# Reflections

## The SoL Journal
on Knowledge, Learning, and Change

**SoL 15+ Years**

**society for SoL organizational learning**

**Frank Schneider**

**W**elcome to this special issue of *Reflections*. In 2012, the Society for Organizational Learning celebrated its 15th anniversary. In honor of that milestone, we look at SoL's journey, from its roots in a program called "Systems Thinking and the New Management Style" to the formation of the MIT Organizational Learning Center in the early 1990s to the foundation of the Society for Organizational Learning in 1997. It is a story told by many of those involved in the on-the-ground efforts undertaken to establish and sustain this truly unique organization. The voices you will hear are just a sampling of the many people who not only have been and continue to be central to SoL's development and evolution but also demonstrate their commitment to its values and principles in how they live their lives.

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*Part One, Foundational Documents,* comprises seminal articles and correspondence from SoL's early years. With contributions from academics, consultants, and business leaders, these documents provide a historical, social, and philosophical context for SoL's growth as a global learning network.

In "From Fragmentation to Integration: Building Learning Communities," Peter Senge and Daniel H. Kim discuss the widespread failure of organizations to adequately integrate research, capacity building, and practice. They make the case that, without this integration or a way to diffuse knowledge, organizations and communities can achieve only incremental improvement.

Jeff Clanon's article, "Organizational Transformation from the Inside Out: Reinventing the MIT Center for Organizational Learning," recounts the birth of SoL, when its founders decided to create a freestanding entity separate from MIT. Jeff's clarity of thought and insight into this process are key to understanding SoL as we know it today. In providing a summary of the lessons learned from the arduous process of self-identity, this piece also has profound implications for achieving fundamental change in any modern organization.

The third foundational document that we have chosen to include, "Scenarios 2000: Four Futures for Organizing and Leading in the New Economy," was created by a group of 20 SoL members and invited guests, which included religious leaders, Fortune 500 executives, academics, environmentalists, and community activists. The intent of the conveners was to introduce new perspectives by creating bold scenarios that could lead to "unexpected insights" for SoL members. The participants hoped that these insights would have positive impact on the work that SoL would do in the future. The scenarios, reprinted in condensed form here, also raise fundamental issues of human identity.

The "Marblehead Letter, October 2001," written by a group of representatives from corporations sponsoring the development of the Global SoL Network, was an open invitation to all members of the SoL community to reflect on major issues shaping the strategic context for businesses around the world. We have included it because it was one of SoL's first efforts to establish a vision for the organization in terms of what it could focus on and the challenges it might be able to address. The meeting that led to the letter was also a strong example of the opportunity to "think together," an activity that

this forward-thinking group believed was essential for developing new capacities in an environment of "perpetual doing."

In *Part Two, Lessons, Failures, and Frontiers,* Peter Senge, Otto Scharmer, and Darcy Winslow, representing SoL, the Presencing Institute, and the Academy for Systemic Change, reflect on "30 Years of Building Learning Communities." The purpose of this dialogue was to provide these thought leaders an opportunity to reflect deeply about the essential role of networks and communities of collaboration in addressing systemic global issues. Taken in its entirety, the dialogue focuses on the importance of shifting from "ego-system" – or individual – awareness to "eco-system" – or collective – awareness in effecting sustainable change. It is interesting to note that, throughout the conversation, Peter, Otto, and Darcy refer to SoL's own capacity to adapt and sustain as a microcosm of every system's struggle to do the same.

SoL would not exist without you, its members. In a small way, *Part Three, Voices from the Community,* pays tribute to your contributions and to your collective and individual commitment to SoL's vision and purpose. Although we would like to have published contributions from all members, we believe that the pieces we have included represent a broad swath of the diverse communities that make up SoL. We were delighted by the diversity of perspective and insight we received in response to the questions provided to help frame the contributors' reflections. At the same time, we were struck by the commonality of purpose and depth of commitment to SoL's vision and principles that these prompts elicited. As you read this section, it should come as no surprise that members of SoL want nothing less than for the SoL community to be *the* global presence that stewards a sustainable and healthy future for all of humankind.

As you read through this issue, we invite you to reflect on your own journey over the last years as a leader,

**We invite you to reflect on your own journey over the last years as a leader, community member, and human being. What's the story of your life, what has been important to you, what have you aspired to, what roads have you taken (and which ones have you not followed)?**

community member, and human being. What's the story of your life, what has been important to you, what have you aspired to, what roads have you taken (and which ones have you not followed), and what has brought you to *Reflections* and to the SoL community? After all, it is the people who engage with one another who make SoL the community it is today: a reflective global learning community that we all see as a space and breeding ground to bring about bright, sustainable, and inspiring futures for ourselves and for the world. This issue of *Reflections* invites you to join us in writing the next 15 years.

