Chapter 2

The Journey to “U”

Theory U • Interview with Brian Arthur at Xerox PARC • Francisco Varela on the Blind Spot in Cognition Sciences • The Inner Territory of Leadership

Theory U: Beginnings

As just discussed, the blind spot concerns the structure and source of our attention. I first began noticing this blind spot in organizations when I spoke with Bill O’Brien, the former CEO of Hanover Insurance. He told me that his greatest insight after years of conducting organizational learning projects and facilitating corporate change was that “the success of an intervention depends on the interior condition of the intervener.” That struck a chord! So it’s not only what leaders do and how they do it but their “interior condition,” that is, the inner place from which they operate—the source and quality of their attention. So this suggests the same person in the same situation doing the same thing can effect a totally different outcome depending on the inner place from where that action is coming.

When I realized that, I asked myself: What do we know about that inner place? We know everything about the what and the how, the actions and the processes that leaders and managers use. But what do we know about that
inner place? nothing! I wasn’t even sure whether there were only one or many of these inner places. Do we have two? Ten? We don’t know because it’s in our blind spot. Yet what I have heard time and time again from profound innovators and creative people is that it is exactly that kind of blind spot that matters most. It is that blind spot that sets apart master practitioners and leaders from average performers. This is why Aristotle over 2,300 years ago made a distinction between normal scientific “what” knowledge (episteme) and practical and technical “how” knowledge (phronesis, techne) on the one hand and the inner primary knowing of first principles and sources of awareness (nous) and wisdom (Sophia) on the other. \(^1\)

Shortly after I came to MIT in 1994, I watched a live broadcast on organizational learning. In response to a question from the audience, Rick Ross, coauthor of The Fifth Discipline Fieldbook, went to the whiteboard and wrote the following three words:

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**STRUCTURE**
**PROCESS**
**THOUGHT**

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**Figure 2.1: Levels of Organizational Change**

When I saw that simple presentation, I realized that organizational change happens on different layers. In a flash I began mentally seeing these layers. Diagramming them helped, because the changes from structure to process to thoughts present more and more subtle shifts. When I completed the drawing in my mind, I had added two more levels—above structure and below thought—as well as a horizontal dimension showing change as we move from perceiving something to acting on it. This is how it began to look:

I began calling the state at the bottom of the U “Presencing.” I will talk much more about this in Part III, but for now, we can call it “seeing from our deepest source”: that is, sensing and operating from one’s highest future potential. It is the state each of us can experience when we open not just our
minds but our hearts and our wills—our impetus to act—in order to deal with the new realities emerging all around us.

Whenever I used this framework in presentations and in my work with groups, organizations, and communities, I noticed how deeply it resonated with experienced practitioners. As they worked with this U image, people began to understand its two key dimensions. One is the distinction between perception and action that defines the horizontal axis, as we work from deeply connecting and sensing toward enacting and realizing. The vertical axis then shows us the different levels of change from the shallowest response, “Re-acting,” down through the deepest, “Re-generating.”

Most change and learning methods are based on the Kolb Learning Cycle, which suggests a version of the following sequence: observe, reflect, plan, and act. By grounding the learning process this way, the learning cycles are based
on learning from the experiences of the past. The distinction made by Harvard and MIT’s Chris Argyris and Don Schön between single-loop and double-loop learning refers to learning from experiences of the past. Single-loop learning is reflected in the levels of reacting and restructuring, while reframing is an example of double-loop learning (which includes a reflection of one’s deep assumptions and governing variables). However, the deepest level of the U graphic—referred to as regenerating—goes beyond double-loop learning. It accesses a different stream of time—the future that wants to emerge—and is what in this book I will refer to as presencing or “the U process.”

