovative solution arrived at were democratic processes, as opposed to the "totalitarian dictatorships" that still function in most of our institutions. He makes a powerful plea for true democracy within organizations: "[T]his is the defining feature of our era regarding leadership. In a world of global institutional networks, we face issues for which hierarchical leadership is inherently inadequate."

Our Own Sources of Power

In the end, *Presence* returns to a theme first articulated in *The Fifth Discipline*, that the capacity to do all of this depends on personal mastery, and specifically on the cultivation of reflective awareness. The authors cite Buddhist meditation and other Eastern contemplative practices as powerful methods for this cultivation. Senge, who speaks from his own deep commitment to study and daily meditation under the direction of a remarkable Chinese Zen-Taoist-Confucian master, uses a simple systems diagram to illustrate the pervasive dysfunction lying at the heart of modern culture. He says: "Western culture's growing reliance on reductionist science and technology over the past 200 years fits the shiftingthe- burden-dynamic remarkably well, revealing a play of forces that create growing technological power and diminishing human development and wisdom. . . . By giving us perceived power, modern technology reduces the felt need to cultivate our own sources of power."

For deep organizational and societal change to occur, there must be an ongoing synergy between the personal personal and the collective. Generating new options depends both on the inner development of individuals and on collective processes in which they mutually enact the field of the emergent future. *Presence* concludes on a hopeful note that contains a call to inquiry and to action. "The changes in which we will be called upon to participate in the future will be both deeply personal and inherently systemic. The deeper dimensions of transformational change represent a largely unexplored territory both in current management research and in our understanding of leadership in general." Auspiciously, this book serves as a personal and collective compass to guide us into this new land.

David I. Rome is senior vice president for planning at the Greyston Foundation, an integrated system of nonprofit and for-profit organizations in Yonkers, New York, that offers a wide array of programs and services to more than 1,200 men, women, and children annually. He also presents "Deep Listening," a training program in reflective awareness and communication skills.

Presence — a Review

by Robert Fritz

Peter Senge, Claus Otto Scharmer, Joseph Jaworski and Betty Sue Flowers have just released a remarkable book entitled *Presence - Human Purpose and The Field of the Future*.

The book is doing something quite original. Rather than the typical transference of information proclaimed from on high from esteemed author-experts, it's a look behind the curtain as the authors engage in an organic search for authentic insights and understanding in areas which do not easily lend themselves to understanding.

Presence is not a book that proposes definitive answers. Nor is it a book in which the reader can immediately translate insights into actions. It is not a "how to," or a "here's how it goes," or a "this is what you should think." If anything, it's an exploration by four very fine minds who are also very good people. Together, they are developing a thought process that delves into the current precarious condition of the world. They wonder aloud if humanity can understand the profound changes it needs to survive, they connect dots of science, ancient wisdom, and their personal experiences. They play off each other, developing lines of reflection, egging each other on, sharing personal stories, joining each other in questioning, looking, searching, and sometimes, finding answers. But the answers they discover are not designed to be Truths one should come to believe. Rather they are perspectives from which to view reality, flexible vantage points that engender looking further, deeper, higher.

If you read *Presence*, which I hope you do, I suggest you read it more as if it were a documentary film rather than a typical book. There is something quite cinematic in the way the book develops. Often, the four authors are meeting in Otto Scharmer's Cambridge home, and we, the readers, are suddenly there, observing the flow of ideas that develop as they engage in a penetrating exploration of the human condition. Often the conversation is philosophical. Other times they tell each other stories that allow us to live vicariously in their experience. The stories are often moving, touching something deeper within the human spirit.

One such story is about a training Peter Senge conducted in South Africa in 1990 on the eve of the breakdown of apartheid. Within the group of thirty, half were white business executives and half black community organizers. At that point in South Africa's history, these people took quite a risk to attend Peter's workshop. On the last day of the program, President F. W. de Klerk appeared on television and gave the now famous speech that began the process of rejecting apartheid. The group was making history and also being a witness to a great historic moment. At the end of the training, when people were making their closing statements, a taciturn Afrikaans business executive looked in the eyes of one of the black leaders and said, "I want you to know that I was raised to think that you were an animal." And then he began to cry. The black leader nodded, and Peter described the impact of this moment as "a huge knot becoming untied"...they were becoming free, even though free elections were still four years in the future.

Otto Scharmer tells a story of his family home being destroyed by fire when he was in his teens. The family had lived there for many generations, but now 350 year-old farmhouse was gone. The next day, his eighty-seven year old grandfather arrived, summoned all the energy he had left, walked straight to where Otto's father was working on clean-up, took his hand

and said, "Keep your head up, my boy, look forward." He then turned around, walked back into a waiting car and left. A few days later he died. Otto's eyes were tearing as he told the story. "You can see that even after all these years, this moves me still -- that little scene of my grandfather walking by, ignoring the ruins of his home, and focusing all his remaining life energy on shifting my father's attention from reacting to the past to opening up what might emerge from the future."