**Photographs**

Unlike other issues of *Reflections,* the photographs here are not necessarily intended to represent or reflect the content; rather, they are meant to inspire and delight. For this special issue, Michael Goodman, a founding member of SoL and a charter member of the System Dynamics Society, generously granted us permission to publish selected images from his expansive collection. We think they are spectacular and beautifully complementary, in tone and in spirit, to this special issue. We hope that you will, too. ■

Frank Schneider, *Publisher*

# 30 Years of Building Learning Communities

## A Dialogue with Peter Senge, Otto Scharmer and Darcy Winslow, Part I

**Although the Society for Organizational Learning was founded 15+ years ago, its roots go back almost 30 years. In this conversation, Peter Senge, Otto Scharmer, and Darcy Winslow look back at SoL's earliest form as a single program ("Systems Thinking and the New Management Style") and its evolution to its current state. In addition, they reflect on the role of individuals in systemic change, the ways in which we can leverage our impact as individuals and communities, and the essential role of cooperation and collaboration in sustainable organizational and global change. They consider what it takes to shift from "ego-system awareness" to "eco-system awareness," a shift they agree is fundamental to effecting sustainable change. Throughout the conversation, references to SoL's own capacity for development, and the evolution of related networks like the Presencing Institute, serve as a microcosm of every system's struggle to adapt and sustain itself.**



**Peter Senge**



**Otto Scharmer**



**Darcy Winslow**

**DARCY:** The idea for this dialogue was to reflect a bit on SoL and the Presencing Institute as learning communities, and on how those communities are going to be helpful in tackling some of the issues that we are facing over the next years or decades. What are the main trends you are seeing in the world, and what are some of the leadership capacities that we will need going forward?

**OTTO:** SoL was founded more than 15 years ago, in 1997. And before that there was the MIT Organizational Learning Center [OLC]. When was the OLC founded?

**PETER:** Well, before that was an MIT research program called "Systems Thinking and the New Management Style," which started in the early 1980s. Gradually, more and more companies became involved. Then we had this idea to form a formal center at MIT around 1990, not just an individual program. Eventually, out of that, SoL evolved. So it has been almost a 30-year journey.

**OTTO:** So a 30-year journey. And 20 or 22 years of that have been as an intentional action-research community. That's an intriguing piece of data. I would be interested, Peter, if you could name the two or three most important accomplishments over those 30 years. What came into the world in this period? What have been the most important accomplishments? Also, what are the failures? What have we failed to bring into the world so far? What are the frontiers where our efforts have not resulted in the accomplishments that we would like to see?

## Five Accomplishments

**PETER:** When you ask what's been accomplished, three things jump out at me right away. First is the clarification of ideas. You have to remember that when all of this started, there was no five disciplines framework. I'm sure you could trace a similar crystallization around the basic ideas of Theory U. You have to work at something for a long time until it gets simpler and clearer.

And then, to me, ideas without tools don't mean much. So there are all the different methods. Last, all of that work needs to be grounded in application projects. It would be easy for me to tell the story of the last 15 years or longer just in terms of a series of remarkable on-the-ground undertakings that involved many different people through which we built that practical knowledge.

**OTTO:** Certainly these three accomplishments resonate with me. Looking at this or that part of the history that I participated in, what also comes to mind are capacity-building mechanisms. A big focal point of our work – and also a real accomplishment – has been creating a shared knowledge base and different environments for building

> The combined, interwoven networks of SoL and the Presencing Institute have played a positive role in helping this fragmented body of practitioners become a little bit more connected.

individual and collective leadership capacity. It is one of the few things we know how to do well.

A fifth accomplishment is community. So, yes, there is application, and yes, there are living examples. But then, more than that, SoL and the Presencing Institute have linked these ideas, methods, and tools to many people who are building their own things with them and who, in a more distributed way, are connecting with each other and forming their own communities.

As you know, community building is a lot of trouble and presents many problems. But when you step back, what you see today is that the SoL

network and the Presencing Institute network – which to a large degree overlap – are actually a part of something larger, almost like a global movement or an awakening that has to do with bringing together science, consciousness, and profound social and institutional change. The combined, interwoven networks of SoL and the Presencing Institute have played a positive role in helping this fragmented body of practitioners and ideas and conversations and so on become a little bit more connected.

We all know that a lot more is necessary. But that sense of community is another important accomplishment.

**PETER:** It's easy for us to take it for granted, because we all have been involved in this effort for so long. But people often say that they can feel a certain spirit as soon as they come to one of the SoL meetings. It is not unique to us, of course, but it really is the spirit of community. I always remember a man from Europe saying at an early SoL gathering, "I have never been around a group that is so enthusiastic and so self-critical."

## What allows a company to adapt in the face of significant changes in its environment is this capacity of community.

This spirit of community is absent in so many efforts. I find it particularly ironic when people are dealing with big, socially relevant issues and don't build community.

It's a tragedy because often when people are dealing with meaningful stuff, they get completely caught in a sense of urgency that dominates. There is a subtle energy of reactiveness, which is understandable. When the problems are big, it's easy to feel like you are pushing this giant rock up a huge hill.

But the energy of community is much more self-generating. You fall into a mindset of trust of one another and beyond: you know that you don't have to figure it all out. You just need to keep working together with others. And out of that working together, you build relationships and confidence that, through our understanding of and our real concern for each other, things will emerge.

### From Learning Organizations to Learning Communities

**OTTO:** Also, what comes to my mind is that when I arrived at the Organizational Learning Center in 1994, you already had shifted. After *The Fifth Discipline* was published, you became known as "Mr. Learning Organization." The concept of learning organizations was kind of the primary header. But whenever I look at what you really did, it was never that. It was always building learning communities, something that goes beyond the boundaries of organizations.

