

## Presencing

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### Seeing from the Source

**P**resencing, the blending of sensing and presence, means to connect from the Source of the highest future possibility and to bring it into the now. When moving into the state of presencing, perception begins to happen from a future possibility that depends on us to come into reality. In that state we step into our real being, who we really are, our authentic self. Presencing is a movement that lets us approach our self from the emerging future.<sup>1</sup>

In many ways, presencing resembles sensing. Both involve shifting the place of perception from the interior to the exterior of one's (physical) organization. The key difference is that sensing shifts the place of perception to the current whole while presencing shifts the place of perception to the source of an emerging future whole—to a future possibility that is seeking to emerge.

As I watched my family's farmhouse burn, I began to feel that everything I thought I was, was gone—that was an example of sensing. When the boundary between the fire and me collapsed and I became aware that I wasn't separate from the fire and that the house that went up in flames wasn't separate from

me—that was also sensing. In sensing, my perception originated in the current field: the burning fire right in front of me. But the next moment, when I felt elevated to another sphere of clarity and awareness and experienced a pull toward the source of silence and Self—that was a foreshadowing of presencing.

## Two Root Questions of Creativity

The territory at the bottom of the U is where we connect with the source of inner knowing that Brian Arthur talked about. The threshold there needs to be crossed in order to connect to one's real source of presence, creativity, and power.

To find out more about that source, Joseph Jaworski and I interviewed Michael Ray, who had developed a Stanford Business School course on creativity in business. Over the years, people had told me that taking his course had changed their lives. So I was interested in finding out how this man, according to Fast Company the “most creative man in Silicon Valley,” helped practitioners connect to their sources of creativity.<sup>2</sup>

“How do you do this? What is the essential activity that actually helps people become more creative?” Ray responded, “I create learning environments in all my courses that allow people to address and work on the two root questions of creativity.” He paused and then continued: “Who is my Self? and What is my Work? The capital-S Self.” By this, Ray said, he means one's highest self, the self that transcends pettiness and signifies our “best future possibility.” Similarly, “capital-W Work” is not one's current job but one's purpose, what you are here on earth to do.

“Know thyself” echoes my conversation with Master Nan, who told me that in order to be a good leader, you must know yourself. “Know thyself” appears throughout all great wisdom traditions. I remember it being a principal teaching when I studied the teachings of Gandhi in India. “You must be the change you seek to create.” It also was attributed to Apollo and inscribed at the entrance of the ancient Greek temple in Delphi. And Goethe knew that the essence of nature cannot be found without turning your atten-

tion back upon yourself, that you can learn who you are only by immersing yourself in the world. Today the self is at the core of what we study, not only in philosophy but also in physics, sociology, and management.

### The Field Structure of Presenting

Presenting happens when our perception begins to happen from the source of our emerging future. The boundaries between three types of presence collapse: the presence of the past (current field), the presence of the future (the emerging field of the future), and the presence of one's authentic Self. When this co-presence, or merging of the three types of presence, begins to resonate, we experience a profound shift, a change of the place from which we operate. When I stood in front of the fire, I experienced the presence of my authentic Self and felt connected both to the journey that had brought me there (the presence of the past) and to what I felt emerging from the future (the presence of the future).

One day I was hiking in the Alps, in Val Fex, a small valley near the border between Switzerland and Italy, right next to Sils Maria, where the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche used to write. This area is a special place in Europe because it is the watershed for three major rivers: the Rhine, flowing to the northwest; the Inn, flowing to the northeast; and the Po, flowing to the south. I decided to follow the Inn to its source. As I hiked upstream, I realized that I had never in my life followed a stream all the way to its source. In fact, I had never seen what the source of a major river really looks like.

The stream grew narrower and narrower until it was simply a trickle, and I found myself standing near a pond in the wide bowl of a valley, encircled by glacier-covered mountaintops. I just stood there and listened. With surprise, I realized that I was at the center of countless waterfalls streaming off the mountains. They were making the most beautiful symphony one can imagine. Stunned, I realized that there was no single point of origin. I watched the source all around and above me, streaming off the circle of glaciated mountaintops and then converging in the small pond. Was the pond the source?

Was it the circle of waterfalls? Or was it the glaciers on the mountaintops? Or was it the whole planetary cycle of nature: rain, rivers flowing to the ocean, and evaporation?

Metaphorically speaking, presencing is the capacity that allows us to operate from this extended notion of the source, to function as a watershed by sensing what wants to come forth and then allowing it to come into being. In other words, by bringing the water from the surrounding waterfalls to a single point, the pond fills and spills into the river, bringing it into being.

Presencing enhances sensing, just as sensing enhances seeing. Sensing extends seeing by moving our locus of attention “inside” a phenomenon. Presencing enlarges the activity of sensing by using our Self as a vehicle for deepening our sensing. The root of the word presencing is \*es, which means “to be.” The words essence, yes, presence, and present (gift) all share this same Indo-European root. An Old Indian derivative of this same root from India is sat, which means both “truth” and “goodness.” This term became a major force in the twentieth century, when Mahatma Gandhi used it to convey his key notion of satyagraha (his strategy of truth and nonviolence). The Old German sun, which is derived from the same root, means “those who are surrounding us” or “the beings who surround us.”<sup>6</sup>

In figure 11.1, the place from which we operate moves not only from the center (downloading) to the periphery (seeing) and from there to beyond the boundary of our own organization (sensing), but progressing on to the surrounding sphere—that is, to “the beings who surround us.”

