

**Entering the Field of the Future  
First Presencing Global Forum, Boston, October 24, 2011,  
Opening Remarks,  
Otto Scharmer**

Friends and fellow travellers here in Cambridge and in about 38 countries around the world, welcome to our 1<sup>st</sup> Presencing Global Forum! It is a wonderful feeling to enter our collective global field in this moment -- having prepared this space with many of you who are present here today, and with many who are present in the all the parallel sessions of this event across the globe.

**Born in a Blizzard**

Five years ago, a dozen or so of us met just across the street in the Lobby of the Kendal hotel to walk over to our meeting space to begin a two day meeting. It was a special walk since for a few hours Cambridge was wrapped into a moment of collective snow and, since no car was moving, unusual stillness. It was a blizzard like no other—lightening and thunder and then, snow and stillness. We walked through the deep waves of snow and felt ourselves slowing down.

Something profound was born during those two days. We envisioned to create a holding space for a global community of practitioners that use awareness based methods of change like presencing. It would be a community of practice that would use itself as a living laboratory to explore the deeper questions of inner cultivation and outer change. We also said that we would not want to start by *talking* about change. We rather wanted to start by *doing* stuff first and then have a conversation on what starts to emerge from our practical work later in a second phase.

Today we are entering that second phase. What we have seen over the past five years is that our dispersed and tiny projects and programs somehow morphed and got linked into an amazing global ecology of profound innovation initiatives. Without really planning for it, we find ourselves in a situation where our core group grew from a dozen to now 72 enrolled in our masterclass, and where our community has grown from zero to 5500 members in over 100 countries in less than three years.

But what's more important is that while all these things took shape, we felt that all of this seemed to be part of a much larger global movement. We seem to be manifesting a larger deepening of individual and collective awareness that is now happening around the globe.

*So what is going on in our world right now? What is the present moment that we share among the over 600 of us that have gathered here in Cambridge and in about a dozen other places around the world? What is speaking to us through this moment that we*

*share with millions of people on our streets across the globe? What are we called to do?*

Throughout this Forum, we will be inquiring these questions together. As we launch into that conversation, let me preface our dialogue with two remarks that look at the outer and inner conditions of our present moment.

### **The Three Divides**

From an external systems point of view, we all share the same situation. We all happen to be change makers in the context of systems in which we collectively create results that nobody wants. We collectively create results that nobody wants. Here are three numbers that indicate the key dimensions of our currently broken system.

The first number is 1.5 and concerns our relationship to nature—the ecological divide. We live on a 1.5 planet footprint but we only have one earth. That means that we are rapidly depleting and polluting the ecosystems that we are supposed to be stewarding. As a consequence, we see that two thirds of our ecosystems are damaged, we see one third of our agricultural land disappearing within the past 40 years, and we see rapidly falling watertables that bring us on a path towards food crises, food riots, and an expected doubling of food prices by 2030.

The second number is 2.5. This number concerns our relationship to others, that is, the social divide. 2.5 billion people continue to live below the poverty line. What amplifies this problem is a growing polarization in society where the top 1% own the same amount of wealth than the bottom 99% own together.

The third number is 3 and concerns the relationship we have to ourselves, that is, our inner or spiritual divide. According to WHO, three times as many people die through suicide than die through homicide and violent conflict. In spite of all the violence going on today in the world, two to three times as many people kill themselves than they kill others! If you put that number in context of suicide attempts (each suicide represents roughly 15-20 suicide attempts), and the rapidly rising numbers for burnout and depression, we know that this third divide represents a huge crisis that we see unfold today, and yet its one that isn't talked about much.

The three divides represent a massive use of structural violence that we apply against nature in the ecological divide, against others in the social divide, and against ourselves in the case of the spiritual divide.

*How can we deal with these three issues and what have we learned in addressing them throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century?*

What we have learned, I believe, is that as long as we address these issues one at a time we are on a path to failure. What we have done in the 20<sup>th</sup> century is that we

have created dedicated singular ministries for each of these problems in government; we have created dedicated NGO's for each of these issues in civil society, and we have created individual university departments, conferences, journals and academic career paths for each of these issues. Today we know that this silo approach of one issue at a time isn't working—on the contrary. It's a path for guaranteed failure.

What we are seeing today and what inspires me most about our current moment is that more and more people begin to realize that you cannot separate these three issues, because they represent three different sides of one and the same problem.