Maybe you could talk a little bit about that distinction, because it refers to an important learning: that you cannot build a learning organization without that kind of community. How did the evolution happen, from your viewpoint?

**PETER:** There were a couple of threads to it. One was a series of historic studies, starting with a Shell study of long-lived companies. The headline of that study was that, when all is said and done, the businesses that last for many, many generations do so because they are a "human community." What allows a company to adapt in the face of significant changes in its environment is this capacity of community, which enables adaptation through its relationships internally and with the larger communities of which it is a part, whether they are the communities where people live or the networks of organizations that together accomplish the work of the business, such as suppliers.

So that was one part of it. And then there was the practical part that came from working on many projects, where you saw again that it was teams and larger communities of people that accomplished miracles. This was critical because an important criterion for me regarding knowledge is outcomes. How do you know you know something? You do something, right? How do you build confidence that your tools work? You use the tools and see what people are able to create. So this bias toward the practical and suspicion of ideas for their own sake has always made us . . . what's the right word from the church?

**OTTO:** Heretics.

**PETER:** Heretics. Exactly. We're heretics in the academic community. And, you know, a heretic is not an atheist.
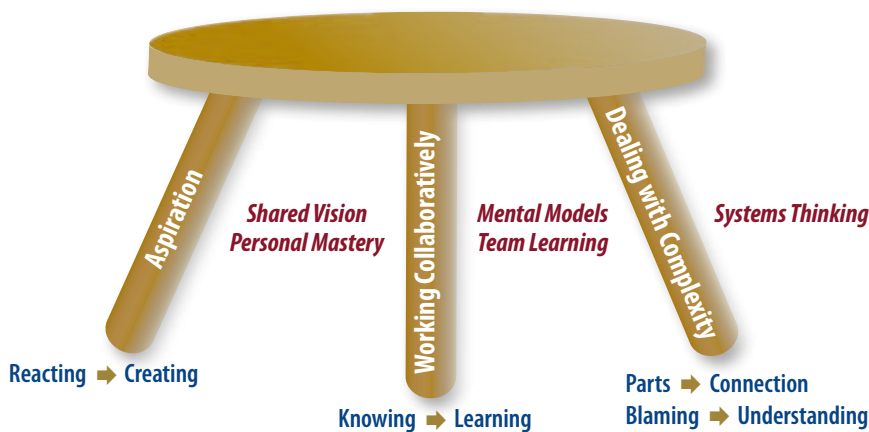
**OTTO:** It's worse. [laughter]

**PETER:** I am sure that often seems true. They stay in the church, and yet they keep their radical ideas. I think that is true for both you and me. And one of the basics of our heresy is that we don't just believe ideas. We only believe ideas that we have seen have practical consequences.

> **This bias toward the practical and suspicion of ideas for their own sake has always made us heretics in the academic community.**

This was the second reason this idea of community became so powerful within SoL. You would have these practical projects, let's say on product development, as were some of the early projects. But they didn't involve the management team or any one well-defined group. They engaged an amorphous network of people who ultimately

## The Core Competencies of Organizational Learning



*Aspiration*

**Shared Vision**
**Personal Mastery**

*Working Collaboratively*

**Mental Models**
**Team Learning**

*Dealing with Complexity*

**Systems Thinking**

Reacting ➡ Creating

Knowing ➡ Learning

Parts ➡ Connection
Blaming ➡ Understanding

── **Sample tools and methods of organizational learning** ──

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| Vision & Sharing | Quality of Conversations | Exploring and testing frames and assumptions | Iceberg – levels of perspective |
| Coaching | Ladder of Inference | | Causal Loops |
| Visualization | Pathways to learning | Kantor's four-player model and four dialogic practices | Reinforcing and Balancing Loops |
| Centering | Left-hand column | | Systems Archetypes: |
| Choosing | Check-in/Check-out | | • Fixes that backfire |
| Creative Tension | Advocacy/Inquiry | | • Shifting the burden |
| | Container building | | • Limits to growth |

got involved and became instrumental to what was accomplished.

So you start to see again and again that the real groups that matter are never the formal structures, the formal teams, the formal management. They include those but are much broader. Practically speaking, the best term for them is communities or networks of collaboration.

## Organizations are too small for the big problems and too big for the small ones, where you need a nimble, targeted approach.

That just kept showing up again and again and again. When we were going through the long, almost two-year process of creating SoL separate from MIT, the one idea that became an anchor was helping people organize themselves in communities. For me and many of us, our core aspiration concerned change at a scale that really matters, that could make a difference in the world. And I remember one morning it just came to me: a global network of all kinds of different learning communities could really have an impact at scale, perhaps in a way that nothing else would.

So the importance of learning communities came from many different places.

### Ego-System Awareness vs. Eco-System Awareness

**OTTO:** I remember what drew me here in the first place were some of the writings that came out of the Organizational Learning Center. For example, when you looked at the five disciplines, with the inclusion of personal mastery, you could feel an openness and the possibility of a conversation or kind of inquiry into the consciousness dimension of change. It was already there, but it was implicit. It was not explicit. But you could already feel it.