To learn more about this way of operating, I went to Berkeley, California, to meet with Eleanor Rosch, whom I introduced to you in chapter 10. She is one of the most eminent cognitive psychologists of our time and a professor in UC Berkeley’s Department of Psychology.

I first encountered her work when reading *The Embodied Mind*, a book she co-authored with Francisco Varela and Evan Thompson. We met after the Berkeley Knowledge Forum, a conference on knowledge management hosted by Ikujiro Nonaka at the Haas School of Business. Rosch had just made a stunning presentation in which she introduced the notion of “primary knowing.”

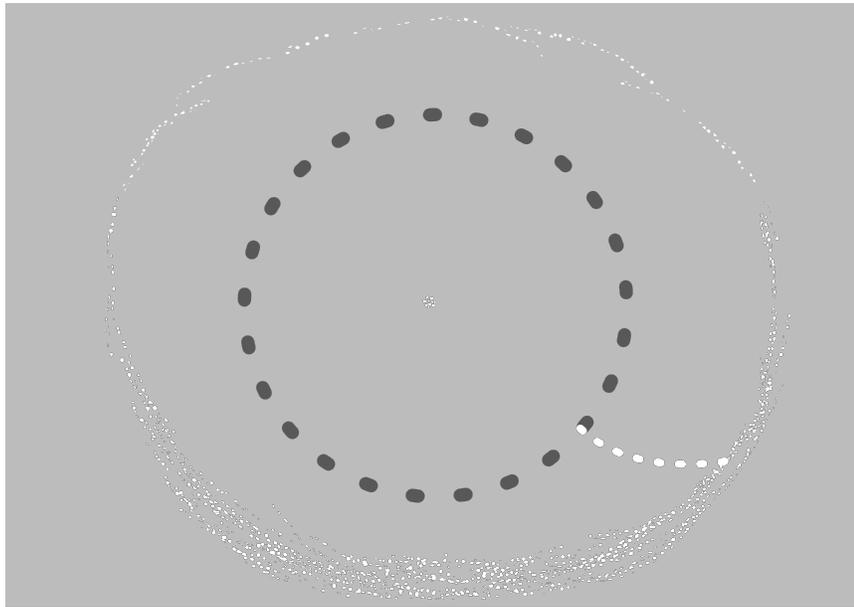


FIGURE 11.1: THE FIELD STRUCTURE OF PRESENTING

## Two Types of Knowledge and Knowing

In her presentation she drew a distinction between two types of knowledge: conventional analytical knowledge and “primary knowing,” or wisdom awareness. The analytical picture offered by the cognitive sciences, Rosch argues, is based on conventional analytical knowledge—that is, the field structure of attention described above as “seeing.” In this state the world is thought of as a set of separate objects and states of affairs, and the human mind as a machine that isolates, stores, and retrieves knowledge as an indirect representation of the world and oneself.

By contrast, primary knowing characterizes a sensing and presenting type of cognition in which one “is said to know by means of interconnected wholes (rather than isolated contingent parts) and timeless, direct presentation (rather than through stored re-presentations). Such knowing is “open,” rather than determinate; and a sense of unconditional value, rather than conditional usefulness, is an inherent part of the act of knowing itself. ... Action from awareness,” Rosch argues, “is claimed to be spontaneous, rather than

the result of decision making; it is compassionate, since it is based on wholes larger than the self; and it can be shockingly effective.”<sup>a</sup>

#### Mind and World Are Not Separate

The implications of this view for psychology and the cognitive sciences, says Rosch, are sweeping. She argues, “Mind and world are not separate. Since the subjective and objective aspects of experience arise together as different poles of the same act of cognition (are part of the same informational field) they are already joined at their inception.” Rosch claims that we need a “fundamental reorientation of what science is,” recalling Albert Einstein’s dictum that problems can never be solved with the same mind that created them. According to Rosch, “Our sciences need to be performed with the mind of wisdom.” It is clear to me that Rosch is developing a language around the subtle experiences that most of us have but barely notice.

As we walked back to her office, she said, “Just saying that mind and world are not separate is only part of it. All the lists of attributes that I outlined ... actually all go together as one thing. That one thing is what Tibetan Buddhism calls the natural state and what Taoism calls the Source. It’s what is at the heart of the heart of the heart. There is this awareness and this little spark that is positive—and completely independent of all of the things that we think are so important. This is the way things happen, and in the light of that, action becomes action from that. And lacking that, or being ignorant of it, we just make terrible messes—as individuals, as nations, and as cultures.”

#### The Field Knows Itself and Leads to Action

Back in her office, she continued, “Think of everything that is happening as moment-by-moment presentations from this deep heart source that has a knowing dimension to it. Tibetan Buddhism talks about emptiness, luminosity, and the knowing capacity as inseparable. That knowing capacity actually is the field knowing itself, in a sense, or this larger context knowing itself.”

“So your own activity is to help this process, the field knowing itself?” I asked.

“If you follow your nature far enough as it moves,” she continued, “if you follow so far that you really let go, then you find that you’re actually the original being, the original way of being. The original way of being knows things and does things in its own way. When that happens, or when you get even a glimpse of it, you realize that we don’t actually act as fragmented selves the way we think we do. Nothing you do can produce this realization, this original way of being. It’s a matter of tuning in to it and its way of acting. It actually has a great intention to be itself, so to speak, and it will do so if you just let it.”