One of the major themes *Presence* explores is the world as a living system. Much of the ecological dangers the earth faces are from the inability of people all over the world to understand how their local decisions are connected to the breakdown of our environmental systems. The authors discuss what type of changes it will take for people to understand their interrelatedness to their planet. Rather than prescriptive answers, the authors let their thought process lead them to consider nature, consciousness, science and technology, spiritual traditions, personal experiences and emotions, and the multidimensional approach that humanity must confront.

Peter Senge has always been a brilliant shining light. I am awed by his ability to bring people into higher levels of perspective, much higher than most of us are able to envision on our own. Having known him for a long time, I know this is part natural talent, but also part discipline, part self-generated growth, and also true intellectual integrity. Peter is dedicated to evolve as a person and is a true lifetime learner, a phrase he helped popularize.

In Peter's speeches, there's a way that he seems to "think in public" so as to include the audience in the essence of his thought process. He is able to provoke visions of new possibilities, insights, and greater involvement with life. He does this, not as a preacher or motivational speaker, but as a soulful and brilliant thinker who is able to bring others into the universe he inhabits.

Over the years, Peter has grown from a system dynamisist, to the prime figure in the Learning Organization movement, to a leader in "learning communities." He began his career dealing with management issues, and has developed into an agent of social change, thought leader, and now, a true world leader.

In *Presence*, we get an almost "meta-lesson" by watching how he interacts with his colleagues. Although a monumental public figure, he never dominates the conversation. He truthfully explores his own dilemmas, poses penetrating questions, shares his spiritual and intellectual quest, and listens carefully as his fellow authors express their thoughts. Peter, Otto, Joe, and Betty Sue are equal players in , and the result is a book with "emotional truth" (as they say in theater.) Something rings true even beyond the ideas they explore. The something is not simply the ideas, but the dialogue, the reaching, the goodness of these four people, their lack of ego and the presence of their humanity.

The process of creating this book began in the fall of 2000. The events of September 11th, 2001 causes a change of tenor in their ongoing conversations as they delved even more deeply into questions of human development and survival. The group's major theme is that our way of thinking is limited and faulty. They encourage thinking in wholes rather than in fragmented parts. They look at systems of relationships rather than single isolated events demanding solutions. And from this perspective, they are able to look freshly at the world and ask new questions that open new possibilities to consider.

The book is not only conversation among the group, but also essays written in a single voice. The play of conversation and essay keeps the book moving forward over time, expanding

our understanding, and enabling us to engage in a wonderful combination of intellectual and visceral experience with the authors.

The book's title *Presence* can be understood in many ways, as the book progresses we are able to be in the presence of these remarkable people, while even more "present" to ourselves and the world we inhabit. Presence is a journey from the present to an unknown future, a journey of exploration rather than dogma, a journey of creating rather than reacting or responding to prevailing circumstances, a journey toward a vision of humanity at its highest.

Robert Fritz, composer, filmmaker, and organizational consultant, is founder of Technologies for Creating,® and author of *Your Life as Art* and the international bestseller, *The Path of Least Resistance*.

Reflections

The SoL Journal
on Knowledge, Learning, and Change



FEATURE ARTICLE

**Awakening Faith in
an Alternative Future**

Peter M. Senge, C. Otto Scharmer,
Joseph Jaworski, and Betty
Sue Flowers

Awakening Faith in an Alternative Future

A Consideration of *Presence: Human Purpose and the Field of the Future*

By Peter M. Senge, C. Otto Scharmer,
Joseph Jaworski, and Betty Sue Flowers

With so many social systems – families, companies, governments, communities and societies – in disarray, it often seems that the future does not look promising. The scenarios we imagine most easily reveal our worst fears rather than the legacy to which we aspire. What can we do? Based on extensive research, first-hand experience, and a multi-year dialogue, Peter Senge, Otto Scharmer, Joseph Jaworski, and Betty Sue Flowers – authors of the new book *Presence: Human Purpose and*

the Field of the Future – have concluded that in order to “create the world anew” we will be called to participate in changes that are both “deeply personal and inherently systemic.” Given Sol’s mission to support the interdependent development of individuals and their institutions, we are delighted to share highlights of the authors’ exploration into the essence of generative learning. The article that follows is based on the introductory chapters of their book.¹ — Sherry Immediato, Publisher



Peter M. Senge



C. Otto Scharmer



Joseph Jaworski



Betty Sue Flowers

Although the four of us came from quite different backgrounds, we did share one thing in common: we had all experienced extraordinary moments of collective presence or awakening, and seen the consequent shifts of large social systems.