The concept of the U, of course, didn’t spring from nothing. It emerged from many years of study and work on change in different contexts and movements, which are documented in two of my earlier books. Important sources of my early thinking about social development and change included a global learning journey whose purpose was to study the dynamics of peace and conflict (in 1989–1990). It led me to India to study Gandhi’s approach of nonviolent conflict transformation, and to China, Vietnam, and Japan to study Buddhism, Confucianism, and Daoism as different approaches to development and being. I also had the fortune to work with unique academic teachers, Ekkehard Kappler and Johan galtung, who taught me that critical thinking and science can function as powerful forces for social transformation and change. Other influences on my thinking were the work of the avant-garde artist Joseph Beuys, and the writings of Henry David Thoreau, Martin Buber, Friedrich Nietzsche, Edmund Husserl, Martin Heidegger, and Jürgen Habermas, as well as some of the old masters like Hegel, Fichte, Aristotle, and Plato. Among the philosophical sources, perhaps most influential was the work of the educator and social innovator Rudolf Steiner, whose synthesis of science, consciousness, and social innovation continues to inspire my work and whose methodological grounding in Goethe’s phenomenological view of science has left the most significant imprint on Theory U. The simplest way of locating Theory U in the landscape of intellectual traditions is to identify it as applied phenomenology—a mindful phenomenological practice for investigating the social field. In that context, another important source of inspiration is the work of Friedrich Glasl, who, inspired by Steiner’s work, developed a related concept of the U
that looks at companies and organizations as three interrelated subsystems (Glaser 1997, 1999).

The key insight I developed from reading Steiner’s foundational book, The Philosophy of Freedom, is the same insight that I walked away with after completing my first research project at MIT with Edgar Schein. In that project we looked at all the different theories of change that researchers at MIT’s Sloan School of Management had come up with. While trying to summarize our findings, Ed reflected on the pretty complex integration of frameworks we had come up with and said, “Perhaps we have to go back to data and start all over again. Maybe we have to take our own experience in dealing with change more seriously.” I took this to mean that, to paraphrase Steiner, we have to investigate our own experience and our own thought process in a clearer, more transparent, and more rigorous way. In other words, trust your senses, trust your observations, trust your own perception as the fundamental starting point of any investigation—but then follow that train of observation all the way back to its source, exactly as Husserl and Varela advocated in their work on the phenomenological method. In The Philosophy of Freedom, Steiner focuses on individual consciousness. In Theory U, we explore the structures and sources of collective attention in teams, organizations, and larger systems.6

Interview with Brian Arthur at Xerox PARC

In 1999, I started an interview project with Joseph Jaworski, author of Synchronicity: The Inner Path of Leadership. Our task was to create a learning environment that would help a group of line leaders in a large global company that had just been restructured after a recent merger to learn faster and to innovate in changing business environments.

To do so, we interviewed practitioners and thought leaders on innovation, including W. Brian Arthur, the founding head of the Economics Program at the Santa Fe Institute. He is best known for his pathbreaking contributions to understanding high-tech markets. As Joseph and I walked up to the Xerox PARC building in Palo Alto, California, I couldn’t help but think about all the
revolutions that had begun in this very spot. Since the 1970s the original Xerox PARC team has been considered one of the most productive research and development teams of all time. It invented the Macintosh-type interface found on almost every computer on Earth; it also invented the mouse, as well as numerous core ideas and technologies used by many successful companies today, including Apple Inc. and Adobe Systems. The irony is that Xerox itself did not capitalize on all those inventions and breakthrough ideas. Instead, they were developed by people like Steve Jobs and others at Apple and Adobe (and elsewhere) who were not distracted by running a copy machine company.

When Arthur met us, we immediately started talking about the changing economic foundations of today’s business world. “You know,” Arthur said, “the real power comes from recognizing patterns that are forming and fitting with them.” He went on to discuss two different levels of cognition. “Most tend to be the standard cognitive kind that you can work with in your conscious mind. But there is a deeper level. Instead of an understanding, I would call this deeper level a ‘knowing.’”

