PRESENCE

An Exploration of Profound Change in People, Organizations, and Society

PETER SENGE
C. OTTO SCHARMER
JOSEPH JAWORSKI
BETTY SUE FLOWERS

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Managing Editor: Nina Kruschwitz
Book design by Chris Welch
Coltsfoot Illustration: Diane Leonard-Senge

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Introduction

It's common to say that trees come from seeds. But how could a tiny seed create a huge tree? Seeds do not contain the resources needed to grow a tree. These must come from the medium or environment within which the tree grows. But the seed does provide something that is crucial: a place where the whole of the tree starts to form. As resources such as water and nutrients are drawn in, the seed organizes the process that generates growth. In a sense, the seed is a gateway through which the future possibility of the living tree emerges.

Introduction

Although the four of us come from quite different backgrounds, we do share one thing in common: we have all been part of extraordinary moments of collective awakening, and seen the consequent changes in large social systems.

One of those moments occurred in South Africa in 1990. Peter was in the hill country north of Johannesburg, coleading a three-day leadership workshop that had been offered for fifteen years, but never in South Africa. His colleagues included a black South African and a white South African who were being trained to lead the program on their own in the future. There were thirty people attending; half were white business executives and half, black community organizers. Many took personal risks to participate in the program.

On the last day of the program, the group heard that President

F. W. de Klerk was going to give a speech, so they took a break and gathered in front of a television set to watch. This turned out to be the famous speech that set into motion the ending of apartheid. In the middle, de Klerk began to list all the previously banned black organizations that were now being "unbanned." Anne Loetsebe, one of the community leaders, was listening with rapt attention. Her face lit up as de Klerk read the name of each organization: the African National Congress (ANC), the Pan Africanist Conference, and so on. Afterwards, she said that as each organization was mentioned, she saw in her mind's eye the faces of different relatives who had been detained and would now be coming home.

After the speech the group reconvened and completed the program as usual. Later that afternoon, they watched, as was the custom in the program, a video of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "I have a dream" speech. This had been banned in South Africa and many of the participants had never seen it before. Finally, the program closed with a "check-out" that gave each person a chance to say whatever he or she wanted. The first four people made lovely comments about how meaningful it had been for them to be there and what they had learned about themselves and about leadership. The fifth person to speak was a tall Afrikaans business executive. This man, like many of his business colleagues, had been reserved and shown little emotion during the program. He now stood and turned to look directly at Anne. "I want you to know that I was raised to think that you were an animal," he said. And then he began to cry. Anne just held him in her gaze and nodded.

"As I watched this," says Peter, "I 'saw' a huge knot become untied. I don't know how to describe it except to say it was as if a rope simply became untied and broke apart. I knew intuitively that what had been holding him and so many others prisoners of the past was breaking. They were becoming free. Even though Nelson Mandela was still in the Robben Island prison and free elections were still four years in

the future, from that moment I never had any doubt that significant and lasting change would occur in South Africa."

For many years, we four have shared a common desire to understand better how such moments and the underlying forces for change they signal come about. We felt that what we had written in the past, at best, described the words but left the music largely in the background. Contemporary theories of change seemed, paradoxically, neither narrow enough nor broad enough. The changes in which we will be called upon to participate in the future will be both deeply personal and inherently systemic. Yet, the deeper dimensions of transformational change represent a largely unexplored territory both in current management research and in our understanding of leadership in general. As Otto puts it, "This blind spot concerns not the what and how—not what leaders do and how they do it—but the who: who we are and the inner place or source from which we operate, both individually and collectively."

Of Parts and Wholes

Everything we have to say in *Presence* starts with understanding the nature of wholes, and how parts and wholes are interrelated. Our normal way of thinking cheats us. It leads us to think of wholes as made up of many parts, the way a car is made up of wheels, a chassis, and a drive train. In this way of thinking, the whole is assembled from the parts and depends upon them to work effectively. If a part is broken, it must be repaired or replaced. This is a very logical way of thinking about machines. But living systems are different.