The other thing that attracted me was the research community. Yes, Peter was directing it and it was organized to a large degree around the five disciplines framework. But then you had others working on dialogue. You had Ed Schein involved, Chris Argyris, Bill Isaacs, Daniel Kim. You could feel these different frameworks coming together, all in service of a larger intention – an action science in the service of the evolution of the social whole, rather than just revolving around itself within some kind of academic virtual walls.

When listening to you, Peter, it reminds me that I once heard someone say, you know the problem with the nation state: it's too big for the small problems and it's too small for the big problems. The same applies to companies and to any kind of organization. Organizations are too small for the big problems and too big for the small ones, where you need a nimble, targeted approach.

So that's another dimension. You start with some of these bigger institutional entities, then you realize that to make headway you need to reach out. When I arrived in the mid-1990s, there was no real mention of cross-sector collaboration. It was all corporate. And it was not even start-ups or small businesses. It was all big Fortune 50 or Fortune 500 companies.

Look at the work and the community now. There is an awareness of the whole dimension of entrepreneurship, social entrepreneurship, and cross-sector partnerships. There is an acknowledgement that, in order to move the economy from being driven from ego-system awareness to eco-system awareness, you necessarily have to collaborate across sectors.

Darcy, the Nike story is one of the prime examples: how in working with NGOs and in working on societal issues, you can transform these relationships, and how good leaders need to think across the value chain rather than stopping at the boundaries of your own organization. The same story plays out in other industries as well. Nike just happened to be a pioneer.

**DARCY:** Well, thanks for saying that, Otto. The impetus for how that started came out of Nike's introduction to Peter and SoL and a lot of the frameworks back in the late 1990s. When I share the story with others, it all comes back to becoming part of the SoL community and the thought leadership and vulnerability that we came together with. I mean, we didn't know what we were doing. We didn't know how big the issue was. There was not a framework at that time, and we didn't know what the end goal was.

So helping to establish and create some of the language and ideas around what it meant to be a sustainable organization or a company for the 21st century gave us a way to embrace the challenges that we faced. Without SoL, I don't think Nike would be where it is today. I know I certainly wouldn't have the wherewithal and ability to sit with the questions I sit with today had it not been for that learning community – and the extension into the Presencing Institute and how it comes together around the SoL Executive Champions' Workshop. These events are milestones in my life every year.

**OTTO:** Darcy, what made the difference for you and for Nike?

**DARCY:** It was the creation of the Sustainability Consortium as a subset of the SoL community in 1998. There were just a handful of companies back then, Nike being one of them. Peter, you may be able to list them.

**PETER:**  It was initially Ford/Visteon, HP, Shell, DTE, Harley Davidson, BP, and Nike.

**DARCY:** Right. And from the first meeting, coming together and meeting these people, there was no competition among us. As leaders within those companies – some with titles and some without – we were trying to make a difference. The Sustainability Consortium created a safe haven for us to come together and show our vulnerability and our lack of understanding of a clear path forward for

how we were going to institute this massive change effort within our companies.

Through that process, through the years, through more companies coming on board, and through building deep relationships among the people within the Consortium, we created a phenomenal resource. When I would hit these brick walls, people within the SoL Sustainability Consortium were the people I went to outside the company to build up the courage to step over that next threshold. It was the most critical resource I had to draw on to be able to do some of the things that we did within Nike.

The Consortium lasted up until about 2008 formally. Over that time, more and more companies were coming to the Consortium to hear these stories, to have that kind of a resource to draw upon. But Nike had started to move into the next phase of sophistication of our work, and we were no longer able to draw from the Consortium. That's when the Consortium started to fade into the background and something new began to emerge. That's one of the reasons for the founding of the Academy for Systemic Change. It's one of the next evolutions of elevating our game, elevating our conversation, elevating our ability to transform and affect some of these critical systems at scale, at a level that is really going to make a difference in the short term.

> **Despite all of our accomplishments and despite what we might feel good about, the world goes along its unsustainable course.**

### Failures and Frontiers
**OTTO:** Maybe that brings us to the second part of the opening question, which is about the failures and the frontiers.

**PETER:** Despite all of our accomplishments and despite what we might feel good about, the world

goes along its unsustainable course. And, by and large, the vast majority of people have no clue, nor do they see much evidence that these things that we see changing are actually changing. Quite the contrary – there is more fatalism and pessimism today than ever.

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## We have not yet found the way to make sufficiently explicit the developmental aspect of the work.

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I always thought in doing this work that it would take multiple generations. [System dynamics pioneer] Jay Forrester had the same attitude, so I inherited that from him, the idea that the really big changes unfold over many decades and generations. I never expected people to read a book, like any of *The Fifth Discipline* books, and go off and start changing things. It is one of the reasons for building communities, to help sustain a process of change.