“Suppose,” he said, “that I was parachuted into some situation in Silicon Valley—not a real problem, just a complicated, dynamic situation that I’m trying to figure out. I would observe and observe and observe and then simply retreat. If I were lucky, I would be able to get in touch with some deep inner place and allow knowing to emerge.” He continued, “you wait and wait and let your experience well up into something appropriate. In a sense, there is no decision making. What to do becomes obvious. You can’t rush it. Much of it depends on where you’re coming from and who you are as a person. This has a lot of implications for management. I am basically saying that what counts is where you’re coming from inside yourself.”

What we heard that day resonated deeply with what we had heard from other leading practitioners we had worked with in many sectors and industries. Leaders need to deal with their blind spot and shift the inner place from which they operate.

Arthur asked us to imagine what would happen if Apple Inc., for instance, decided to hire a CEO from, say Pepsi-Cola? That leader would bring one sort
of cognition: cost down, quality up, whatever the mantra is. And it wouldn’t work. But now imagine a Steve Jobs coming in—someone who can distance himself from the problem and think differently. “When he came back to Apple, the Internet was just beginning. No one knew what that might mean. Now look at him: he turned Apple around.” Top-notch scientists do the same thing, Arthur continued. “Good, but not quite first-rate scientists are able to take existing frameworks and overlay them onto some situation. The first-rate ones just sit back and allow the appropriate structure to form. My observation is that they have no more intelligence than the good scientists do, but they have this other ability and that makes all the difference.”

This “other way of knowing” shows up in Chinese and Japanese artists as well. Arthur said, “They’ll sit on a ledge with lanterns for a whole week, just looking, and then suddenly they’ll say, ‘Ooohh’ and paint something very quickly.”

On the return trip we realized that the conversation with Arthur had furnished two principal insights. First, there is a distinction between types of cognition: normal (downloading mental frames) versus a deeper level of knowing. And second, in order to activate the deeper level of knowing, one

![Three Movements of the U Diagram](image)

**Figure 2.3: Three Movements of the U**
has to go through a three-step process similar to Arthur’s parachute example: observe deeply, connect to what wants to emerge, and then act on it instantly. It was obvious to connect this conversation with my earlier work on the U. So I drew a U figure on a piece of paper, mapped the key points of the conversation with Brian Arthur onto it, and showed it to Joseph.

We realized we were onto something very significant. What followed was an intense period of spelling out, crystallizing, and refining the framework. My joint work with Joseph on these issues has taught me much about operating from one’s deeper source of knowing. His life story, which he shares in his book Synchronicity, is itself a great illustration of how an individual can tap into this deeper source of creativity. Then the next question came to mind: What would it take for a group, an organization, or an institution to operate on a similar level? Finding the answer became our quest.

Francisco Varela on the Blind Spot in Cognition Sciences

After that trip, I shared the drawing of Brian Arthur’s three movements through the U with many people. When they followed the pattern of “observe, retreat, and reflect, then act in an instant,” many said, “I know this. I have seen this in highly creative people. I have seen this in highly creative moments of my own life.” But then when I asked them, “Okay, and what do work and life actually look like in your current context and organization?” they usually responded, “Not like this; it’s different. It’s more like this downloading thing.” What remained puzzling was that most people know this deeper place of creativity, yet in our everyday work and lives, particularly in the context of larger institutions, we seem unable to access it. We remain locked in the old patterns of downloading. Why? I believe we have trouble navigating this deeper territory because we lack a higher-resolution map. We need more than just those three steps. We need a map that shows the archetypal folds and thresholds in between, as well as the stumbling blocks where the process of “observe, observe” tends to hit the wall. What would that higher-resolution map look like?

Pondering that question, I left for Paris to interview the famous cognitive scientist Francisco Varela. At the time, I was working on a parallel research project sponsored by Michael Jung, then a Director at McKinsey & Company.
When I first met Varela in 1996, he told me about the blind spot of cognition research. “There is an irreducible core to the quality of experience that needs to be explored with a method. In other words, the problem is not that we don’t know enough about the brain or about biology. The problem is that we don’t know enough about experience. ... We have had a blind spot in the West for that kind of methodical approach. Everybody thinks they know about experience. I claim we don’t.”