Rosch talked about the same turning points I had frequently observed in workshops and that Varela also talked about: redirection (tuning in) and letting go. For example, in the Patient-Physician Dialogue Forum, when the participants looked at the wall with the white and dark dots, letting the picture sink into their minds, they weren’t taking in any additional data. What was shifting in that moment was the place from which they were looking at the picture in front of them. Before that, they had operated from their conventional interior selves, or what Rosch calls “the individual locked inside his skin looking out through his eyes.” After the shift, the forum participants began to operate from a different place, from a self that is outside their own skin and physical organization.

When you operate from the self-transcending, enhanced sense of self—from a place that is both inside and outside the observer’s organization—you see your self as part of the system and you start to see how people enact that system. You feel as if you are not just observing the system from a single point (the “balcony perspective”) but from multiple points simultaneously, from the surrounding field or sphere. This is what Bortoft called “striving from the whole to the part” and what Rosch refers to as “the field knowing itself,” a field that, if you succeed in tuning in to it, actually “has a great intention to be itself.”

### Moments of Truth, Beauty, and Goodness

How does this all work? Well, let’s now look at a couple of examples. The first example comes from Erik Lemcke, a sculptor and management consultant from Denmark.

### My Hands Know

“After having worked with a particular sculpture for some time,” he told me about his work, “there comes a certain moment when things are changing. When this moment of change comes, it is no longer me, alone, who is creating. I feel connected to something far deeper and my hands are co-creating with this power. At the same time, I feel that I am being filled with love and care as my perception is widening. I sense things in another way. It is a love for the world and for what is coming. I then intuitively know what I must do. My hands know if I must add or remove something. My hands know how the form should manifest. In one way, it is easy to create with this guidance. In those moments I have a strong feeling of gratitude and humility.”

Erik’s example beautifully demonstrates that the essence of presencing and the essence of the deepest creative processes are one at the same. The following example comes from a very different world. I use it to demonstrate that these deep transformational experiences are not confined to serene settings of art and culture. On the contrary, they happen in the midst of turmoil and everyday life.

### Breaking Through a Membrane

In Houston, Texas, during the first days of June 1999, Joseph Jaworski and I sat in a final team meeting between a group of line managers and external consultants. We were meeting to design an action learning intervention that would help the people at the top of that organization—after a big downstream oil company merger—to lead their huge and complex organization more entrepreneurially and more effectively. The room brimmed with tension, anxiety, anger, and frustration.

The level of conversation seemed to be driven by Gresham’s law. Sir Thomas Gresham, a sixteenth-century English businessman and public servant, observed that “bad money drives out good.”<sup>6</sup> Likewise, I have often seen a pattern in group conversations where bad conversation drives out the good. Bad conversation is annoying and noisy; the same people display their egos and monopolize the airtime, with no sensitivity to process or contributions from others that might move the group in a different direction. Good conver-

sation requires a certain quality of attention, or listening—a “container,” as Bill Isaacs would say—that includes some toning down or the elimination of “bad talk.” Thus good talk is contingent upon suspending bad talk, but bad talk is not contingent upon good—it just keeps on going and going and further reproducing itself. Our group, it struck me, was a living example of this painful principle.

Almost every kind of birth process involves as much pain as it does joy and magic. Whenever a group achieves a significant breakthrough, first there is plenty of down-and-dirty pain and frustration. So why do we hear so many heroic stories about people accomplishing amazing things without this messy dimension? Because they’re fantasies. Soon after our second child was born, my wife said, “That’s it. We’re not doing this again.” But three months later she wondered, “Do we really want to have only two children? Maybe we should consider a third one.” If women accurately remembered the pain of childbirth, humanity’s future would be in serious jeopardy. And if we all accurately remembered the pain of group work, we would probably change occupations. But our minds clean up and polish our stories. There’s an instant background shift, and we start to downplay the “bad parts” and tune in to our joy about what we have accomplished. On that morning in Houston, the Dream Team, as they called themselves, seemed more like the Nightmare Team. Time was running out, and the task of designing a leadership laboratory to help leaders take their organization into the future clearly wasn’t being accomplished; the tension and bad feeling in the room escalated, so we decided to take a brief break. The leader of the group stepped out with Joseph and me to talk about how to best use the remaining time.

We’d been meeting periodically for four months and had done a lot of intensive observation, immersion, and learning together. Furthermore, we had created a significant body of shared perception, understanding, and, to a certain degree, aspiration. It seemed we should be doing better. After we reconvened, the project leader pressed on through an endless list of checkoff items. I glanced up at David, one of the principal deal makers in the trading division and someone who had initially struck me as probably the most hard-nosed guy in the group. An iron man, he knew about athletics and performing in the zone, but

he also was the most focused and serious guy on the team. Now he seemed to be working hard to articulate a question, trying to give voice to something inchoate but clearly present. The conversation moved on, but I saw him still holding on and allowing that question to build up, to take shape in his mind. By nodding to him, I drew the group's attention to him. He started to crystallize his thought (or the thought started to crystallize through him). The energy field around him seemed to intensify. His question came from his source, and that was the turning point.