One of those moments occurred in South Africa in 1990. Peter was in the hill country north of Johannesburg, coleading a three-day leadership workshop that had been offered for 15 years, but never in South Africa. His colleagues included a black South African and a white South African who were being trained to lead the program on their own in the future. There were 30 people attending; half were white business executives and half, black community organizers. Many took personal risks to participate in the program.

On the last day of the program, the group heard that President F. W. de Klerk was going to give a speech, so they took a break and gathered in front of a television set to watch. This

turned out to be the famous speech that set into motion the ending of apartheid. In the middle, de Klerk began to list all the previously banned black organizations that were now being “unbanned.” Anne Loetsebe, one of the community leaders, was listening with rapt attention. Her face lit up as de Klerk read the name of each organization: the African National Congress (ANC), the Pan Africanist Conference, and so on. Afterwards, she said that as each organization was mentioned, she saw in her mind’s eye the faces of different relatives who would now be coming home.

After the speech the group reconvened and completed the program as usual. Later that afternoon, they watched, as was the custom in the program, a video of Martin Luther King, Jr.’s “I have a dream” speech. This had been banned in South Africa and many of the participants had never seen it before. Finally, the program closed with a “check-out” that gave each person a chance to say whatever he or she wanted. The first four people made lovely comments about how meaningful it had been for them to be there and what they had learned about themselves and about leadership. The fifth person to speak was a tall Afrikaans business executive. This man, like many of his business colleagues, had been reserved and shown little emotion during the program. He now stood and turned to look directly at Anne. “I want you to know that I was raised to think that you were an animal,” he said. And then he began to cry. Anne just held him in her gaze and nodded.

“As I watched this,” says Peter, “I ‘saw’ a huge knot become untied. I don’t know how to describe it except to say it was as if a rope simply became untied and broke apart. I knew intuitively that what had been holding him and so many others prisoners of the past was breaking. They were becoming free. Even though Nelson Mandela was still in the Robben Island prison and free elections were still four years in the future, I never had any doubt from that moment that significant and lasting change would occur in South Africa.”

The four of us shared a common desire to understand better how such moments and the underlying forces for change they signal come about. We felt that what we had written in the past, at best, described the words but left the music largely in the background. Contemporary theories of change seemed, paradoxically, neither narrow enough nor broad enough. The changes in which we will be called upon to participate in the future will be both deeply personal and inherently systemic. The deeper dimensions of transformational change represent a largely unexplored territory both in current management research and in our understanding of leadership in general. As Otto puts it, “This blind spot concerns not the what and how – not what leaders do and how they do it – but the who: who we are and the inner place or source from which we operate, both individually and collectively.”

Of Parts and Wholes

Presence offers a theory of profound change that is both radical and simple, based first on understanding the nature of wholes, and how parts and wholes are interrelated. Our normal way of thinking cheats us. It leads us to think of wholes as made up of many parts, the way a car is made up of wheels, a chassis, and a drive train. In this way of thinking, the whole is assembled from the parts and depends upon them to work effectively. If a part is broken, it must be repaired or replaced. This is a very logical way of thinking about machines. But living systems are different.

Unlike machines, living systems, such as your body or a tree, create themselves. They are not mere assemblages of their parts but are continually growing and changing along with

their elements. Almost 200 years ago, Goethe, the German writer and scientist, argued that this meant we had to think very differently about wholes and parts.

For Goethe, the whole was something dynamic and living that continually comes into being “in concrete manifestations.”² A part, in turn, was a manifestation of the whole, rather than just a component of it. Neither exists without the other. The whole exists through continually manifesting in the parts, and the parts exist as embodiments of the whole. The inventor Buckminster Fuller was fond of holding up his hand and asking people, “What is this?” Invariably, they would respond, “It’s a hand.” He would then point out that the cells that made up that hand were continually dying and regenerating themselves. What seems tangible is continually changing; in fact, a hand is completely re-created within a year or so. So when we see a hand – or an entire body or any living system – as a static “thing,” we are mistaken. “What you see is not a hand,” Fuller would say. “It’s a ‘pattern integrity,’ the universe’s capability to create hands.”³

For Fuller, this “pattern integrity” was the whole of which each particular hand is a “concrete manifestation.” Biologist Rupert Sheldrake calls the underlying organizing pattern the formative field of the organism. “In self-organizing systems at all levels of complexity,” says Sheldrake, “there is a wholeness that depends on a characteristic organizing field of that system, its morphic field.”⁴ Moreover, Sheldrake says, the generative field of a living system extends into its environment and connects the two. For example, every cell contains identical DNA information for the larger organism, yet cells also differentiate as they mature – into eye, heart, or kidney cells, for example. This happens because cells develop a kind of social identity according to their immediate context and what is needed for the health of the larger organism. When a cell’s morphic field deteriorates, its awareness of the larger whole deteriorates. A cell that loses its social identity reverts to blind, undifferentiated cell division, which can ultimately threaten the life of the larger organism. It is what we know as cancer.