Little did I know as I sat in his office in January 2000 that it would be our last meeting. One of the most outstanding and promising cognitive scientists of our time, Varela passed away in 2001. I told him that his notion of the blind spot had resonated with many readers. I asked him whether he had done more work on that subject. He said this had been his primary focus ever since. He explained that his current work entailed a triangulation of approaches to accessing experience: psychological introspection, phenomenology, and contemplative practices. “What is common in all of them? What is it that all human beings have?” Varela mused. “... So that Germans in the 1880s could do their creative kind of introspection or the inheritors of the Buddha Shakyamuni in the fifth or fourth centuries before Christ could create the techniques of samatha or that somebody like Husserl could create a whole new school of thinking about phenomenology? What is common to these three practices of pragmatics about human experience?”

“The key is how will you become aware?” For three years Varela had been working on a book called On Becoming Aware. In it he posed the question “Can people cultivate this core process as an ability?” Varela explained to me: “By looking at these three traditions as practices, you first have to distinguish, for lack of a better term, the purely first-person point of view and what one does as an individual at the interface between the first and second person. When it comes to the first person what seems to happen is better seen in terms of three gestures of becoming aware. They are: suspension, redirection, letting-go.

The Three Gestures on the Left-Hand Side of the U

This is something everyone knows instinctively, he said, “But just as a runner must train to become a marathoner, understanding and mastering this process requires study and coaching.” We walked together through the three
gestures. Varela explained. “By suspension I mean the suspension of habitual patterns. In Buddhist meditation, you put your butt on the cushion and move one level above your habitual engagement and see from a more aerial perspective.” We went on to discuss how many people sitting in meditation claim that nothing happens. Why? “Because the whole point is that after suspension you have to tolerate that nothing is happening. Suspension is a very funny procedure. Staying with that is the key.”

Then he explained his second and third gestures: redirection and letting go. Redirection is about redirecting your attention from the “exterior” to the “interior” by turning the attention toward the source of the mental process rather than the object. Letting go has to be done with a light touch, he cautioned. As he wrote with his coauthors Natalie Depraz and Pierre Vermersch, it means “to accept our experience.”

Walking out of Varela’s office, I knew I had been handed a gift. What struck me about Varela’s description is that the three gestures or turning points in transforming one’s quality of attention match many of my own experiences in groups. As have other facilitators, I had seen these “folds” many times in team processes and workshops as I tried to usher a group through turning points so they could access some deeper place of creativity. First, you help the group suspend judgments in order to see the objective reality they are up against, including the basic figures and facts. Second, you help them redirect their attention from the external issue to the process of co-creating it in order to help them see how their own actions contributed to the problem at hand. At that point people begin to see themselves as part of the issue; they begin to see how they collectively create a pattern that at first seemed to be caused by purely exterior forces. And then, if you are lucky, you and the group go to a deeper place of stillness where they let go of the old and start to connect with their higher-order intentions. Walking out of Varela’s office, I could see in an instant how these folds could be mapped onto the U (figure 2.4).

But I still had more questions. If Varela’s core process of becoming aware illustrates the journey down one side of the U, what about the other part of this journey? What is the process of moving up the right-hand side? It seemed to me that most researchers, educators, and cultivators of cognition and mindfulness were occupied primarily with the “opening process”—the
left-hand side of the U—and paid little or no attention to the drama of collective creation that happens when we enter the right-hand side of the U. As every practitioner, innovator, and leader knows, a whole other dimension to the collective creativity process happens on the right-hand side of the U that deals with intentionally bringing the new into reality. How does something new manifest? How does the new come into being?

The Inner Territory of Leadership

Mapping the Right-Hand Side of the U

Going down the U moves us through the cognitive spaces of downloading, seeing, sensing, and presencing. But to successfully enter these deeper cognitive spaces, we have to cross the thresholds that Varela was talking about: suspension, redirection, and letting go. I realized that going up the U may be the same journey, except that you cross the thresholds coming from the opposite direction (figure 2.5).