Unlike machines, living systems, such as your body or a tree, create themselves. They are not mere assemblages of their parts but are continually growing and changing along with their elements. Almost

two hundred years ago, Goethe, the German writer and scientist, argued that this meant we had to think very differently about wholes and parts.

For Goethe, the whole was something dynamic and living that continually comes into being "in concrete manifestations."[1] A part, in turn, was a manifestation of the whole, rather than just a component of it. Neither exists without the other. The whole exists through continually manifesting in the parts, and the parts exist as embodiments of the whole.

The inventor Buckminster Fuller was fond of holding up his hand and asking people, "What is this?" Invariably, they would respond, "It's a hand." He would then point out that the cells that made up that hand were continually dying and regenerating themselves. What seems tangible is continually changing: in fact, a hand is completely re-created within a year or so. So when we see a hand—or an entire body or any living system—as a static "thing," we are mistaken. "What you see is not a hand," said Fuller. "It is a 'pattern integrity,' the universe's capability to create hands."

For Fuller, this "pattern integrity" was the whole of which each particular hand is a concrete manifestation. Biologist Rupert Sheldrake calls the underlying organizing pattern the formative field of the organism. "In self-organizing systems at all levels of complexity," says Sheldrake, "there is a wholeness that depends on a characteristic organizing field of that system, its morphic field."[2] Moreover, Sheldrake says, the generative field of a living system extends into its environment and connects the two. For example, every cell contains identical DNA information for the larger organism, yet cells also differentiate as they mature—into eye, or heart, or kidney cells. This happens because cells develop a kind of social identity according to their immediate context and what is needed for the health of the larger organism. When a cell's morphic field deteriorates, its awareness of the larger whole deteriorates. A cell that loses its social identity

reverts to blind undifferentiated cell division, which can ultimately threaten the life of the larger organism. It is what we know as cancer.

To appreciate the relationship between parts and wholes in living systems, we do not need to study nature at the microscopic level. If you gaze up at the nighttime sky, you see all of the sky visible from where you stand. Yet the pupil of your eye, fully open, is less than a centimeter across. Somehow, light from the whole of the sky must be present in the small space of your eye. And if your pupil were only half as large, or only one quarter as large, this would still be so. Light from the entirety of the nighttime sky is present in every space—no matter how small. This is exactly the same phenomenon evident in a hologram. The three-dimensional image created by interacting laser beams can be cut in half indefinitely, and each piece, no matter how small, will still contain the entire image. This reveals what is perhaps the most mysterious aspect of parts and wholes: as physicist Henri Bortoft says, "Everything is in everything."[3]

When we eventually grasp the wholeness of nature, it can be shocking. In nature, as Bortoft puts it, "The part is a place for the presencing of the whole."[4] This is the awareness that is stolen from us when we accept the machine worldview of wholes assembled from replaceable parts.

The Emergence of Living Institutions

Nowhere is it more important to understand the relation between parts and wholes than in the evolution of global institutions and the larger systems they collectively create. Arie de Geus, author of *The Living Company*[5] and a pioneer of the organizational learning movement, says that the twentieth century witnessed the emergence of a new species on earth—that of large institutions, notably, global corporations. This is a historic development. Prior to the last hundred

years, there were few examples of globe-spanning institutions. But today, global institutions are proliferating seemingly without bound, along with the global infrastructures for finance, distribution and supply, and communication they create.

This new species' expansion is affecting life for almost all other species on the planet. Historically, no individual, tribe, or even nation could possibly alter the global climate, destroy thousands of species, or shift the chemical balance of the atmosphere. Yet that is exactly what is happening today, as our individual actions are mediated and magnified through the growing network of global institutions. That network determines what technologies are developed and how they are applied. It shapes political agendas as national governments respond to the priorities of global business, international trade, and economic development. It is reshaping social realities as it divides the world between those who benefit from the new global economy and those who do not. And it is propagating a global culture of instant communication, individualism, and material acquisition that threatens traditional family, religious, and social structures. In short, the emergence of global institutions represents a dramatic shift in the conditions for life on the planet.