He pointed to three or four charts hanging around the room. "These charts seem to be different, but something connects them." One chart was the U model. Another showed the four fields of listening.<sup>6</sup> Others displayed four different levels of organizational change. And then there was one that showed the structure of our lab process. "We're trying to get our arms around this deep process of creation—of actively participating in creating new worlds—and these four pictures represent images, imprints of this deeper force at work. But what is it that connects these four footprints—what is its common underlying source?"

His question shifted the attention in the room. The project leader was furious. He wanted to continue with his checklist. But that conversation had been abruptly halted by David's question. Having articulated his question, David and the others looked at me. I looked at him and said—nothing. That silence went on for what seemed to be a long time.

Out of that silence, Joseph slowly rose and put all four charts David had referred to next to one another. When Joseph spoke, we all sensed he was speaking from a profound place. David's question, the silence, and Joseph opened a door, and the rest of us were caught up in a magical, deep conversational flow. Not everyone spoke up, but you could see the full engagement in their faces. Shining eyes. Some eyes were wet. Something profound suddenly happened in our group, in our room. Time slowed down. The sense of self and felt connection with the group expanded. We all spoke from that deeper place—a place that connected us to one another and made us one with a larger generative field, allowing us to develop several key ideas very quickly.

In hindsight, I realize that those few hours produced three notable outcomes. Within minutes, the group generated several core ideas that later were implemented in the delivery of the leadership lab. Second, we noticed that after this meeting people were able to tap into the field of generative dialogue much faster and more readily, and without all the pain that had preceded the first “delivery” of that experience.<sup>4</sup>

And third, there was a significant impact on an individual level. When I saw David several years later, he told me that that meeting had been a major turning point in his life. I asked him how he had felt while articulating that question. He said, “It felt as if I was breaking through a membrane.” What a wonderful way to phrase it, I thought. A few months later, David became head of a business unit for lease trading that he took from rock bottom to the top of its industry, ranking number one in both volume and earnings.

“Breaking through a membrane.” Each birth is a mystery that involves at least three different perspectives: the perspective of the mother, the perspective of the helper (midwife, father, doctor), and finally the perspective of the newborn—the being that is “breaking through” into another world. On that day it wasn’t just David who entered a new world. But it was he who midwifed the birth. A friend of mine, Karen Speerstra, who writes and “midwifes” books (including the one that you are reading now), once told me that she had learned how to do that from a real midwife, who wisely told her, “You must always honor the spirit of the birth.” Sometimes we just have to wait. We may want to grab the forceps, but it’s usually wiser to honor the spirit of the birth.

David’s remark also reminded me that, when I decided to coin and use the term “presencing” for this deeper experience, I did an Internet search to find out whether anyone else might have already used the word in a different context. Only two hits came up. One was that the word “presencing” had been used by a French translator of Heidegger’s work into English. And the other usage was by nurses and midwives, who talked about the deeper aspects of their work. When I saw these two contexts, I knew I had found the right word for what I wanted to express.

## A Wedding

The day after the Patient-Physician Dialogue Forum in Germany, the core group of physicians, Ursula, the students, and I met to clean up the schoolroom we'd been using. We were joined by some patients who had shown up to help, unasked. It was like the morning after a party, when you're hanging out, tired but elated and relaxed, and open to anything that happens in the now. One person sat down with a cup of coffee. Another pulled up a chair. Soon the grill was lit and we were eating leftovers from the kitchen. We sat, this circle of friends, in the gentle outdoor light that harbors spring. I asked the woman operating the grill what she thought of the forum the day before. "I was touched by it."

"Touched by what?" I asked.

"Well, in a way, I experienced the day like a wedding. In the end there was a solemnity in the room, like in a cathedral, and an intimacy, like you only have when you know one another as well as you do in a family." She had found the perfect words to describe a subtle level of experience that we had all felt. The day had truly been about joining two separate fields or bodies in a way that made each stronger and enlarged the possibilities for each.

I turned around and looked at our little "wedding constellation," a circle of friends that united physicians, patients, and students. We had become a community and were totally present to one another. Time slowed down; loving energy radiated through the entire group.

Later that circle emerged as a core group in one of the most successful among the dozens of similar networks started in Germany in the 1990s. In 2000, the network instituted a new emergency control center that includes a 24/7 physician hotline and provides higher-quality emergency service at considerably lower overall cost.

## Through the Eye of the Needle

For about ten years, Katrin Kaufer and I facilitated the semiannual meeting of a bio-dynamic farming community in Germany. The group consisted of about a dozen people. As always, we used the first night of these three-day meetings for an extended check-in with each participant. Each person talked about where they were in their work and in their life. On the following two days we

discussed the key issues the group was currently wrestling with. At one of the early meetings, Katrin and I felt that we had made very little progress during the first day. Things felt unresolved. Something seemed to prevent the group from reaching its real potential. So we invited everyone to share the story of “the journey that brought me here.” It soon became obvious how little we had known about one another.

The next morning, a Sunday, a shift happened that deeply affected the group. We started to talk about the larger picture that was emerging through their stories and journeys and how it might relate to the future of this community of farmers and this place—a place that had been founded by a monastery some nine hundred years earlier. One of the farmers began to articulate his felt sense of purpose in very simple but touching words as “taking care of this tiny piece of earth.” He spoke from his heart, and people felt moved to an inner place. In earlier discussions they had spoken from their individual perspectives and points of view, but now they talked about the presence and being of this place. What might they do as a community to help it realize its best and fullest future potential?