Accordingly, the threshold of letting go (on your way down) turns into the threshold of letting come (on your way up), leading you to the space of crystallizing vision and intention. The threshold of redirecting from the exterior
to the inner way of seeing (on your way down) turns into the threshold of redirecting from the inner vision to the exterior action in order to enact a rapid-cycle prototype (on your way up). And finally, the threshold of suspending habits and routines (on your way down) turns into the threshold of institutionalizing by embodying the new in actions, infrastructures, and practices (on your way up). So in each of these cases the same threshold is crossed, but from the other side.

I have seen groups move across these thresholds at various times. When such a process of profound innovation and change happens, you can watch a group go through some version of the following subtle shifts of the social field (see figure 2.5):

- **Downloading**: At the beginning there is a spark of becoming aware that moves us beyond continued downloading—beyond reenacting patterns of the past. Attended to from this angle, the world is seen through the lens (and limitations) of our old habits of thought, when nothing new can enter our minds.

- **Seeing**: If continued, the moment of awakening awareness deepens when we suspend our habitual judgment in order to see reality with fresh
eyes. When the world is attended to from this angle, we see it with an open mind but also from a viewpoint that makes the observed appear to be separate from us.

• Sensing: If further continued, the moment of awareness deepens when we redirect our perception toward sensing from the whole field. Attended to from this angle, the boundary between observer and observed collapses and opens up a cognitive space that allows the system to see itself.

• Presencing: If continued even further, the moment of awareness continues to deepen as we let go of the old and connect to the sources of our being and of what wants to emerge. Attended to from this angle, the boundary between observer and observed fully collapses, morphing into a holding space that allows participants and the system to sense and see itself in terms of both the current reality and the future that wants to emerge.

• Crystallizing vision and intention: If further continued, the awareness continues to manifest as we envision and let come the future that wants to emerge. Attended to from this angle, the relationship between observed and observer, or system and self, starts to transform through a profound process of inversion. That inversion begins with the vision and intention crystallizing (as opposed to being crystallized by the observer).

• Prototyping living microcosms: If further continued, the awareness continues to manifest as we enact prototypes in order to explore the future by doing. Attended to from this angle, the relationship between observed and observer (system and self) continues its inversion as the prototyping process is guided by the context or by “being in dialogue with the universe” (as opposed to being guided by the observing self).

• Performing and embodying the new: If continued even further, the awareness continues to manifest as we embody the new practices and infrastructures. Attended to from this angle, the relationship between observed and observer (system and self) completes its inversion through embedding and performing the new from the larger eco-system (as opposed to from the observing self).
We can think of this whole set of seven cognitive spaces as a house with seven distinct spaces or rooms. Each room represents one of the seven spaces of attention (see figure 2.5). The problem with most organizations and institutions today is that they use only a few of these rooms—usually the spaces in the upper half of figure 2.5; the other ones are rarely used or seldom leveraged. Part II of this book, “Entering the U Field,” shows us in much more detail what each “room” represents and how we can enjoy and leverage being in them and grow from the experience.

The rest of our journey toward uncovering Theory U can be summarized by five key propositions, which I introduce here and discuss in more detail in the remainder of the book.

1. We need a new Social Technology That Is Based on Tuning Three Instruments

While participating in numerous profound innovation and change projects and initiatives, I realized that while most experienced leaders actually do know these deeper levels of the U from their own experience, most organizations, institutions, and larger systems are firmly stuck on levels 1 or 2. Why? I believe it is because we lack a new social leadership technology. Without a new leadership technology, change-makers and leaders don’t really shift fields but end up with more of the same. We call these attempts “restructuring,” “redesigning,” or “re-engineering,” and more often than not they serve only to deepen our frustration and cynicism.

What I am suggesting as an alternative is to develop a new type of social technology that is based on three instruments that each of us already has—an open mind, an open heart, and an open will—and to cultivate these capacities not only individually but also collectively.