To appreciate the relationship between parts and wholes in living systems, we do not need to study nature at the microscopic level. If you gaze up at the nighttime sky, you see all of the sky visible from where you stand. Yet the pupil of your eye, fully open, is less than a centimeter across. Somehow, light from the whole of the sky must be present in the small space of your eye. And if your pupil were only half as large, or only one quarter as large, this would still be so. Light from the entirety of the nighttime sky is present in every space – no matter how small. This is exactly the same phenomenon evident in a hologram. The three-dimensional image created by interacting laser beams can be cut in half indefinitely, and each piece, no matter how small, will still contain the entire image. This reveals what is perhaps the most mysterious aspect of parts and wholes: as physicist Henri Bortoft says, “Everything is in everything.”⁵



When we eventually grasp the wholeness of nature, it can be shocking. In nature, as Bortoft puts it, “The part is a place for the presencing of the whole.”⁶ This is the awareness that is stolen from us when we accept the “machine” worldview of wholes assembled from replaceable parts.

The Emergence of Living Institutions

Nowhere is it more important to understand the relation between parts and wholes than in the evolution of global institutions and the larger systems they collectively create. Arie de Geus, author of *The Living Company*⁷ and a pioneer of the organizational learning movement, says that the twentieth century witnessed the emergence of a new species on earth – that of large institutions, notably, global corporations. This is a historic development. Prior to the last hundred years, there were few examples of globe-spanning institutions. But today, global institutions are proliferating seemingly without bound, along with the global infrastructures they create for finance, distribution and supply, and communication.

It's common to say that trees come from seeds. But how could a tiny seed create a huge tree? Seeds do not contain the resources needed to grow a tree. These must come from the medium or environment within which the tree grows. But the seed does provide something that is crucial: a place where the whole of the tree starts to form. As resources such as water and nutrients are drawn in, the seed organizes the process that generates growth. In a sense, the seed is a gateway through which the future possibility of the living tree emerges.

This new species' expansion is affecting life for almost all other species on the planet. Historically, no individual, tribe, or even nation could alter the global climate, destroy thousands of species, or shift the chemical balance of the atmosphere. Yet that is exactly what is happening today, as our individual actions are mediated and magnified through the growing network of global institutions. That network determines what technologies are developed and how they are applied. It shapes political agendas as national governments respond to the priorities of global business, international trade, and

economic development. It is reshaping social realities as it divides the world between those who benefit from the new global economy and those who do not. And it is propagating a global culture of instant communication, individualism, and material acquisition that threatens traditional family, religious, and social structures. In short, the emergence of global institutions represents a dramatic shift in the conditions for life on the planet.

It may seem odd to think about titanic forces such as globalization and the information revolution as arising from the actions of a new species. But it is also empowering. Rather than attributing the changes sweeping the world to a handful of all-powerful individuals or faceless “systems,” we can view them as the consequences of a life form that, like any life form, has the potential to grow, learn, and evolve. But until that potential is activated, industrial-age institutions will continue to expand blindly, unaware of their part in a larger whole or of the consequences of their growth, like cells that have lost their social identity and reverted to undifferentiated growth for its own sake.

The species of global institutions reshaping the world includes non-business organizations as well. Today, for example, it's possible to enter an urban school in China or India or Brazil and immediately recognize a way of organizing education that has become completely taken for granted in the West. Students sit passively in separate classrooms. Everything is coordinated by a predetermined plan, with bells and whistles marking time, and tests and grades to keep things moving like one giant assembly line. Indeed, it was the assembly line that inspired the industrial-age school design, with the aim of producing a uniform, standardized product

as efficiently as possible. Though the need to encourage thoughtful, knowledgeable, compassionate global citizens in the twenty-first century differs profoundly from the need to train factory workers in the nineteenth century, the industrial-age school continues to expand, largely unaffected by the new realities within which children are growing up in the present day.

