

## u.school: Shaping Awareness- Based Systems Change

The Battle of Our Time • Inspiring a Global Shift • Call of Our  
Time • Born in a Blizzard • u.school in the Making

### The Battle of Our Time

With the beginning of this millennium we have entered a phase of increased tension between two principal forces. On the one hand, we see a dramatic acceleration of the forces of fundamentalism, manipulation, and absencing or destruction. On the other hand, we witness the deepening of a profound opening process around the world in which groups of people are beginning to become aware of and connect with the deeper meaning of their life journeys. Day by day, week by week, both of these forces seem to amplify at the same time. The difference between them is that the first one—the forces of fundamentalism, manipulation, and absencing—works by decreasing the degrees of freedoms for the people involved. We see this happening, for instance, when bombs are dropped with the intention of blowing people into a future that looks more like a caricature of the past.

By contrast, the other set of forces at work increase the degrees of freedom by giving people additional ways to attend and respond to their own situations and circumstances. The difference, simply put, is that the first one looks at a human being as an object that is determined by its environment and conditioned by its past. As a consequence, it can be influenced, manipulated, and controlled through exterior mechanisms such as algorithms that keep us firmly in the grip of our habitual bubble. The second view sees human beings as evolving selves—carriers of a dormant capacity to connect with a deeper source of creativity and knowing. Through this capacity, people can link with and realize a future that depends on each of us to bring it into being. The essence of this view of the human being is to create by connecting to one's highest future possibility, one's authentic Self.

The trajectory of our evolutionary path forward is at risk. Are we, as a species, heading toward a mechanization of the collective global field, where the evolutionary project gets frozen in the bubble of our habitualized behavior and in the space of absencing? Or can we find a way to deepen our connection to Source?

It has been often said that in the face of the utmost destructive forces—such as Hitler at the height of his power—it's not good enough to keep focusing on Gandhian types of nonviolent strategies of conflict transformation. But that is exactly what hundreds of unarmed German women did for a week in February 1943. In Berlin's Rosenstrasse, they stood toe to toe with machine-gun-wielding Gestapo agents, demanding the release of their imprisoned husbands.

Charlotte Israel was among the women who waited in freezing temperatures outside Rosenstrasse 2–4, the Jewish community center, desperate for news of her husband. She had been coming each day since the police arrested Julius Israel along with hundreds of other factory-working Jews, the last of the Jews to be taken. She recalled, "Without warning, the guards began setting up machine guns. Then they directed them at the crowd and shouted: 'If you don't go now, we'll shoot.' The movement surged backward. But then, for the first time, we really hollered. Now we couldn't care less. ... Now

they're going to shoot in any case, so now we'll yell too, we thought. We yelled, 'Murderer, murderer, murderer, murderer.'"

The protest by the women from the Rosenstrasse was successful, says the historian Nathan Stoltzfus in his recent book on the event, because women such as Charlotte Israel were so deeply motivated that they risked their lives even though there was no central organization.<sup>1</sup> "We acted from the heart, and look what happened," another woman, Eliza Holzer, told Stoltzfus nearly half a century after she protested the arrest of her husband, Rudi.

In the end the women's courage and passion prevailed. As thousands of other Berlin Jews were crammed into cattle cars and transported to Auschwitz, the 1,700 Jews who had been locked in at the Rosenstrasse were set free.

### Inspiring a Global Shift

What if more Germans had "acted from the heart," as the women of the Rosenstrasse did? What can their story teach us about how to deal with today's challenges? How can we learn to begin to act from the heart?

We know from systems theory that when a system hits a bifurcation point, very small differences can determine its future path. If our current era marks such a threshold point for the global system, how many committed people acting from the heart would it take to co-inspire a profound global shift one way or the other? The Renaissance, it is often said, was created by a core group of approximately two hundred people. The core group of the Bauhaus was much smaller than that—maybe a dozen committed people with only half a dozen at the inner core. We don't know how many people it will take at the beginning of this century to co-inspire another profound global shift. But it probably wouldn't take more than fifty or a hundred if those people were really committed and supported by the right kinds of infrastructures.

If the social technology outlined in the chapters you've just read is the lever, what is the leverage point where we can best apply it? In systems thinking language, there are two limiting factors that keep the current system

locked into its old patterns: the lack of innovations in social infrastructure and the lack of a committed global core group to inspire and support these innovations in the context of a global movement for awareness-based change. With many colleagues, I've spent the past two decades working to create some seeds for both these elements. Where we are today, what's next, and how you can get involved in their further co-creation is the subject of the following sections.

## Call of Our Time

Among the 150 interviews I conducted for the research that led to this book, one of them stood out in terms of illuminating the blind spot of the interviewer. At the end of an interview I conducted with the physicist Arthur Zajonc, he turned the conversation back onto me and asked me what had brought Katrin and me to the place in which we now find ourselves. Then he said something I will never forget: "Think of everything that you experienced in the past as preparatory building blocks for your future journey and task." I have found this to be a very useful way of viewing the past. Don't get attached to something that was particularly good or bad; instead, look at the journey of the past from the viewpoint of exploring an unfolding future that calls on you.