The first instrument, or capacity, the open mind, is based on our ability to access our intellectual, or IQ, type of intelligence. This allows us to see with fresh eyes, to deal with the objective figures and facts around us. As the saying goes, the mind works like a parachute: it only functions when it is open.

The second capacity, the open heart, relates to our ability to access our emotional intelligence, or EQ; that is, our capacity to empathize with
others, to tune in to different contexts, and to put ourselves into someone else’s shoes.

The third capacity, the open will, relates to our ability to access our authentic purpose and self. This type of intelligence is also sometimes referred to as intention or SQ (spiritual intelligence or self-knowledge). It deals with the fundamental actions of letting go and letting come.

We can tune each of these three instruments on an individual (subjective) and a collective (intersubjective) level.

2. THE MOST IMPORTANT LEADERSHIP TOOL IS YOUR SELF

The second insight deals with the evolving nature of every human being and with the recognition that we are not “one” but “two.” One self is the person or community we have become as a result of a journey that took place in the past. The other self is the person or community we can become as we journey into the future. It is our highest future possibility. People

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**Figure 2.6: Three Instruments: Open Mind, Open Heart, Open Will**

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sometimes refer to the first self using a lowercase “s” and to the second self with a capital “S.”

When these two “selves” start talking to each other, you experience the essence of presencing.

How does this happen? Later we will take this up in more detail, but for now let’s describe it this way. At the bottom of the U is a fundamental threshold one must cross. We might call it going through the eye of the needle. If the process of going through falls short, all our efforts to change will remain somewhat superficial. They won’t touch our essential core, our emerging future Self. We must learn to drop our ego and our habitual “self” in order for the authentic Self to emerge.

When our “self” and our “Self” begin to communicate, we establish a subtle but very real link to our highest future possibility that can then begin to help and guide us in those situations where the past can’t offer us useful advice (figure 2.7).

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<td>Presencing connecting to source</td>
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<td>Who is my Self?</td>
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**Figure 2.7: The Most Important Tool: your Self**
Thus, the most important tool in such a new leadership technology is the leader’s (or change-maker’s) self—your Self.

3. The Leader’s Interior Work Deals with Meeting and Mastering Three Enemies

The third insight deals with this puzzle: Why is the journey to the deeper levels of the U the road less traveled? Because it requires difficult inner work. Going “through the eye of the needle” requires that we face and deal with at least three inner voices of resistance, three enemies that can block the entrance to one of the deeper territories. The first enemy blocks the gate to the open mind. Michael Ray calls this enemy the Voice of Judgment (VoJ). Unless we succeed in shutting down our Voice of Judgment, we will be unable to make progress in accessing our real creativity and presence.

The second enemy blocks the gate to the open heart. Let us call this the Voice of Cynicism (VoC)—that is, all types of emotional acts of distancing.

**Figure 2.8: Facing Three Enemies: VoJ, VoC, VoF**
What is at stake when we begin to access the open heart? We must first put ourselves into a position of vulnerability, which distancing usually prevents. I am not saying you should never follow your VoC. I am saying that if you want to get to the bottom of the U—to your real source of creativity and Self—then your VoC is dysfunctional because it blocks your progress on that journey.

The third enemy blocks the gate to the open will. This is the Voice of Fear (VoF). It seeks to prevent us from letting go of what we have and who we are. It can show up as fear of losing economic security. Or fear of being ostracized. Or fear of being ridiculed. And fear of death. And yet meeting and dealing with that voice of fear is the very essence of leadership: to facilitate the letting go of the old “self” and letting come the new “Self.” Only then can we step into another world that begins to take shape once we overcome the fear of stepping into the unknown.