As Buckminster Fuller pointed out, a living system continually re-creates itself. But how this occurs in social systems such as global institutions depends on both our individual and collective level of awareness. For example, each individual school is both a whole unto itself and a part, a place for the “presencing” of the larger educational system. So, too, is each individual member of the school: teachers, administrators, students, and parents. Each of us carries the memory and expectations of our own experience as schoolchildren. The same holds true for the way business organizations, and their members, are places for the presencing of the prevailing systems of management. As long as our thinking is governed by habit – notably by industrial, “machine age” concepts such as control, predictability, standardization, and “faster is better” – we will continue to re-create institutions as they have been, despite their increasing disharmony with the larger world.

In short, the basic problem with the new species of global institutions is that they have not yet become aware of themselves as living. Once they do, they can then become a place for presencing the whole as it might be, not just as it has been.

New Ways of Thinking About Learning

When any of us acts in a state of fear or anxiety, our actions are likely to revert to what is most habitual: our most instinctual behaviors dominate, ultimately reducing us to the



Figure 1: Reactive Learning

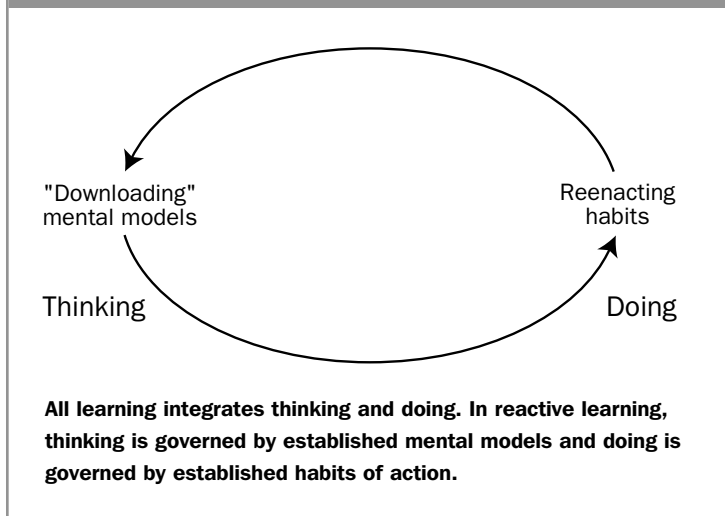
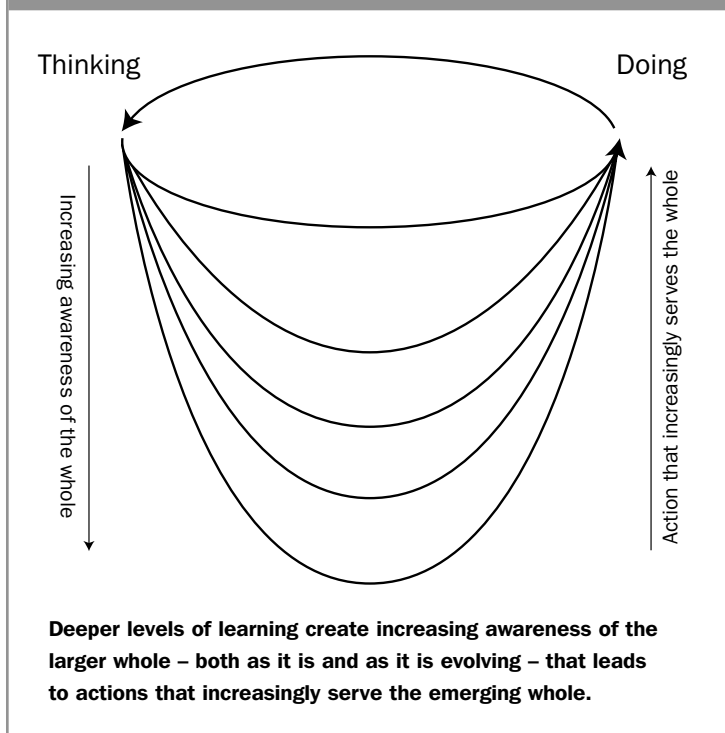


Figure 2: Deeper Learning



“fight-or-flight” programming of the reptilian brain stem. Collective actions are no different. Even as conditions in the world change dramatically, most businesses, governments, schools, and other large organizations continue to take the same kinds of institutional actions that they always have.

This does not mean that no learning occurs. But it is a limited type of learning: learning how best to react to circumstances we see ourselves as having had no hand in creating. Reactive learning is governed by “downloading” habitual ways of thinking, of continuing to see the world within the familiar categories we’re comfortable with. We discount interpretations and options for action that are different from those we know and trust. We act to defend our interests. In reactive learning, our actions are actually reenacted habits, and we invariably end up reinforcing pre-established mental models. Regardless of the outcome, we end up being “right.” At best, we get better at what we have always done. We remain secure in the cocoon of our own worldview, isolated from the larger world. (See Figure 1: Reactive Learning.)

