

Facing the Fire

When I left my German farmhouse that morning for school, I had no idea it was the last time I would see my home, a large 350-year-old farmhouse thirty miles north of Hamburg. It was just another ordinary day at school until about one o'clock, when the teacher called me out of class. "You should go home now, Otto." I noticed that her eyes were slightly red. She did not tell me why I needed to hurry home, but I was concerned enough to try to call home from the train station. There was no ring. The line was obviously dead. I had no idea what might have happened, but by then I knew it probably wasn't good. After the usual one-hour train ride I ran to the entrance of the station and jumped into a cab. Something told me I didn't have time to wait for my usual bus. Long before the cab arrived, I saw huge gray and black clouds of smoke billowing up into the air. My heart was pounding as the cab approached our long driveway. I recognized hundreds of our neighbors, area firefighters, and policemen along with people I'd never seen before. I jumped from the cab and ran down

through the crowd, the last half mile of our chestnut-lined driveway. When I reached the courtyard, I could not believe my eyes. The world I had lived in all my life was gone. Vanished. All up in smoke.

There was nothing—absolutely nothing—left except the raging flames. As the reality of the fire in front of my eyes began to sink in, I felt as if somebody had ripped away the ground from under my feet. The place of my birth, childhood, and youth was gone. I just stood there, taking in the heat of the fire and feeling time slowing down. As my gaze sank deeper and deeper into the flames, the flames also seemed to sink into me. Suddenly I realized how attached I had been to all the things destroyed by the fire. Everything I thought I was had dissolved into nothing. Everything? No, perhaps not everything, for I felt that a tiny element of my self still existed. Somebody was still there, watching all this. Who?

At that moment I realized there was another dimension of my self that I hadn't previously been aware of, a dimension that related not to my past experiences—the world that had just dissolved in front of my eyes—but to my future possibilities, a world that I could bring into reality with my life. At that moment time slowed down to stillness, and I felt drawn in a direction above my physical body and began watching the scene from that unknown place. I felt my mind quieting and expanding in a moment of unparalleled clarity of awareness. I realized that I was not the person I had thought I was. My real self was not attached to all the material possessions smoldering inside the ruins. I suddenly knew that I, my true Self, was still alive! It was this "I" that was the seer. And this seer was more alive, more awake, more acutely present than the "I" I had known before. I was no longer weighted down by all the material possessions the fire had just consumed. With everything gone, I was lighter and free, released to encounter the other part of my self, the part that drew me into the future—into my future—into a world waiting for me, that I might bring into reality with my forward journey.

The next day my eighty-seven-year old grandfather arrived for what would be his last visit to the farm. He had lived in that house all his life, beginning in 1890. Because of medical treatments, he had been away the week before the fire, and when he arrived at the courtyard the day after the fire, he sum-

moned his last energy, got out of the car, and went straight to where my father was working on the cleanup. He did not even once turn his head to the smoking ruins. Without seeming to notice the small fires still burning around the property, he went up to my father, took his hand, and said, “Kopf hoch, mein Junge, blick nach vorn!” “Keep your head up, my boy, look forward!” Then he turned, walked directly back to the waiting car, and left. A few days later he died quietly.

Only years later did I realize that my experience in front of the fire was the beginning of a journey. My journey began with the recognition that I am not just one self but two selves. One self is connected to the past, and the second self connects to who I could become in the future. In front of the fire I experienced how these two selves started to connect to each other. Today, thirty-seven years later and several thousand miles away in Boston, Massachusetts, these two questions appear to be more relevant than ever: “Who is my true self?” and “How does this self relate to the other stream of time—the one that seemed to draw me from the future that wants to emerge?”

The journey of Theory U is basically an inquiry into this question: How can we access these deeper sources of time, being, and self in a way that is reliable, practical, and collective—and that works without your family farmhouse going up in flames every morning? These questions eventually prompted me to leave Germany for the United States in 1994 to continue my research at the MIT Organizational Learning Center.