It may seem odd to think about titanic forces such as globalization and the information revolution as arising from the actions of a new species. But it is also empowering. Rather than attributing the changes sweeping the world to a handful of all-powerful individuals or faceless "systems," we can view them as the consequences of a life-form that, like any life form, has the potential to grow, learn, and evolve. But until that potential is activated, industrial age institutions will continue to expand blindly, unaware of their part in a larger whole or of the consequences of their growth, like cells that have lost their social identity and reverted to growth for its own sake.

The species of global institutions reshaping the world includes non-

business organizations as well. Today, for example, it's possible to enter an urban school in China or India or Brazil and immediately recognize a way of organizing education that has become completely taken for granted in the West. Students sit passively in separate classrooms. Everything is coordinated by a predetermined plan, with bells and whistles marking time, and tests and plans to keep things moving like one giant assembly line throughout each hour, day, and year. Indeed, it was the assembly line that inspired the industrial age school design, with the aim of producing a uniform, standardized product as efficiently as possible. Though the need to encourage thoughtful, knowledgeable, compassionate global citizens in the twenty-first century differs profoundly from the need to train factory workers in the nineteenth century, the industrial age school continues to expand, largely unaffected by the realities within which children are growing up in the present day.

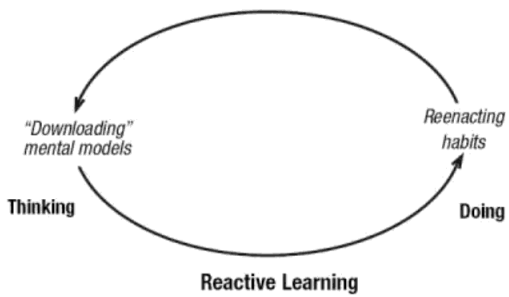
As Buckminster Fuller pointed out, a living system continually re-creates itself. But how this occurs in social systems such as global institutions depends on both our individual and collective level of awareness. For example, each individual school is both a whole unto itself and a part, a place for the "presencing" of the larger educational system. So, too, is each individual member of the school: teachers, administrators, students, and parents. In particular, adults carry the memory, expectations, and emotions of their own experience as schoolchildren. The same holds true in businesses: the organization's members become vehicles for presencing the prevailing systems of management because those systems are most familiar. As long as our thinking is governed by habit—notably by industrial, "machine age" concepts such as control, predictability, standardization, and "faster is better"—we will continue to re-create institutions as they have been, despite their disharmony with the larger world, and the need of all living systems to evolve.

In short, the basic problem with the new species of global institutions is that they have not yet become aware of themselves as living. Once they do, they can then become a place for the presencing of the whole as it might be, not just as it has been.

New Ways of Thinking About Learning

Our actions are most likely to revert to what is habitual when we are in a state of fear or anxiety. Collective actions are no different. Even as conditions in the world change dramatically, most businesses, governments, schools, and other large organizations, driven by fear, continue to take the same kinds of institutional actions that they always have.

This does not mean that no learning occurs. But it is a limited type of learning: learning how best to react to circumstances we see ourselves as having had no hand in creating. Reactive learning is governed by "downloading" habitual ways of thinking, of continuing to see the world within the familiar categories we're comfortable with. We discount interpretations and options for action that are different from