At these moments, when time slowed down and space seemed to open up around us, we felt the power of a subtle presence shining through our words, gestures, and thoughts—as if the presence of a future were watching and attending to us, a future that also was totally and intimately dependent on us—and still is.

When the meeting ended later that day, the group had crossed through the eye of the needle. In groups and organizations, this is the point at which the actors begin to see and sense from a different place, a place that allows them to establish a direct connection with a field of the future—and that allows them to begin acting in ways that are informed (inspired) by that future field. For the community of farmers, “going through the needle” created a very productive string of years that gave rise to manifold initiatives, ventures, and collaborative efforts that continued to shape and reshape the farm and its local context.

In a nutshell, all these stories illustrate that in order to move through that eye of the needle, we must look at old issues in new ways and bring our real selves into the situation.

### The Presence of the Circle Being

Moving into the realm of presencing happens to groups when they go through the eye of the needle. First, the group members feel a strong connectedness, a sense of low and collapsing boundaries. Then they sense among themselves a subtle but authentic presence. Once a group has experienced that level of connection, there is a deep bond that remains. The Circle of Seven, for example, has systematically developed the tools and means to move into this place of connectedness and authenticity together. But it takes a fair amount of risk and a willingness to let go of fear. “This may not be true for others,” said Glennifer, “but for me it’s so hard to release my personal boundary and relax into the circle. It takes a huge amount of inner work and letting go for me to do that. Each of us works differently with how we let go into the collective. Each time it requires crossing a threshold.”

I asked Glennifer what it was like to cross such a threshold. “I feel,” she responded, “as though I’m going to die if I let myself go into the circle. So I have to notice and be okay with that feeling. Crossing that boundary is what I imagine it must feel like to die. Who will I be? Because I don’t know, I’m not sure how to protect myself.”

“So what happens next?” I wanted to know.

“Then I usually step over the boundary. If I step all the way, it’s such a relief to have taken the step. I feel freer. Somehow I didn’t know beforehand that I would feel freer, even though I’ve done it before.

“When everyone’s done that, we have this collective presence in a different way. We have a new being—the presence of the Circle Being. My experience is that until I’ve done that, I don’t experience the Circle Being. After that, it’s beyond me as an individual. I don’t matter so much as an individual anymore. Yet, paradoxically, I’m more of an individual at the same time.”

After a moment of silence someone else said, referring to Glennifer, “You stepped over the boundary here. If I were to describe this energetically, as you started to speak, your voice was higher. You spoke quickly and breathily. As you pushed into what’s on the inside and what’s on the other side of that threshold, your rhythm and pacing changed. Your voice tone dropped. And the energy moved from here [she pointed to her head] to here [she pointed to her chest and gut].

What I saw happening was that you took a risk. There has to be a risk in order for the collective to show up. The risk can be one person's, two persons', or all of ours, but there has to be some kind of risk or vulnerability associated with crossing the threshold that you're talking about. I felt the whole space shift. Because you took a risk, it shifted the space for all of us."

### The Holding Practice

Of all the episodes and moments of presencing that I have experienced over the years, it strikes me that they all seem to share two common elements. The first one is taking a risk, as exemplified by Glennifer and others. "Are you willing to die?" That's one element. But then there is another one. The second element concerns the quality of the holding space.

"If we have a dominant circle practice," (in the Circle of Seven) Ann explained, "it has to do with holding."

I asked, "When you listen to one another, how do you cultivate your listening so that you can function as a collective holding space?"

The women described three different conditions of listening that enable a collective holding space to emerge (see figure 11.2). The first one they call unconditional witnessing. "The quality of witnessing or holding that we're talking about here is personal identification with the source in the circle. Something like: the eyes through which you see, the heart through which you feel, the ears with which you listen are not personal.

"So there is very little projection onto the situation. There is little intent other than opening to what life wants to have happen right then. There's sensitivity without manipulation. A spirit of nonjudgment and blessing."

The second one is clearing the horizontal space with unconditional love. "The focus of energy drops out of the head and into the heart in the room, because the opening usually happens when somebody's heart really opens, and definitely when the field is identified. The energy field has to drop.

"There is a blessing that comes with impersonal love. It's the impersonality of the love. Your personality isn't in it. And I do think we as a collective somehow manage to just hold that impersonal level," Anne explained.

The third condition has to do with where you put your attention: seeing the essential self. "I see through that wound to the truth of her," Barbara

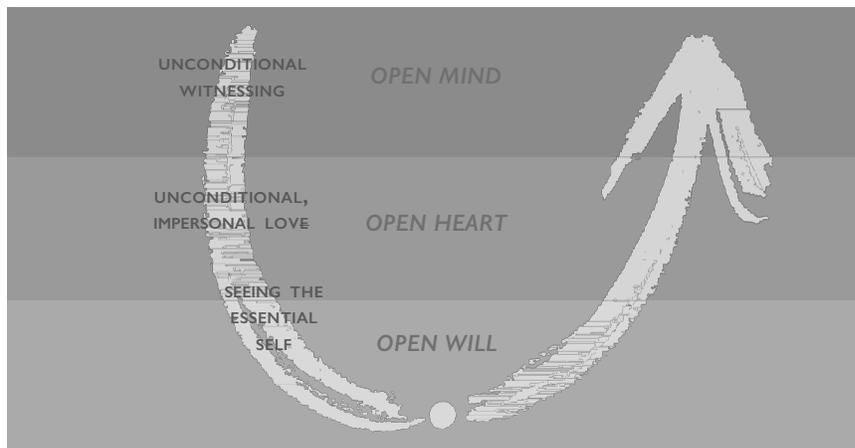


FIGURE 11.2: THREE CONDITIONS FOR DEEP LISTENING AND HOLDING

noted. “So it’s where I place my awareness that does the work. ... It’s a discipline of attention that has to do with how I see the people who are described by others in the circle.”