And I have mixed feelings saying this because, well, this is a great self-fulfilling prophecy. You assume it is going to take a long time. Therefore,

### Master Nan Huai-Chin

Nan Huai-Chin (1917–2012) was a spiritual teacher and a major force in the revival of traditional Chinese culture in China. He wrote more than 60 books, which have sold tens of millions of copies in China, mostly on the black market until the past decade. Only a few of his books have been translated and made available outside China. His death in September 2012 was a major national event in China.

when nothing much changes at scale that matters, you can say, "Oh, well. See, it's what I always knew would happen."
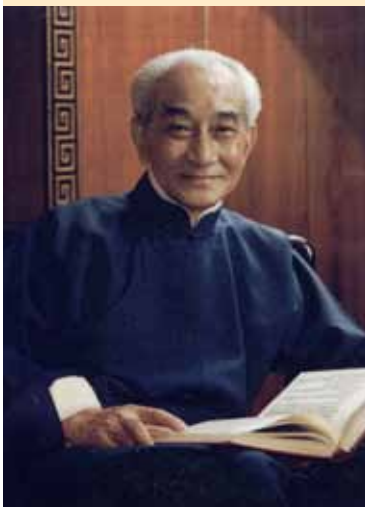
Be that as it may, I do think that's definitely a shortcoming, because we don't have forever to go along at the pace we have today. It raises a profound question – one of the hardest ones to really embrace – which is, can you accelerate things at all?

When I visited Master Nan, he often took me to task. He would said, "You just want to save the world." And I would go, "Yeah. Right." He would kind of shake his head. In one of the last exchanges we had, he said, "You cannot accelerate things. Do not try to accelerate things." He went on to say, "There's an old Chinese saying that the night is darkest the last hour before the dawn. It's a good time to meditate."
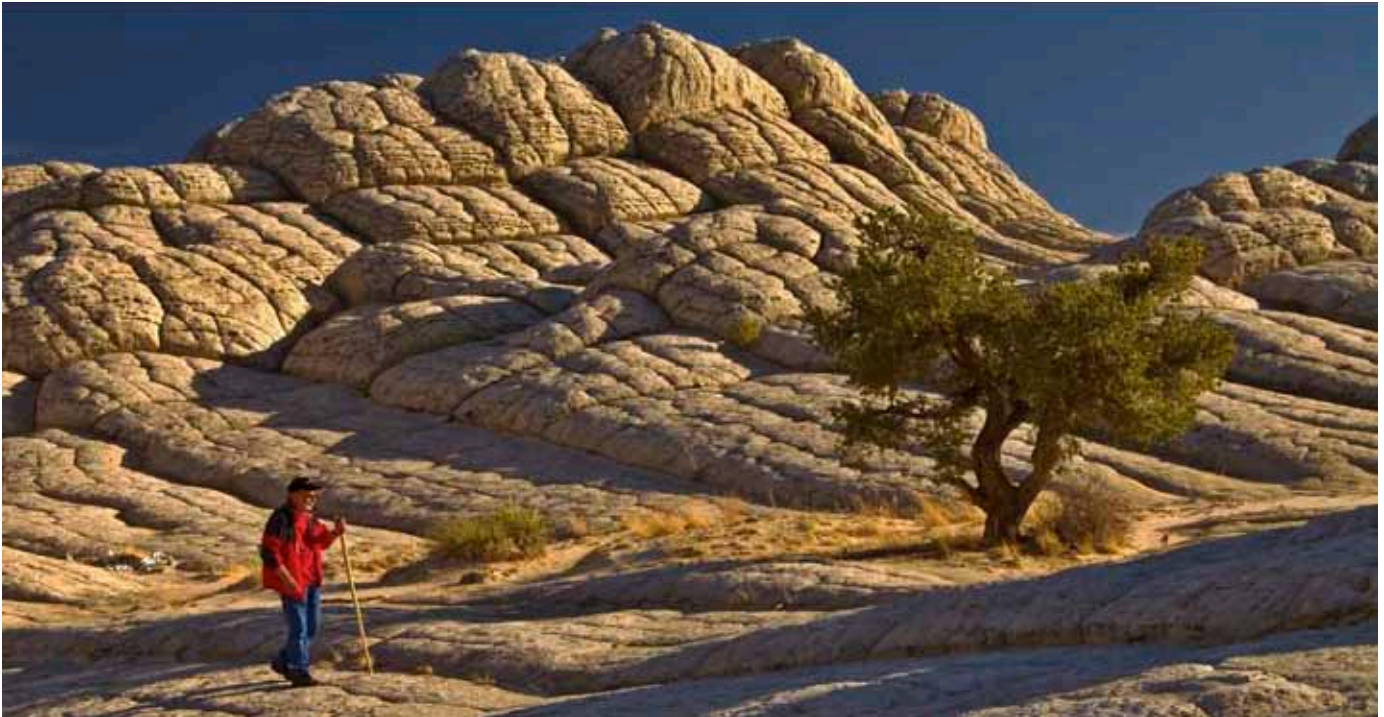
On the other hand, this is hardly a guy who did nothing in his life. He was busy doing all these things to bring about change. So there is a real paradox here. The simplest way I can express the paradox is, it's easy for our ego to get attached to doing something significant – and to think that somehow "I" must or "I" can or "I" will do something to be the difference at a scale.

I wrote down two things when you asked about the failures. One is scale, and the second is that we have not yet found the way to make sufficiently explicit the developmental aspect of the work. [Harvard developmental theorist] Bob Kegan uses a great metaphor. He once said, "Well, I don't really write about spirituality. But it is sort of a dog whistle in my work. You know, a dog whistle can only be heard by dogs." He said, "There's a message, but only certain people hear it. And it doesn't distract everybody else." To some degree, it is probably true of all of us. We don't use the words "spirituality" or "spiritual." We do talk about human development. Even that gets tricky sometimes, because people can react strongly – for example, those who think this is the business of religion.