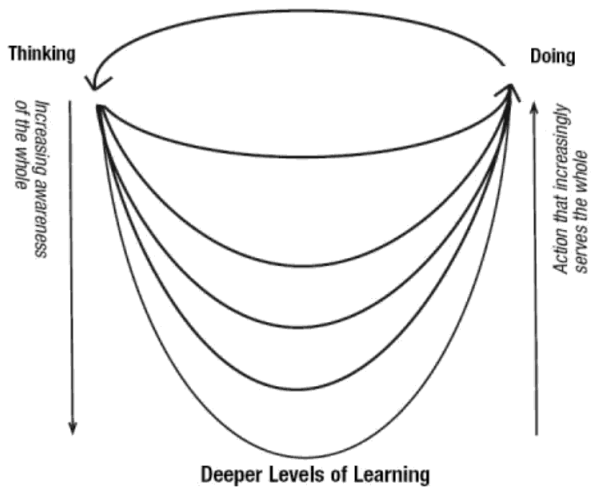


All learning integrates thinking and doing. In reactive learning, thinking is governed by established mental models and doing is governed by established habits of action.

those we know and trust. We act to defend our interests. In reactive learning, our actions are actually reenacted habits, and we invariably end up reinforcing pre-established mental models. Regardless of the outcome, we end up being "right." At best, we get better at what we have always done. We remain secure in the cocoon of our own worldview, isolated from the larger world.

But different types of learning are possible. More than seven years ago, Joseph and Otto began interviewing leading scientists, and business and social entrepreneurs. Those interviews—which now total more than 150—often began by asking each person, "What question lies at the heart of your work?" Together, the two groups illuminated a type of learning that could lead to the creation of a world not governed primarily by habit.

All learning integrates thinking and doing. All learning is about how we interact in the world and the types of capacities that develop from our interactions. What differs is the depth of the awareness and



Deeper levels of learning create increasing awareness of the larger whole—both as it is and as it is evolving—and actions that increasingly become part of creating alternative futures.

the consequent source of action. If awareness never reaches beyond superficial events and current circumstances, actions will be reactions. If, on the other hand, we penetrate more deeply to see the larger wholes that generate "what is" and our own connection to this wholeness, the source and effectiveness of our actions can change dramatically.

In talking with pioneering scientists, we found extraordinary insights into our latent capacity for deeper seeing and the effects such awareness can have on our understanding, our sense of self, and our sense of belonging in the world. In talking with entrepreneurs, we found extraordinary clarity regarding what it means to act in the service of what is emerging so that new intuitions and insights create new realities. But we also found that for the most part, neither of these groups talks with the other. We came to realize that both groups are really talking about the same process—the process whereby we learn to "presence" an emerging whole, to become what George Bernard Shaw called "a force of nature."

The Field of the Future

The key to the deeper levels of learning is that the larger living wholes of which we are an active part are not inherently static. Like all living systems, they both conserve features essential to their existence and seek to evolve. When we become more aware of the dynamic whole, we also become more aware of what is emerging.

Jonas Salk, the inventor of the polio vaccine, spoke of tapping into the continually unfolding "dynamism" of the universe, and experiencing its evolution as "an active process that . . . I can guide by the choices I make."[6] He felt that this ability had enabled him to reject common wisdom and develop a vaccine that eventually saved millions

of lives. Many of the entrepreneurs we interviewed had successfully created multiple businesses and organizations. Consistently, each felt that the entrepreneurial ability was an expression of the capacity to sense an emerging reality and to act in harmony with it. As W. Brian Arthur, noted economist of the Santa Fe Institute, put it, "Every profound innovation is based on an inward-bound journey, on going to a deeper place where knowing comes to the surface."

This inward-bound journey lies at the heart of all creativity, whether in the arts, in business, or in science. Many scientists and inventors, like artists and entrepreneurs, live in a paradoxical state of great confidence and profound humility—knowing that their choices and actions matter and feeling guided by forces beyond their making. Their work is to "release the hand from the marble that holds it prisoner," as Michelangelo put it. They know that their actions are vital to this accomplishment, but they also feel that the hand "wants to be released."

Can living institutions learn to tap into a larger field to guide them toward what is healthy for the whole? What understanding and capacities will this require of people individually and collectively?