Leslie added, “we have an agreement to see the essential self that we call the no-mess-up clause. No matter what one of us does, she can’t mess up as far as the others are concerned. So the intention is placed on the essential self. We have a shared belief that one of the greatest forms of service to people is to see their essential selves—that somehow through my seeing that, they experience more of themselves.”

“This may be my own attribution,” said Glennifer, “but here’s how I experience work in the Circle, if I’m the one who’s doing the work, being witnessed, or assisted by another person. My experience is that there’s a thickness in the atmosphere—an enabling presence—that allows me to go deeper than if, say, Beth and I were working only with one another. ... I see more. I see more of myself. I see more of what I’m working with. Now, I don’t know whether that’s because of the skill levels in the group or whether it’s because of the quality of attention or a combination of both. But my experience is that I see more; I experience more of myself.

“I feel like a bigger person. I feel fuller in my own being. And I feel empowered or enabled in a particular way. I feel seen. I feel the focus of attention is fine; that it’s qualitative, nonjudgmental, and loving. And I feel

the presence of the Circle Being, which is different from the sum of the individuals.

“So I can’t really describe it any differently than that. When it’s not there, I know it. It takes a little time for the Circle Being’s presence to be evoked. But when it’s present, there’s a different quality to my experience. The quality of atmosphere is different. That’s one thing. And the other is, I feel more enabled—I feel more powerful.”

#### Being Seen and Witnessed as an Essential Self

Later I asked each of the women to draw two pictures: one that depicts the experience of a normal group meeting and another that depicts the experience of a Circle meeting.

“In my first picture,” explained Beth, “I thought about a particular new group working together on health care reform. I feel as if everybody’s got their own little bubble around them—their identity. So I’ve drawn what they’re walking in with in different colors. In a way, we already have something larger that we’re about, but we don’t know each other; we don’t know if other people are really about the same thing. So there’s distance between everyone.

“In the second picture,” continued Beth, “there’s an impression of the unique gift of each one’s inner presence or essential self. What I see happening is more of our essential selves coming through, and at the same time, we’re becoming more differentiated in our thoughts and contributions. We are experiencing more of our lives more fully as a result of being seen and witnessed both for who we fundamentally are and for our personality structures and points of view.”

“In my experience of working at our highest, I put the same color as essential self on the individual and the collective levels. This basic presence is an aspect of the Great Field. But at the same time, we are all different, so I’ve also used different colors.

“In my experience, there’s a circle around us, permeating and holding us all. That energy informs us if we are receptive, affecting our understanding, our feelings, and our whole expression. Coming through us individually, in

a collective, light is shed on complicated challenges, usually characterized by a basic generosity and a comprehensive view.

“When I leave this circle and do my professional work, I bring the continued strength and substance of this space that we’ve created. I take it everywhere I go. I feel stronger in all those other places. I think people in my work environment feel a sense of their own presence and power as they come into contact with something we’ve experienced here. They, in turn, go out and take that kind of experience to others.”

Looking at the second picture, I was struck by how strongly it resonated with the field structure of attention that connects to and originates from “those who are surrounding us,” “the beings who surround us.”

“So when you say the ‘Circle Being,’ is that just a concept—just a label? Or does it denote a living presence?” I asked.

“I will give you an example,” Leslie replied. “We have friends who come here to initiate new directions or projects in the circle. I’m thinking of Lexi, for example, who felt drawn to call together a circle of younger women, based on her mentorship work with some of us. She knew that if she sat in our circle, not with us as individuals but in the presence of the Circle Being, that her seed for the young women’s circle would grow. So the Circle Being acts on potential.<sup>o</sup>

“There are many things that people have placed in this circle to be cared for by the action of the field.”

“How can you tell if the Circle Being is present?”

“It’s a change in atmosphere. My ears ring; things slow down; time changes. A quality of depersonalization sets in, and I am urged not to speak casually. I speak when I’m moved by a larger presence that needs a voice. There is always a bit of a mix, but overall it jump-shifts into another zone. Sometimes we note, ‘We’ve dropped into the field.’”

“So, Otto,” said Barbara, turning to me. “I have a real-time consideration. I’m wondering if you’d like you and your work to be held by this circle?”

With that question, I felt a palpable presence. I realized that this question actually had crossed my mind earlier in the interview. But of course, I would have never dared to ask. Now, after Barbara raised the possibility, I felt unable

to react. My ears were ringing. I suddenly realized how much I'd missed my European community of friends living, learning, and joyfully creating together. I also realized how much I missed the presence of such a collective holding space in my current life. I must have waited a long time before I quietly said, "Yes, I would love to."

When speaking these words I felt the witnessing, loving presence not only of each individual circle member, but beyond. I was held and witnessed in a special space. I felt looked at or witnessed by field or entity that wasn't me.