Which brings me to my second remark, the view from within.

### **Connecting Three Streams**

As we are now stepping into that space of collective awareness and inquiry I want to acknowledge three different lineages or historic streams that we as a community of practice or we as a movement are part of.

We've all been observing this first movement take shape—today it's called the 99%. And before that, it carried many other names. This is the rise of global civil society that involves many millions of people and organizations and that probably is the biggest movement that this planet has ever seen. Three names that represent the lineage of this movement are Martin Luther King, Mahatma Gandhi and a person who lived a few miles up North from here and who through his writing and action of civil disobedience inspired Gandhi who then in turn inspired countless grassroots movements around the planet over the past 70 years. His name of course is Henry David Thoreau.

The second movement and stream that I want to acknowledge and that we are a part of has to do with organizational learning, systems thinking and action science. Three names that represent this movement are Peter Senge, who is present here with us and who continues to be a co-shaper of the presencing work, Ed Schein, who cannot be here with us today but who has been an influential mentor and educator to many of us here in the room, and Kurt Lewin, who famously suggested that we cannot understand a system unless we change it and is considered the founding father of action research.

This brings us to the third movement. This is the collective stream of awareness and mindfulness. This stream is deeply connected to all wisdom traditions across the planet. Three names that might representative this stream are Buddha, that is the Buddhist practices as a method that facilitates the opening of the mind and the heart; secondly Confucius, and in this case particularly the lesser known part of his work that is based on his essay The Great Learning and that focuses on the idea that as a leader, you have to know your self; and thirdly, as a representative of the Western tradition of mindfulness, Rudolf Steiner whose life blended mindfulness

and a Goethean or phenomenological approach to science as a developmental path in which science is performed with the mind of wisdom, that is, with a mind that can see itself.

What makes us distinct as a community of change makers today is that we link with and integrate all three of these streams through civic engagement, action research, and mindfulness.

The history of the 20<sup>th</sup> is full of examples where efforts of social change may have included one or two, but failed to include all three of these dimensions. Socialism, for instance, featured social change and science but was lacking the awareness and mindfulness. Then our science and technology created the atomic bomb, but our inner cultivation failed to match our extended outer reach. Then many of us know consciousness movements like new age that tried to develop awareness without being in service of transformative social change. The impact of these single-sided 20<sup>th</sup> century approaches to change have limited us in some cases, and in other cases have caused catastrophic failures.

*So, having arrived in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, what is our most important lesson learned?*

We need to bring all three streams together. And what inspires me most about our current moment is that these three streams are, in fact, beginning to come together now. They come together through the work that we do as a community. They come together through the work others do in related communities. They come together through the arrival of a whole generation of people, the millennial generation or Generation Y, that seem to be naturally aspiring to integrate all three of these streams in how they want to live and work. This new generation recognizes itself as being part of a global social movement. They are performing change work and action research with the mind of wisdom. I believe it is our job to partner with that generation in order to build a holding space or a global learning platform where this deeper leadership capacity can be build and cultivated.

In fact, the deeper purpose of launching the whole Presencing Institute community has always been the same: to build that type of global holding space for merging these three streams in order to work together in the renewal of the civilizations that we represent and connect.

### **Principles of Presencing**

So let me close with a few words on the underlying conceptual framework of Theory U and presencing. As many of you know, that framework has emerged from a ten year research project at MIT and SoL that I have been conducting with my colleagues Peter Senge, Joseph Jaworski and others prior to our walk in the snow blizzard five years ago. What resulted from that research have been two things: a framework that we refer to as Theory U and a methodology that we refer to social technology of presencing. We have articulated and published the framework and

method in two books: *Presence* and *Theory U*, that combine maybe 900 pages or so. I am sorry for the many pages! As a way of compensating you for that, I would like to summarize the essence of this framework in three simple points and propositions.

- (1) *The quality of our results in a system is a function of the awareness that the people in that system operate from.* The essence of Theory U is not: I think therefore I am. It is: “I attend this way, therefore it emerges that way.” The evolutionary pathway of the universe is a function of our inner place from that we operate. In the words of Bill O’Brien, late CEO of Hanover Insurance: “The success of an intervention depends on the interior condition of the intervenor.” The success of what I do as a leader depends on the inner place from that I operate.
  