Going forward, we have to learn how to be more explicit. I believe that Theory U and all the subsequent work it has generated is a big step in explicitness. As you said yourself, Otto, you could go back and find different things – whether it is personal mastery or talk about the implicate order – in the early writings in this territory. But that's all they were. They were like the dog whistle. They were a little thing here, a little thing there. If somebody was on that wavelength, they would go, "Aha! I understand that relates to this and this and this."

Theory U is much more explicit. It leads me to wonder if there is a next stage in explicitness or directness. Maybe another word to use is "demystify." Because one of the things that keeps us from being as explicit as we need to be about deep development is we tend to mystify it.

You now use the word "consciousness" a lot, Otto. I don't think you used to use it nearly so much, or maybe you've used it for a long time and I hadn't noticed it. But a couple of years ago, I heard you talk about Theory U as a particular theory and method that is all about "awareness-based" change. That is a good example of being more direct.

## Collective Karma

**DARCY:** Peter, can I just jump in here. You mentioned Master Nan. And you shared one other statement, maybe one of the last he made to you. It was something to the effect that "Collective karma cannot be changed by one heroic spirit or individual." That stuck with me. As we look to the frontiers, I interpret that in some profound ways. Can you share a little bit about what that means to you in the context of frontiers?
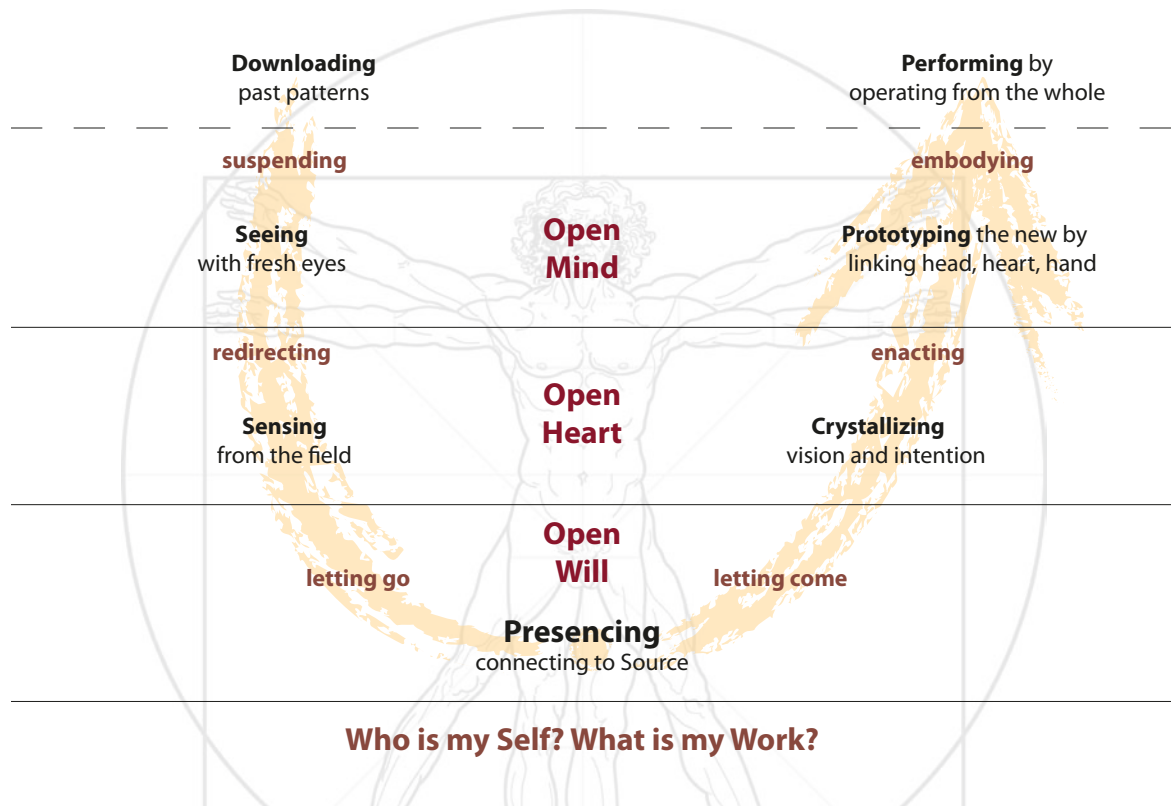
**PETER:** Well, it is actually something that Otto and I have talked about as much as I've talked about it with anybody. We have entered an era, somewhere in this last generation or so, where deep, individual developmental work or individual enlightenment

> We have entered an era, somewhere in this last generation or so, where deep, individual developmental work is not enough. It really is about collective cultivation.

## Theory U

Downloading
past patterns

Performing by
operating from the whole

suspending

embodying

**Open
Mind**

Seeing
with fresh eyes

Prototyping the new by
linking head, heart, hand

redirecting

enacting

**Open
Heart**

Sensing
from the field

Crystallizing
vision and intention

**Open
Will**

letting go

letting come

Presencing
connecting to Source

**Who is my Self? What is my Work?**

Presencing Institute - Otto Scharmer - www.presencing.com/permissions

**Somehow, somewhere over the last three to five thousand years, we've decided human beings were the most important species.**

is not enough. It really is about collective cultivation.