Even though I have no way of proving it, my personal sense is that all the positive breakthroughs that we are beginning to see through the global U (and u.lab) ecology would not have happened without that experience of being held by the Circle of Seven.

## Principles of Presencing

Presencing happens in the context of groups, teams, and organizations as well as with individuals. I often encounter the phenomenon in deep listening and dialogue interviews. In these conversations, it's pretty obvious when the conversation drops from one level to another. You can feel it in your whole body. People often describe it as a heart-to-heart connection. Often there is a subtle quality of light and warmth—not physical warmth, but you can sense it. When boundaries are opening up, there is a subtle field or presence that connects me with my interviewee with the field that surrounds and holds us in an open, deeply generative, and calming state of mind. We are all part of the same larger field or presence that, it seems, becomes aware of itself through us. Four distinct principles define this shift:

### Letting Go and Surrendering

Letting go of the old and surrendering to the unknown is the first principle. Francisco Varela, Eleanor Rosch, and Brian Arthur all emphasize it as the core element of the journey. "Everything that isn't essential must go," Brian Arthur told us when he described crossing the threshold. When you start to suspend your habitual ways of operating and your attention is grabbed by

something that surprises or interests you—something concrete, specific, and unexpected. When that happens, you begin to access your open mind. The burning farmhouse cleared the space and allowed me to move my seeing beyond all the patterns of the past. At such a moment you must let go. What's the point of holding on to a past identity that just went up in flames? In such a case the gesture of letting go is easy. You just surrender to what's obvious. But life doesn't always offer us the mechanism of burning down one's old structures. The challenge is how to access the deep territory without burning down the family farm.

In the absence of a dramatic event like that, we have to perform the activity of letting go and surrendering much more consciously. In the Circle of Seven, Glennifer said it felt as if she were going to die: "Because there's a boundary that has to be stepped over. ... I imagine that there'll be nothing on the other side and that I won't be who I am now when I cross the boundary." For the participants in the farming community, this involved letting go of their firmly held views about the purpose and identity of the farm, of themselves, and of other participants in the group. For the employees of the energy company in Houston, it involved letting go of enormous group and leadership pressure to meet previously established deadlines and expectations.

Letting go and surrendering can be thought of as two sides of the same coin. Letting go concerns the opening process, the removal of barriers and junk in one's way, and surrendering is moving into the resulting opening. When Dave felt that a significant question was beginning to build up within and around him, he had to give it all his attention and simply go with it, surrender to it, whatever it was. When I conduct dialogue interviews, I regularly have to let go of my old intentions, road maps, and lists of questions and simply surrender to what emerges in the conversation.

#### Inversion: Going Through the Eye of the Needle

"Inversion" is the word I use to describe what happens when a person or a group goes through the eye of the needle and begins to link with an emerging field. The German word for inversion, *Umstülpung*, literally means "turning inside out and outside in." When you pass through the eye of the needle—the

threshold where everything that isn't essential must go—you shift the place from which you operate to the field of “those who are surrounding us”; you begin to see from a different direction, you begin to operate from the emerging whole.

In the Circle of Seven, Beth described feeling larger, feeling something come through her. I also experienced this shift of perspective when I felt witnessed not only by the circle members but also by another presence that wasn't me or the individuals in the room. With the farming community, the inversion happened after our Saturday night's conversation was based on individuals' sharing and exchanging their stories and views. The next morning, people started talking from a different point. It was only then that they could ask: What does the being of this place mean for fully realizing its future potential?

For the Houston energy company employees, the inversion took place in the moment of silence after David had asked the perceptive question, right before Joseph and the others followed David through “the eye of the needle” and helped to open that space further. All of them, at that moment, shifted their place of operating from inside themselves to a deeper spot from which a collective creativity began to flow through the group. For the participants in the German Patient-Physician Dialogue Forum, an inversion clearly took place somewhere between Saturday morning, when the patients took their places at one end of the room and the doctors grouped together at the other end, and the next morning, when that little group of physicians and patients sat together outside in a circle. One critical turning point was the statement from the heart by the woman who did not want the system to harm the physicians, whom she knew and cared about. In almost all the examples we see a moment of deep silence before the field shifts.

#### The Coming into Being of a Higher (Authentic) Presence and Self

In the Circle of Seven, Glennifer said, “My experience is that I see more, I experience more of myself. I feel like a bigger person. I feel fuller in my own being. And I feel enabled in a particular way—I feel more powerful.” When you switch from empathic listening to listening from a deeper source or

stream of emergence that connects you to a field of future possibility that wants to emerge and when operating from that deeper presence of a future that wants to emerge, you connect to yet a deeper resource of listening and of intelligence that is available to both human beings and systems—the intelligence of the open will.

I have experienced these kinds of shifts time and again in dialogue interviews. What happens is that you leave that conversation as a different being—a different person—from the one who entered the conversation a few hours earlier. You are no longer the same. You are (a tiny bit) more who you really are. Sometimes that tiny bit can be quite profound. I remember that in one instance I had a physical sensation of a wound when I left a particularly profound conversation. Why? Because that conversation created a generative social field that connected me with a deeper aspect of my journey and Self. Leaving that holding space—the social field—discontinued that deeper connection, which I then experienced as an open wound.

When David articulated his question in Houston, he had, as he told me two years later, actually had a profound personal experience in which he experienced the opening of a another dimension of his emerging self.