- (2) *Social reality emerges from the interplay of two fundamentally different social processes and fields.* The first process we are dealing with is about how the new is coming into the world. This process works through the opening of the mind, the heart, and the will. We call this the process of presencing. The social field that emerges from this process connects us to our deeper sources of creativity and humanity. There is a lot of evidence for this process in the world right now and everyone who is joining this Forum today has probably had experiences like that. But then, that’s only half of the story. Everyone who works in real institutions and systems change knows that there is another process out there. That process is characterized by getting stuck in one truth as opposed to Open Mind, getting stuck in one collective skin or one US vs Them as opposed to Open Heart, and by getting stuck or frozen into one rigid identity or intention that have formed in the past as opposed to Open Will. We call this second field the cycle of absencing as opposed to the cycle of presencing.

The cycle of absencing works through blinding and denials as opposed to seeing, entrenching and desensing as opposed to sensing, holding-on and absencing instead of letting-go and presencing. So that first part of the cycle of absencing is really about two things: cutting off the horizontal connection (to others) and cutting off the vertical connecting (to the emerging or higher self). What happens to any social system when you have cut these two connections? What you are going to see is delusion, destruction, and self-destruction. So instead crystallizing you create a delusion of reality, instead of birthing and embodying the new you are aborting and disembodying the new. An extreme example of this cycle can be found when watching the interview of Hitler’s secretary who has described his final days in the Bunker. But that’s of course not the only example, the world is really full of these examples today.

What’s so interesting today is that we all live in both of these worlds. It’s not like the George W. Bush worldview that the axis of evil is out there and we happen to be on the side of good. Reality today is much more complex. And

this complexity means that we all participate in both of these worlds. One moment we are down here really present to what is emerging in the moment. The next moment I get stuck in my old habits of downloading and I find myself unintentionally operating in this blue world up here. Many of us try individually to operate in the yellow space of presencing. Yet, collectively, we all operate most of the time in the blue space of absencing as evidenced in the widening of the three divides discussed earlier. This contradiction, brings us to my last and third proposition:

- (3) *In order to bring about profound change around us, we first have to go through a profound inner opening not only as individuals but also collectively.* This opening process not only applies to us as individuals, where we for example begin to deepen our capacity to listen from downloading to factual to empathic to generative (see slide), but also to us as collective entities as
- groups, where we deepen our conversations from downloading to debate to dialogue to collective creativity, as well as
  - institutions, where we go through the same opening or decentering process from centralized to divisionalized to networked to ecosystem type of organizing, as well as on
  - a global systems level where we see the coordination mechanism of the economy differentiating from hierarchy to market to stakeholder dialogue to ABC (awareness based collective action)

As a community of change makers we have made quite some remarkable progress in creating individual and group capacities for moving from level 1 and 2 to level 3 and 4. But where we are stuck today in many systems is that we try to approach level 4 challenges with institutional response mechanisms from level 1, 2 or 3. Think about the collapse of the Copenhagen Climate talks. Think about Wall Street successfully preventing in Washington any real regulation from happening even after 2008. Today, The six mega banks in Wall Street are more powerful than before the crisis. In 1995, their combined assets were valued below 17.1 % of the US GDP. <sup>1</sup>

What we need instead is a different process that maybe looks a little bit like this (slide). What you see in this example from Namibia that we will learn more from later today, is that this process is essentially about people. It's about linking people to each other, to themselves, and to their own journey.

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<sup>1</sup> At the end of 2006, this number was 55%. In 2010, it even rose to an unimaginable 64% of the US GDP. That means, the too big too fail banks got even bigger after the crisis and with that are even better positioned to continue to blackmail governments and taxpayers as we anticipate the next crisis.

And that journey takes us from **egosystem** awareness to **ecosystem** awareness.

Our journey of the past five years now enters a new phase. We're moving from our beginnings in a snow blizzard to this new time-space in which the Arab Spring has arrived on this side of the pond and where this same impulse is continue to move around the world. We're seeing the 99% movement growing and foreshadowing a future that needs all of us to work together across all boundaries in order to learn how to generate awareness based collective action.

With that, let's now launch into a global sensing journey in which we want to listen to some of the real examples and stories from the field. After that, we are going to have breakout sessions where you can choose to join one of the case stories that you are going to hear over the next hour in more detail.