I have a little pad of paper from my last visit with Master Nan in April [2012]. And I've gone back and reread a lot of what's there. It is amazing. It's so clear and so relevant. One of the statements was just what Darcy said: "Collective karma cannot be transformed by heroic individual action." Collective karma would be a good way of describing our predicament, right? We've inherited a whole set of structures and assumptions and ways of operating. And we pass them along, embedded in our schools, businesses, governments, markets, and media.

The term "karma" is easily misunderstood in the West. Again, it doesn't have to be mystified. It just acknowledges that when a human being comes into existence, there is something more than a sperm and an egg. There is some inheritance that comes with the human being. If you don't accept that, how the hell is every single person so different? Two people could have the same mother and father, it doesn't matter – they can be totally different people. You know, from saints to the ultimate sinners.

So clearly, there is something beyond the effects of our environment. In Eastern traditions, they call it "karma." But you can also say it is deep seeds we bring with us into life in some form or other.

The whole systems viewpoint in effect says that the same thing happens collectively, that what

we've built up goes beyond the lifetime of a single leader or leaders and is transferred directly through culture, language, and who knows how many other ways. This could be collective at the level of an organization or a society. It can be visible like how we talk or dress, or very subtle.

For example, somehow, somewhere over the last three to five thousand years, we've decided human beings were the most important species. There is a hierarchy of importance, and human beings are at the top of the hierarchy. It is not just that we have certain features that other species don't have. There is us and there is everybody else. And this worldview comes with a deeper notion of profound separateness: We are separate. We are different. We are apart from the rest of nature's creations. There are many cultural nuances, but beyond the individual cultures is this idea that human beings are separate and somehow more important.

That's collective karma or collective inheritance. And we are going to have to collectively cultivate a different view. I think that that's partly why Master Nan was always needling me about my kind of ego-based orientation to save the world.

But it's a genuine paradox. Because the opposite is not the point, you know, do nothing and let everything just go the way it goes because there is nothing you can do at all. We have always understood the importance of collective cultivation, at least at the level of team, such as in team learning and building shared vision. But the way that the Presencing tools get at this is more direct and is a big step, because they explicitly address collective sensing and co-creating at multiple levels of aggregation.

Again, I wonder if they aren't other steps coming.

### A Change to Our Collective Story

**DARCY:** One way to express this is that, as a society, we are living out a story. How do we start to change our story? How do we start to change our trajectory, our collective karma, personally

or in community with others? And what are your thoughts on the impact the SoL community and the Presencing community could have over the next five, 10, 15 years?

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**Seeds start so small. And suddenly, when we look over the field, we see sprouts coming up. That's exactly where I feel we are as a global movement.**

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**OTTO:** Coming back to Master Nan's statement – yes, individuals cannot change collective karma, but together we can. And the together starts, interestingly, with individuals. The actual process has a lot to do with paying attention, opening up your awareness, going to the edges of the system and of yourself, and creating a space where we can venture with each other in a safe, exploratory way.

What happens in the spring? You see nothing. Seeds start so small. And suddenly, when we look over the field, we see sprouts coming up. That's exactly where I feel we are as a global movement. All of the depressing things that are going on, and everyone who is not in denial can only be cynical and depressed. Yes, that is all true.

At the same time, when we look at the opening of the heart and the transformation of relationships, we can create generative fields of connections. We have developed methods, tools, frameworks, and examples, through which, starting with very small groups, we can attend to each other and to ourselves and to our environment in a way that gives rise to a new connection between the part and the whole.

[Philosopher of science] Henri Bortoft said, "The whole is presencing itself in the parts." So that means the key to the future is this extended awareness of the connection to the whole. The whole is living within me. What I'm doing is

informed by the presencing of the whole through me. At the same time, I'm holding the space for others to move into that same space. There is an enormous power in this collective practice that we can bring into reality in a much more intentional way.

### Our Critical Development Edge

**DARCY:** If we look at the future of learning communities – SoL and the Presencing Institute are

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**The idea of eliminating noise and distraction is a transcendent message. When you are serious about any deep developmental process, that will become a dimension of it.**

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just one expression of those – what is the critical development edge going forward? As a collective community, as a collective learning community, what are we? What do we need to pay attention to with regard to our own development?

**PETER:** Well, that's the question. We all have to learn what to pay attention to. To me, in general, it's pretty simple: What enhances life and what doesn't? And become a student of what enhances your sense of life and energy and purpose and what doesn't, and be ruthless in following what works and eliminating what doesn't work.

The significance of being a community is that it's hard work. We need to help each other. We've got to stop screwing around. What if we imagined that what we are doing really matters, not for us but for our kids and our kids' kids and for life and for the future generations of all species.

Imagine it actually has significance. You would start being much more diligent in paying attention to our own thoughts and actions – all the time, not just when we feel like it. Do what works. Don't do what doesn't work. You don't need to know anything else.