When the group of farmers had their conversation about the deep and changing identity of their self, their relationship and their place, they also experienced a forward pull from a different kind of opening or possibility that somehow connected with the embodiment of an emerging or different kind of self—the authentic Self.

In each of these instances we see the same fundamental happening: the arrival, the beginning of a birth, and the coming into being of a new self, the essential or the authentic self that connects us with who we really are.

#### The Power of Place: Creating a Holding Space of Deep Listening

The fourth principle concerns the power of place. Presencing happens in places; that is, in some context of holding space. The Circle of Seven described the three conditions in this space: unconditional witnessing or no judgment, impersonal love, and seeing the essential self. When this shift happens, a new type of relationship between the individual and the collective self takes

shape. Said Beth, “In my experience, there’s a circle around us, permeating and holding us all.” In the case of the farming community, the Houston-based energy company, and the Patient-Physician Dialogue Forum, the holding space was consciously created through a process of context sharing, storytelling, and deep listening.

In many cases, nature can also function as a teacher and gateway into that deeper place. How to use and leverage the presence and power of certain places for accessing the authentic dimension of self in individuals and in communities is one of the most interesting research questions for the years to come.

### Field Notes

The golden thread that runs through all the stories is about the simple distinction between sensing—acting from the current whole—and presencing—operating from the emerging future whole. There are various leverage points to deepen one’s capacity to operate from that deeper source. They are:

Pick a practice. The currency that counts at the bottom of the U is not ideas but practices. Many of the people (interviewees, clients, and others) I have been most impressed by have their own cultivation practices. Many of them do something in the morning, such as getting up early and using the silence of the first hour to connect to a source of commitment and creativity. Some meditate. Some use other contemplative practices. There is no standard recipe, just as there isn’t a standard practice. People must discover for themselves what works and what doesn’t.

Create a circle of presence. Create a context of people that allows you to support one another in the unfolding of your journey and in the pursuit of deeper questions and challenges that present themselves. Think of the Circle of Seven as an example. Theirs is not the only way to do it. But it works for them. The principle here is to have a regular holding space. Such a holding space can lend us the wings we need to cross the thresholds our life’s journey presents to us.

Develop collective cultivation practices. Develop collective cultivation practices, such as intentional silence or generative dialogue, that provide access

to the deeper sources of communal awareness and attention in the context of everyday life and work. The development of new collective presencing practices will be one of the most important undertakings in the years to come. A collective presencing practice is different from an individual one in that the various sensing and presencing experiences of the individuals are used as gateways for connecting with and entering the deeper source of collective creativity and knowing (as exemplified in the farming community story).

Do what you love—love what you do. This is another thing Michael Ray said. It's a source principle that Steve Jobs talked about in his famous Stanford Commencement speech.<sup>6</sup> It refers to this root question: What is my Work? What am I here for? I have found a very simple formula that explains my sustained level of energy. It doesn't take more than two simple conditions: what I am doing must really matter (connect to my purpose), and it must create a positive difference (feedback mechanism). If these two conditions are met, I am in an ever-increasing positive energy loop.

In summary, each of us is not one but two. Each person and each community is not one but two. On the one hand, we are the person and community that we have become on our journey from the past to the present—the current self. On the other, there is the other, the dormant self, the one that is waiting within us to be born, to be brought into existence, to come into reality through our journey ahead. Presencing is the process of connecting these two selves: our current with our authentic Self. It is the process of moving toward our Self from the future that wants to emerge.

When we enter that deeper state of being—as individuals and as communities—we enter a state of fundamental freedom and capacity to create. We step into our real freedom. Hence, the social technology of presencing is essentially a technology of freedom. Operationally, that means that the defining feature of entering the field of presencing is the absence of manipulation and manipulative practices. That's the core. In doing this work, all we can do is to open the doors. But we can never ever take away the decision each human being makes: to go through this door—or to stop short of it. The moment you manipulate somebody in such a space, you move into the field of absencing.

In crossing the threshold, we step into our real power—the power of operating from our highest future Self; the power of connecting with “the beings who surround us.”<sup>12</sup> This deep connection has been described by different names in various wisdom traditions: the presence of Source (Daoism), natural state (Buddhism), Brahman (Hindu traditions), Yahweh (Judaism), Allah (Muslim traditions), God, Christ, The Holy Spirit (Christian traditions), or The Great Spirit (Native traditions). All these terms name the same fundamental level of experience and describe a deeper state of being that can become present within us and through us, both individually and collectively. But for the presentencing of this deeper field and connection to happen, we must first cross the threshold at the bottom of the U.

Now, as our field walk has reached the bottom of the U, it may be a good time to go back to the beginning and look again at Kelvy’s drawings: of the threshold, the iceberg, inversion, the social field, and the Earth rising. You might find that here, midway on our journey through the book, the meaning of these images has evolved for you in subtle ways. Take a moment to study the images again and allow them to talk to you ...

I remember once talking to John Milton, a pioneering ecologist, educator, and meditation master who founded the Way of Nature Fellowship. His method of guiding people through the bottom of the U is to use nature as a teacher, by putting people alone in nature for several days or even weeks. Before the people go, he tells them something like this: “When you encounter Nature with your heart truly fully wide open, you will be amazed by what she will give back to you.” I have found that principle to be true for both nature and great art. Maybe it will also work for you when you revisit the images at the beginning of the book.