4. THE U IS A LIVING FIELD THEORY—not a LINEAR MECHANICAL PROCESS.

The fourth insight concerns an observation that puzzled me when I noticed that some of the early adopters of the U process applied the principles of this theory in a rather mechanical, linear manner. What this brings to mind is that the essence of Theory U is just the opposite: it works as a matrix; that is, it works as an integral whole, not as a linear process. When you watch Bruce Lee, or Muhammad Ali, or Michael Jordan, or Lionel Messi, you’ll notice that their actions do not follow a linear process. Rather, they dance with the situation they are dealing with—they constantly observe and sense (connect), allow the inner knowing or intuition to emerge, and then act in an instant. And they do it all the time. It’s not three different stages enacted sequentially, you can’t plan to do one each week, with a few days of break in between. Instead, you dance with what surrounds you and with what emerges from within all the time. You dance to all three movements of the U simultaneously, not sequentially.

Yet for practical purposes, there is also a real benefit to breaking it down this way: During the co-sensing movement, focus primarily on sensing; during the co-presencing movement, focus on inner knowing; during the
co-creation movement, focus on enacting. But keep in mind that all the other movements and capacities are always present. you could think of the U as a holographic theory: each component reflects the whole, yet in a very specific and particular way.

In order to enhance their resonance with the deeper fields of emergence, organizations need to establish three different kinds of infrastructures and places:

- Places and enabling infrastructures that facilitate a shared seeing and sense-making of what is actually going on in the larger surrounding ecosystem (co-sensing)
- Places and cocoons of deep reflection and silence that facilitate deep listening and connection to the source of authentic presence and creativity, both individually and collectively (co-presencing)
- Places and infrastructures for hands-on prototyping of the new in order to explore the future by doing (co-creating)

5. The Rise of the Social Space of Emergence and Creation (Cycle of Presencing) Is Connected to the Rise of Its Counterpart: The Social Space of Destruction (Cycle of Absencing)

Our final insight is that we observe the massive rise of destruction, violence, and fundamentalism at the same time that we also see an opening to the deeper layers of the social field. That double movement, the opening to the deeper levels of emergence, on the one hand, and the enhanced power of the forces of destruction, on the other, is a defining feature of our time. This proposition tries to shed some light on how these two forces—those of presencing and absencing—relate to each other. It suggests that both are aspects of a single evolutionary movement. Often we see how people in the face of the utmost destruction have the ability to wake up to a higher level of awareness and consciousness. Throughout this book I will share several of these stories.

All of us around the world participate in two different types of social connection, two different qualities of the social field. One of them is governed
by the dynamics of anti-emergence and destruction, which amplifies the collective social body that is about to die. The other is governed by the dynamics of emergence and collective creativity, which leads to the new social body that is about to be born. What happens in numerous social situations of violence and connection today is that we are torn between these two worlds. We can switch from one space (the space of collective creativity) to the other (the space of collective destruction) in an instant at almost any time and place, and our noticing this switch depends on how awake we are to one another (see figure P.1, preface).

In the remaining chapters of Part I we will go on a learning journey in which we will see that basically the same thing happens at each system level: we increasingly bump into our own blind spot. That is, time and again, we are thrown into blank-canvas situations that require us to look at ourselves and at our collective patterns of behavior to reinvent ourselves: to know who we are and where we want to go as an institution, as individuals, and as a community.

In Part II we will uncover the core process of illuminating this blind spot. And in Part III we will investigate in much more detail how this profound transformation of the global field is playing out across all system levels, from the individual (micro) to groups (meso), institutions (macro), and the world (mundo).

As you go through the journey of this book—if you choose to do so—you will notice that at times I share with you some frameworks that at first may seem complex. But what you will also notice is that all these frameworks and distinctions are derived from the examples and stories discussed throughout the book. Looked at together, they could be called the footprints of our collective evolutionary process. It’s the evolutionary grammar that we enact collectively across all system levels, every day. It’s our own story. So the act of seeing, recognizing, and attending to these patterns is not just a theoretical exercise; it gives us a whole different way to collaborate as change agents for bringing forth a world that is profoundly different from that of the past.

How to do this, how to begin to operate from the future as it emerges, is the question that underlies and organizes this book. With this question in mind, let us now turn our attention to how a team learns.