Presence

We've come to believe that the core capacity needed to access the field of the future is presence. We first thought of presence as being fully conscious and aware in the present moment. Then we began to appreciate presence as deep listening, of being open beyond one's preconceptions and historical ways of making sense. We came to see the importance of letting go of old identities and the need to control and, as Salk said, making choices to serve the evolution of life. Ultimately, we came to see all these aspects of presence as leading to a state of

"letting come," of consciously participating in a larger field for change. When this happens, the field shifts, and the forces shaping a situation can move from re-creating the past to manifesting or realizing an emerging future.

Through our interviews, we've discovered similarities to shifts in awareness that have been recognized in spiritual traditions around the world for thousands of years. For example, in esoteric Christian traditions such shifts are associated with "grace" or "revelation" or "the Holy Spirit." Taoist theory speaks of the transformation of vital energy (qing, pronounced "ching") into subtle life force (qi, pronounced "chi"), and into spiritual energy (shin). This process involves an essential quieting of the mind that Buddhists call "cessation," wherein the normal flow of thoughts ceases and the normal boundaries between self and world dissolve. In Hindu traditions, this shift is called wholeness or oneness. In the mystic traditions of Islam, such as Sufism, it is known simply as "opening the heart." Each tradition describes this shift a little differently, but all recognize it as being central to personal cultivation or maturation.

Despite its importance, as far as we know there is relatively little written in spiritual or religious traditions about this shift as a collective phenomenon or about collectively cultivating the capacity for this shift. Yet many of our interviewees had experienced dramatic changes in working groups and, in some cases, in larger organizations and social systems. Some of the theorists had even developed ways of thinking about this that transcended the dichotomy between individual and collective.

In the end, we concluded that understanding presence and the possibilities of larger fields for change can come only from many perspectives—from the emerging science of living systems, from the creative arts, from profound organizational change experiences, and from direct contact with the generative capacities of nature. Virtually

all indigenous or native cultures have regarded nature or the universe or Mother Earth as the ultimate teacher. At few points in history has the need to rediscover this teacher been greater.

About This Book

The four of us were drawn to work together from different directions. Building on his earlier work on organizational learning, Peter has devoted his energies for twenty-five years to encouraging learning communities—developing capacities among diverse organizations to collaborate in order to accomplish changes that would be impossible for those organizations to achieve individually. Otto's initial experiences with large-scale change date to his efforts as a grassroots activist during the latter days of the Cold War in Berlin, engaged in establishing networks of relationships across the East-West divide in Europe. Joseph has been an entrepreneur for much of his life, cofounding a major law firm and then devoting his energies to creating the American Leadership Forum, a national network for developing servant leaders. He later was responsible for scenario planning at the Royal Dutch/Shell Group of Companies, where he first worked with Betty Sue. Betty Sue's lifelong interest has been the power of the stories we tell in shaping the reality we experience. As a professor of English literature and a specialist in myth, she has undertaken diverse projects such as collaborating with Joseph Campbell and Bill Moyers on the well-known *Power of Myth* television series, and working with Shell scenario writers in creating evocative stories of the future to help managers see their present reality more clearly.

As we talked and shared our stories, we came to believe that a growing number of people in diverse institutional settings were having similar experiences of profound collective change, and were ask-

ing similar questions. In part, we came to this belief when we began to study Otto and Joseph's interviews together in the fall of 2000. Gradually, we realized that the interviews offered both significant corroboration and, more important, clarification of our firsthand experiences. A theory Otto had been developing on "presencing" of different levels of perception and change[7] began to merge with Joseph's ongoing work on "sensing and actualizing new realities,"[8] and eventually a number of working and technical papers were produced.[9] But, most important, the theory started to come to life as we found ourselves drawn into a web of synchronous events that were difficult to explain. It seemed as though we too were becoming part of a future "seeking to emerge."