But different types of learning are possible. More than seven years ago, Joseph and Otto began interviewing leading scientists, and business and social entrepreneurs. The interviews – which now total more than 150 – often began by asking each person, “What question lies at the heart of your work?” Together, the two groups illuminated a type of learning that

could lead to the creation of a world not governed primarily by habit.

All learning integrates thinking and doing. All learning is about how we interact in the world and the types of capacities that develop from our interactions. What differs is the depth of the awareness and the consequent source of action. If awareness never reaches beyond superficial events and current circumstances, actions will be reactions. If, on the other hand, we penetrate more deeply to see the larger wholes that generate “what is” and our own connection to this wholeness, the source and effectiveness of our actions can change dramatically. (See Figure 2: Deeper Learning.)

In talking with pioneering scientists, we found extraordinary insights into our latent capacity for deeper seeing and the effects such awareness can have on our understanding, our sense of self, and our sense of belonging in the world. In talking with entrepreneurs, we found extraordinary clarity regarding what it means to act in the service of what is emerging so that new intuitions and insights create new realities. But we also found that for the most part, neither of these groups talks with the other. We came to realize that both groups are really talking about the same process – the process whereby we learn to “presence” an emerging whole, to become what George Bernard Shaw called “a force of nature.”

The Field of the Future

The key to the deeper levels of learning is the recognition that the larger living wholes of which we are an active part are not inherently static. Like all living systems, they both conserve features essential to their existence and seek to evolve. When we become more aware of the dynamic whole, we also become more aware of what is emerging and our part in it.

Jonas Salk, the inventor of the polio vaccine, spoke of tapping into the continually unfolding “dynamism” of the universe, and experiencing its evolution as “an active process that . . . I can guide by the choices I make.”⁸ He felt that this ability had enabled him to reject common wisdom and develop a vaccine that eventually saved millions of lives. Many of the entrepreneurs we interviewed had successfully created multiple businesses and organizations. Consistently, each felt that the entrepreneurial ability was an expression of the capacity to sense an emerging reality and to act in harmony with it. As one of our interviewees, W. Brian Arthur, a noted economist of the Santa Fe Institute, told us, “Every profound innovation is based on an inward-bound journey, on going to a deeper place where knowing comes to the surface.”

This “inward-bound journey” lies at the heart of all creativity, whether in the arts, in business, or in science. Many scientists and inventors, like artists and entrepreneurs, live in a paradoxical state of great confidence and profound humility – knowing that their choices and actions really matter and feeling guided by forces beyond their making. Their work is to “release the hand from the marble that holds it prisoner,” as Michelangelo put it. While they know that their actions are vital to this accomplishment, they also know that the hand “wants to be released.”

Can living institutions learn to tap into a larger field to guide them toward what is healthy for the whole? What understanding and capacities will this require of us individually and collectively?

Presence

We’ve come to believe that the core capacity needed to access the field of the future is presence. We first thought of presence as being fully conscious and aware in the present moment. Then we began to appreciate presence as deep listening, of being open beyond one’s preconceptions and historical ways of making sense. We came to see the importance of letting go of old identities and the need to control and, as Salk said, making choices to serve the evolution of life. Ultimately, we came to see all these aspects of presence as leading to a state of “letting come,” of consciously participating in a larger field for change. When this happens, the field shifts, and the forces shaping a situation can shift from re-creating the past to manifesting or realizing an emerging future.



Through our interviews, we've discovered similarities to shifts in awareness that have been recognized in spiritual traditions around the world for thousands of years. For example, in esoteric Christian traditions such shifts are associated with "grace" or "revelation" or "the Holy Spirit." Taoist theory speaks of the transformation of vital energy (*qing*, pronounced "ching") into subtle life force (*qi*, pronounced "chi"), and into spiritual energy (*shin*). This process involves an essential quieting of the mind that Buddhists call "cessation," wherein the normal flow of thoughts ceases and the normal boundaries between self and world dissolve. In Hindu traditions, this shift is called wholeness or oneness. In the mystic traditions of Islam, such as Sufism, it is known simply as "opening the heart." Each tradition describes this shift a little differently, but all recognize it as being central to personal cultivation or maturation.

Despite its importance, as far as we know there is relatively little written in spiritual or religious traditions about this shift as a collective phenomenon or about collectively cultivating the capacity for this shift. Yet many of our interviewees had experienced dramatic changes in working groups and, in some cases, in larger organizations. Some of the theorists had even developed ways of thinking about this that transcended the dichotomy between individual and collective.

In the end, we concluded that understanding presence and the possibilities of larger fields for change can come only from many perspectives – from the emerging science of living systems, from the creative arts, from profound organizational change experiences – and from direct contact with the generative capacities of nature. Virtually all indigenous or native cultures have regarded nature or the universe or Mother Earth as the ultimate teacher. At few points in history has the need to rediscover this teacher been greater.