Not too long after that conversation, Arthur Zajonc facilitated a historic conference in 2003 at MIT that for the first time brought His Holiness the Dalai Lama together with eminent Western cognitive scientists and Buddhist cultivators to discuss issues in cognition research.<sup>6</sup> At the end of that meeting I was filled with energy and excitement about the power and possibilities of investigating a field that linked the worlds of science (the third-person view) and consciousness (the first-person view). During those two days I felt, though, that the conversation was ignoring a third dimension that was necessary to frame the inquiry: the dimension of social transformation and change.

When I left the MIT auditorium, together with Katrin, Dayna, and Peter, I could see, in a flash, everything that was wrong with my current life. I was

going in too many different directions, pursuing far too many projects in too many places. Although each one made sense individually, viewed as a whole they lacked focus.

Just as that message—You need focus—you must change your life!—was sinking in, I saw in the same flash what I should be focusing on as I moved forward. I should concentrate all my energy on a single project: creating a place and a vibrant community dedicated to investigating the common ground among science, consciousness, and profound social change.

I knew that I needed to talk with others about ways to make that idea work. From these conversations, we decided that the next step would be to convene a group of individuals for whom this question—how to integrate science, consciousness, and social change—was central to their life’s journey and work.<sup>ã</sup>

### Born in a Blizzard

In December 2005 we felt that the time was right to take the next step. We invited a small group of practitioners, researchers, and activists to begin to co-initiate a platform for a global presencing-in-action school that would integrate science, consciousness, and social change.

About a dozen of us met at a hotel in Cambridge, Massachusetts, in early December.<sup>é</sup> From there, we decided to walk the short distance from MIT to the SoL offices on the Charles River, a walk that usually doesn’t take longer than ten minutes. But that day it was snowing, and as we walked the snow piled up and the visibility grew worse. No cars passed us. It was as if we were lone actors in a Siberian slow-motion movie. The blizzard offered us a special form of walking meditation. Later that day, as the storm intensified, we heard thunder and saw lightning strike fairly close by. That was the first time that any of us had experienced that rare combination: a snow blizzard with lightning and thunder. We took it as Mother Nature’s way of welcoming us.

In that first co-initiation meeting, we aspired to create a holding space for awareness-based change, for cultivating the conditions of profound innovation in organizations, in society, and in the self. What resulted from this

phase is a global eco-system of projects, programs, and initiatives that has been described throughout this book.

Fast forward exactly ten years from that original meeting in the blizzard, to December 2015. We are in almost the same place at MIT. We are still holding many of the same ideas and intentions. Yet something has changed. Back then it was just the few of us with some ideas. Ten years on, in December 2015, we were conducting the closing live-session of the u.lab MOOC: a global community made up of hundreds of hubs and thousands of circles around the world. The live-session was co-facilitated from three different hubs: Edinburgh, Scotland (Julie), São Paulo, Brazil (Adam), and MIT (Kelvy and me). You are already more connected with that global gathering than you might think. Remember the beautiful blackboard drawing in white chalk at the beginning of this book? It's the image Kelvy created on that day in December. Maybe take a moment to go back to that image now: in a nutshell, it captures not only the essence of this book but also the essence of the journey that unfolded between the two gatherings at MIT: December 2005 and December 2015.

### u.school in the Making

The Presencing Institute was always intended as a temporary infrastructure that could develop the social technology outlined in this book, and support projects around the globe. With the launch of the u.lab MOOC in 2015, we are now ready to take this work to a larger scale. As part of that effort, the Presencing Institute is in the process of evolving into “u.lab”—the name for the global ecosystem of initiatives, research, and capacity building programs that work in service of shifting society from ego to eco-system economies.

Maybe take another look at image 6 (social fields) at this point. On the left side are the three divides; in the middle is the inner cultivation work that we need to engage in to improve the quality of the social soil; and on the right are the enabling infrastructures that we need to put into place in order for the emerging future “to land.” The enabling infrastructure is depicted in the

form of a tree. The tree depicts what we intend the u.school, as this enabling infrastructure, to be.

In the upper part of the tree you see the three core activities that define us as a community of practice:

- convening innovation labs across sectors (business, government, civil society)
- building collective capacity across intelligences (open mind, open heart, open will) and
- creating action research as the vehicle for linking science, consciousness and social change

In the lower part, the root system of the tree at the source level, is an emerging global movement of shifting consciousness from ego-system to eco-system awareness. Even though much of it is still dormant, we see and sense the awakening of that movement in many places across the world.