In organizing this book, we have sought to convey the experience of our work together as well as the results. The four of us often appear as "characters" talking with one another, telling stories, and exploring our different points of view, woven together with ideas and perspectives from the interviews conducted by Joseph and Otto. All quotes that are not referenced come from those interviews.[10] The flow of ideas more or less traces the flow of our conversations and experiences and the theory, or way of seeing, that gradually emerged from those conversations. But while the conversations themselves took place over a year and a half, it took close to two more years for the four of us to write this book.

The first three parts of the book correspond to the process of deepening collective learning as we have come to understand it. This starts with learning to see, moves on to opening to a new awareness of what is emerging and our part in it, and finally leads to action that spontaneously serves and is supported by the evolving whole. The fourth and final section places this deeper learning in the context of a more integrative science, spirituality, and practice of leadership.

Above all, this book is about a theory and our journey to under-

Part 1

Learning to See

about a real-life nightmare scenario: the destruction of our environment; the growing social divide between rich and poor; the potential dangers of things like biotechnology; and escalating violence around the world."

"Isn't it ironic the way people talk about dinosaurs?" Peter said. "Today we say an organization is 'just like a dinosaur' when we mean it's slow and can't adjust to change. But you know, the dinosaurs did manage to survive over a hundred times longer than humans have so far. Whatever beings might take our place here in the future will probably say, 'Just like the human beings—too bad they didn't have the adaptive capabilities of dinosaurs!'"

Betty Sue shuddered. "Hearing human beings talked about in the past tense like that is terribly chilling. I guess we all know that since we have the means to destroy ourselves, it's possible that we will. The unthinkable is possible, but it's still very difficult to consider. The poet Auden said, 'We must love one another or die.' No one thinks we're very close to loving one another just yet, but we also don't seem willing to consider the consequences of not doing so."

"And that's why we don't change," Peter replied. "I was speaking at a conference on business and the environment last week, and stayed at a conference center that I first visited twenty years ago. This center hosts a conference every year at which a prestigious environmental sustainability award is given, so you would expect it to be a showcase for environmentally sound practices, but I'm sure this place generates more waste per customer than they did twenty years ago.

"Everything is individually wrapped—coffee, sugar, shampoo—and each container will be thrown away. The materials used in the room were no more environmentally sound then they had been twenty years ago—the wood hadn't been sustainably harvested, the plastics and materials couldn't be recycled, and the appliances couldn't be remanufactured. I had asked for a room where I could open the

instances where imagining alternative futures, even negative futures, can actually open people up."

"Scenarios can alter people's awareness," Betty Sue agreed. "If they're used artfully, people actually begin to think about a future that they've ignored or denied. The key is to see the different future not as inevitable, but as one of several genuine possibilities.

"Maybe if people really believed we could be headed for extinction, we would do collectively what many people do individually when they know they may actually die—we would suddenly see our lives very clearly."

"If we could actually face our collective mortality—and simply tell the truth about the fear, rather than avoiding it—perhaps something would shift," said Peter.

"Several years ago in one of our leadership workshops, a Jamaican man from the World Bank named Fred told a story that moved people very deeply. A few years earlier he had been diagnosed with a terminal disease. After consulting a number of doctors, who all confirmed the diagnosis, he went through what everyone does in that situation. For weeks he denied it. But gradually, with the help of friends, he came to grips with the fact that he was only going to live a few more months. 'Then something amazing happened,' he said. 'I simply stopped doing everything that wasn't essential, that didn't matter. I started working on projects with kids that I'd always wanted to do. I stopped arguing with my mother. When someone cut me off in traffic or something happened that would have upset me in the past, I didn't get upset. I just didn't have the time to waste on any of that.'

"Near the end of this period, Fred began a wonderful new relationship with a woman who thought that he should get more opinions about his condition. He consulted some doctors in the States and soon after got a phone call saying, 'We have a different diagnosis.' The doctor told him he had a rare form of a very curable disease. And then came the part of the story I'll never forget. Fred said, 'When I heard

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