It All Starts with Seeing

In a SoL leadership workshop several years ago, Fred, a Jamaican man from the World Bank, told a remarkable story. A few years earlier he had been diagnosed with a terminal disease. After consulting a number of doctors, all of whom confirmed the diagnosis, he went through what anyone would in that situation: for weeks he denied what was happening. But gradually, he came to grips with the fact that he was only going to live a few more months.

"Something amazing happened then," he said. "I simply stopped doing everything that wasn't essential. I didn't do anything that didn't matter. I started working on projects, with

groups of kids, that I'd always wanted to do. I stopped arguing with my mother. When someone cut me off in traffic, I no longer got upset. I just didn't have time to waste on anything like that."

Near the end of this period, he began a wonderful relationship with a woman who thought that he should get more opinions about his condition. He consulted some doctors in the United States and soon got a phone call telling him, "We have a different diagnosis." The doctor told him he had a rare form of a very curable disease.

"When I heard that," Fred told us, "I cried like a baby, because I was so afraid my life would be back to the way it used to be."

We've learned from years of scenario-planning exercises that imagining alternative futures, even negative futures, *can* actually open people up. Used artfully, scenarios can alter people's awareness of their present reality and catalyze profound change. In the mid-1980s, five years before Nelson Mandela was released from jail, citizens in public forums throughout South Africa confronted "the low road" and "the high road" – two scenarios about the consequences of, respectively, maintaining or stopping the country's apartheid policies. The key to making potentially fearful futures generative is to see that we have choices, and that our choices matter.

Early on in our work with *Presence* we received a remarkable article from Surdna Foundation president, and good friend, Ed Skloot. The piece, "Global Requiem" by religion scholar Jack Miles, was a speculation about potential cultural impacts if society started to realize that humankind might not overcome the global problems it faces, that we may not develop a sustainable society, and that, in fact, the human race might perish (see sidebar, "Global Requiem: The Apocalyptic Moment in Religion, Science, and Art"). Predictions of environmental or social collapse almost inevitably evoke denial, fear, and even paralysis. Given that their authors' intent is usually to mobilize action, they can actually be counterproductive. But what if, instead, facing a global requiem scenario led us to "wake up," as happened for Fred when he faced his mortality? What would happen if such an awakening occurred and, instead of inducing denial, led us to realize that our future as a species cannot be taken for granted, that there is a real urgency to our present situation, and that the time to start living together differently is now?

We believe such an awakening may be occurring around the world. This is based on the interviews we've been doing for more than seven years; on direct experiences we've had with profound change; and on coming to understand better how change occurs in living systems.

One of the most important books in the Mahayana Buddhist tradition is *The Awakening of Faith*.⁹ Written in (or about) 500 AD, it provided a crucial bridge in bringing Buddhist philosophy and practice from India to China and hence, throughout the Asian cultures. The faith of which the book speaks is a deep conviction that enlightenment is possible, that we each carry within ourselves immense possibilities for connecting to the universe and participating in its generative process. In more religious terms, you could say the book's aim is to show that the infinite or absolute and the phenomenal, God and human, are inseparable, and that we have the potential to co-create our realities. But to do so we must first transcend the myth of separation that modern culture has taught us – separation from one another, from our highest selves, and from the generative processes of nature. Awakening our faith that the future can be different from the past will take nothing less than rediscovering our place, and that of our modern societies and institutions, in life's continual unfolding.

The key to making potentially fearful futures generative is to see that we have choices, and that our choices matter.

Global Requiem The Apocalyptic Moment in Religion, Science and Art

If the first generations that assimilated Charles Darwin's thought were concerned with the origin of species, our own is concerned in an unprecedented way with the extinction of species and, above all, with the threat of extinction that faces the human species. During the 1850s, while Darwin was concluding *The Origin of Species*, the rate of extinction is believed to have been one every five years. Today, the rate of extinction is estimated at one every nine minutes. This raises the question, Will the human species be extinguished in its turn? The statistical question, perhaps the statistical likelihood, is complicated, morally, by the probability that human extinction, if it comes about soon, will prove to have been species suicide.

"Human reproduction," veteran foreign correspondent Malcolm W. Browne wrote in his memoir *Muddy Boots and Red Socks*,¹⁰ "has some disturbing similarities to cancer.... [Humankind] will most likely destroy its planetary host before dying out itself." He cites the work of anthropologist Warren M. Hem, who compared satellite images showing the growth of Baltimore and the colonization of the Amazon basin side by side with pictures of cancer cells. As Hem put it: "The human species is a rapacious, predatory, omnivorous [devouring its entire environment] species."