**DARCY:** And, what do you love? What do you want to conserve? Start there.

**OTTO:** First, there is a big need for noise reduction mechanisms. That's where community comes in. How do we reduce the noise and connect with what's most essential? What is noise? What remains when all the noise is gone? So that's certainly a big need and has a lot of momentum already in small ways.

The second part has to do with creativity and entrepreneurship. Does the technology that we are creating enhance life and creativity? The word "technology" goes back to the Greek word "techne," meaning "art." So technology really goes back to creation. If you look at how we use technology today, it is to some degree creativity diminishing and to another degree creativity enhancing. To

reconnect with the essence of technology and art means to cultivate those things that help us tap into our individual and collective sources of creativity.

And the third part has to do with co-sensing. Co-sensing is making meaning across boundaries and silos. An image that comes up for me is society as a collective brain. The way we organize society today is that we have all these silos, and the neuronal connections aren't there in this collective brain. So that's why, in the U-Process, the sensing and paying attention are done in real time together. But we haven't built institutions or collective practices that do the same thing for society as whole. You know, human awareness that doesn't have co-sensing cannot move from "ego" to "eco." It is as simple as that. And those are the institutions that are missing.

Darcy's story about Nike and what happened in the SoL Sustainability Consortium is a foreshadowing of what's possible. But we need to be much more intentional in bringing the players together and into experiences that allow the shift from ego to eco to happen in a more reliable way.

In my view, co-sensing is not picked up enough. When it is picked up, it is not done well, because people think they can move over it and get to the cool "connecting to source" and so on. They don't realize that the problem they have later on in the prototyping actually starts with the quality of their co-sensing. You can't fix it by tinkering downstream. You have to start earlier.

**DARCY:** It goes back to your comment about the noise in the system. I still have both of you to thank for bringing that to the forefront through a story that you shared in the book *Presence* and for the introduction to John Milton. The first sacred passage I did was because of that book.

The biggest message and gift I got from that solo was to let the noise go away. When I did, I immediately knew the direction I needed to take for essentially the rest of my life. We don't give enough space and time to allow that noise to go away.

## How can you possibly be of any real use as a leader on a larger scale if you can't lead yourself through the thicket of your own emotions and thoughts?

**PETER:** The idea of eliminating noise and distraction is a transcendent message. When you are serious about any deep developmental process, that will become a dimension of it. It doesn't matter what the tradition is or the method.

The irony, of course, is a lot of noise is pretty powerful stuff. The image of noise makes it sound like it's a bunch of bad traffic noise in the background. But a lot of times, the noise is what is dominating us emotionally. It's the stuff that totally occupies us, either because it is tapping our fear or our greed or whatever. You wouldn't normally use the term "noise," but it is noise relative to the deeper state of pure awareness.

**DARCY:** And I think that is what it is. It is not that the noise goes away but rather becoming aware of what is noise and what is important.

**PETER:** I believe we need regular practices or disciplines to do this well. This morning, I got up to do meditation, and it became evident as soon as I started that I was pretty agitated. Quickly, I realized certain areas in my body were tight. Almost always, when I'm worried about something, it shows up in particular physical conditions. And so then I could just look at the thoughts and become aware of them. I did a little tai chi, and I got clear that all I had to do was keep my awareness in my feet and everything would be fine. It was amazing. The whole thing just was gone.

So we all have our own inner choreography, our own ways of doing this. But there's a progression from not being aware of the emotion but seeing it as a physical area of tension, to identifying the thought and the emotion that went with it, to

then realizing that I could just move beyond this by really getting in my body.

Because I'm the sort of person who, whenever I'm stuck, I'm stuck in my head in one way or another. And the answer is, get into your feet. Stand. That's a noise reduction mechanism. That's having some ability to move into noise, particularly when it is really loud, and letting it transform itself.

I don't really care what the hell your discipline is, but you need to have one. Find the spiritual tradition that speaks to you right now, and maybe a different one will speak to you in five years. It doesn't really matter.

But how can you possibly be of any real use as a leader on a larger scale if you can't lead yourself through the thicket of your own emotions and thoughts – and you get tied up in knots by anger, fear, and tension? This is an old, universal idea. And we have to be a little more direct about it.

**DARCY:** My last question is, what else do we need to consider?

**PETER:** Stop screwing around. That's it.

**OTTO:** What we need to consider is that the noise reduction mechanisms are most importantly missing on a collective level. We have plenty of mechanisms on the individual level, as Peter mentioned, that have emerged from all the wisdom traditions of the world. But what we don't have are the collective noise reduction mechanisms – infrastructures and practices that help us to co-sense and presence what matters to the future of our community. What we have today are collective noise *amplification* mechanisms, for example, commercials. When you go to Bhutan, you meet a society without advertising and commercials in public spaces. That's a first example of collective noise reduction. But much more is necessary.

I was just involved in the launch of the Global Wellbeing and Gross National Happiness Lab with the prime minister of Bhutan as one of our patrons. The Lab, co-convened by the Presencing Institute and the German Ministry of Development Cooperation, brings together change makers from Bhutan, Brazil, India, China, the US, and Europe to "innovate beyond GDP" in order to reinvent our economy from noise amplification to noise reduction. How can we transform the positive energy of the noise to a higher level of awareness? In that spirit, let me shut up here… ∎

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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