But what about the middle part—the “trunk”? What could catalyze the awakening of this dormant movement and bring this ecology to scale? What are these enabling conditions that, if in place, could help us to create the inner and outer conditions to bring about profound personal and civilizational renewal?

We believe that there are five enabling conditions that, if in place, could make that happen:

They are:

1. Places: A global eco-system of hubs. Profound innovation happens in places. Hubs cultivate these places by focusing on emerging opportunities and providing tools for bringing those opportunities to fruition. Hubs will look different in different places, but they will share several features: (a) a physical space that evokes the mindful simplicity of a Buddhist temple, (b) the hands-on creativity of an artistic community, (c) high-tech equipment that connects a global web of co-sensing partners,

(d) the clarity of a well-organized think tank, and (e) the functionality of avant-garde social presencing theater, which blends performance, mindfulness, and the social sciences. Innovation Hubs could be replicated in urban and rural communities everywhere.

2. Partners: A global network of institutional living examples. All u.school prototype work is guided by a global network of mentors and change-makers affiliated with different types of organizations that implement institutional innovations through practical experimentation. We envision to evolve this network to a global eco-system of partnering hubs that in each world region focus on innovations in eight institutional acupuncture points for transforming the economy.<sup>6</sup> They are:
  - i. Nature and Place: from depleting resources to cultivating eco-systems
  - ii. Labor and Work: from jobs to passionate entrepreneurship
  - iii. Money and Capital: from extractive to intentional
  - iv. Technologies: from system-centric to human- and eco-centric
  - v. Leadership and Collaboration: from top-down to co-shaping the future
  - vi. Consumption and People-Power: from consumerism to well-being for all
  - vii. Health and Education: from outcome-centric to people- and awareness-driven
  - viii. Coordination and Governance: from hierarchy and competition to ABC (awareness-based collective action).
3. Platforms: Blended learning architectures. Platform building that links online and offline (o2o) practical tools, personal reflection, and local living examples with global movement building.
4. People: A strong core team. A team that can hold the space, build the curriculum and create blueprints for a vibrant and rapidly evolving and expanding global innovation eco-system.
5. Practices: Presencing and mindfulness-based practices. Economic and social transformation requires a shift in awareness and new qualities of

communication. The u.lab methods and tools facilitate this shift and are broadly accessible to a global audience.

While the u.school is still in its early phase of development, some key elements are already in place. These include:

- A global network of over 75,000 change makers who have formed over 500 hubs, and are engaged in countless change ventures and initiatives
- A community of 2,000 graduates of introductory and advanced programs offered through the Presencing Institute over the past fifteen years
- A global eco-system of master practitioners, co-facilitators, and living example partners that demonstrate the practical results of U process prototypes
- Tested and refined methods and tools that support deep innovation processes (see <https://www.presencing.com/tools>)
- A global ecology of large multi-stakeholder change efforts that u.school practitioners support or co-convene. These include: the Global Wellbeing Lab (with prototypes in seven countries), Novos Urbanos (Brazil), agricultural transformation in Ethiopia, maternal health system improvement in Namibia, the Sustainable Food Lab (in the Americas and Europe), creating an innovation ecology in Shanghai, strengthening education and civil society in China, UID China, UID Indonesia, the Coral Triangle Initiative (CTI) in Indonesia, leadership for attaining Universal Health Coverage in Africa (in collaboration with the World Bank and GIZ), supporting the effort to shift Nigeria's over-dependence on oil by (in collaboration with Synergos), and applying Theory U to attain gender equality in Zambia's Public Service (in collaboration with the UN Development Program), as well as projects in the area of reinventing banking and finance in various countries.

## The Journey Ahead

In 2015, propelled by the global reach of the MOOC, u.lab created a worldwide field of magnified future possibilities. Our goal is to create a global action school for awareness-based systems change—u.school—that takes the seeds of u.lab described above to its next level of possibility and collective impact among the many who hold and help this rapidly growing ecology.

We are also working on several additional MOOC offerings, including a u.lab 2x (“From Prototyping to Systems Change”), which will build on u.lab 1x (“From Personal Change to Prototype”) and feature major living examples across sectors. We also intend to develop u.lab courses on reinventing business and organizations, education, and finance (“Just Money”).

There are a number of ways you can get involved. One is to join one of the u.lab MOOCs.<sup>4</sup> By participating in one of the MOOCs, you can also choose to join or host a hub in your own community or city. Hundreds already exist around the world. We also offer in-person capacity building programs throughout the year. If you currently work in an organization, or on a challenge, that you would like to connect to the u.lab movement, you can contact us—our information is on the Presencing Institute website.

It feels like the future is now arriving and beginning to land. What started (for me) with the story of the fire in chapter 1, has come full circle. It feels as if the real story is just beginning now. We experience that beginning as an intensifying global field of connections, people, and courageous initiatives who operate through a deepened source of human intelligence: the intelligence of the heart.