As voices like Browne's are increasingly heard, the cause that until now has been presented as the defense of the environment, as if the environment were an importunate relative whom long-suffering mankind was being asked to support, is beginning to be presented as the self-defense of the human species itself. The environment is, after all, the human habitat, and time after time, extinction has followed on loss of habitat when the

species at risk was not able to adapt in time. Despite our large numbers, we are an endangered species.

As this paradigm shift takes place in the realms of politics and activist science, another change looms in the realm of the imagination and, perhaps also, in the practice of religion. If the earth is failing as a viable habitat for our species, then we can no longer imagine our individual deaths, as we have so long been accustomed to do, against a backdrop of continuing life. As we cease to do so, as we recontextualize our personal deaths in the emerging prospect of species death, can there – should there – be a religious wisdom that will accept species death as if it were personal death?

Such a prognosis, if it comes, surely will not come as it does in the disaster movies that are now so strangely popular; namely, with a warning that unless a given action is taken within ten days or ten hours, the world will end. No, it will come rather as an accumulation of ignored warnings from scientists and science journalists and an ensuing consensus that the opportunity to take the action that would have saved the species has come and gone. At that scientifically apocalyptic moment, should it be reached, and we can certainly imagine it being reached, actual extinction may still be far enough in the future that there will be time for a new kind of religion and a new kind of art to develop. These will be, no doubt, a religion and an art born of despair, but religion and art – far more than politics or commerce or science – are precisely those products of the human spirit to which we turn in times of despair. The last days of the human race may be, not to speak at all flippantly, our finest hour.

— Jack Miles

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jack Miles is senior advisor to the president of the J. Paul Getty Trust and author of *God: A Biography* (New York: Alfred P. Knopf, 1995). This excerpt was adapted and reprinted with permission from Jack Miles, "Global Requiem: The Apocalyptic Moment in Religion, Science, and Art," *Cross Currents*, Fall 2000, Vol. 50, Issue 3.

Endnotes

- 1 Peter Senge, C. Otto Scharmer, Joseph Jaworski, and Betty Sue Flowers, *Presence: Human Purpose and the Field of the Future* (Cambridge, MA: SoL, Society for Organizational Learning, 2004).
- 2 According to physicist and philosopher of science Henri Bortoft, *The Wholeness of Nature: Goethe's Way Towards a Science of Conscious Participation in Nature* (Hudson, NY: Lindisfarne Press, 1996).
- 3 Amy Edmondson, *A Fuller Explanation*, 56-59 (Birkhaeuser, Boston, 1987) and Buckminster Fuller, *Synergetics: the Geometry of Thinking* (NY: Macmillan, 1976).
- 4 See "Conversation with Rupert Sheldrake: Morphic Fields," interview by C. O. Scharmer (London, September 23, 1999), www.dialogonleadership.org.
- 5 See "Conversation with Henri Bortoft: Imagination Becomes an Organ of Perception," interview by C. O. Scharmer (London, July 14, 1999), www.dialogonleadership.org.
- 6 Ibid.
- 7 Arie de Geus, *The Living Company* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Business School Press, 1997).
- 8 *The New York Times*, June 24, 1993, 1, 9.
- 9 *The Awakening of Faith*, attributed to Asvaghosa, translation and commentary by Yoshito S. Hakeda (New York: Columbia University Press, 1974).
- 10 See Malcolm W. Browne, *Muddy Boots and Red Socks: A Reporter's Life* (New York: Times Books, 1993).

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Peter M. Senge is a senior lecturer at the MIT Sloan School of Management, and the founding chair of SoL. A renowned pioneer in management innovation, Peter is the author of the widely acclaimed *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization* (Doubleday/Currency 1990).

C. Otto Scharmer is a Lecturer at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, a Visiting Professor at the Helsinki School of Economics, co-founder of SoL and the Global Leadership Initiative, and author of the forthcoming book *Theory U: Leading From the Emerging Future*.

Joseph Jaworski is the chairman of Generon Consulting and cofounder of the Global Leadership Initiative, founder of The American Leadership Forum, and author of the critically acclaimed *Synchronicity: The Inner Path of Leadership* (Berret Koehler, 1996).

Betty Sue Flowers was a professor of English at the University of Texas at Austin and an international business consultant prior to her current role as the director of the Johnson Presidential Library and Museum.

If you would like to contact the authors about this article or about their new book *Presence: Human Purpose and the Field of the Future*, please email them at presence@solonline.org.

To access reader resources or to order *Presence*, please visit www.presence.net. Order the book direct from the site to receive the complementary 40-page *Presence Workbook* free.