

ILLUMINATING THE BLIND SPOT: AN OVERVIEW AND RESPONSE TO THEORY U

Jonathan Reams

Introduction

There have been numerous attempts to make a contribution to the conversation about how we can make the world a better place. These cover a full range of approaches including scientific, political, economic, social, new age consciousness and so on. Many of these attempts focus on the value of seeing the world through the lens, discipline, doctrine or ideology of a particular approach, and thus advocate for the primacy of that approach. In other words, they preach the latest gospel that can bring salvation to a troubled world.

To see the world as a troubled place is not hard. In fact, many would say that if you saw it otherwise you must be blind or seriously in denial. And so efforts to make the world a better place are a response that arises in many forms. The question then arises; what would an integral approach have to offer? How might it go beyond any particular ideology, discipline or doctrine? What if instead of creating models responding to the ongoing problems of the world, we looked at illuminating the blind spot lying within such models, and generated a more comprehensive framework for seeking to understand the underlying processes behind change itself? This is one way to look at what Otto Scharmer has been working on with the development and publication of *Theory U. Leading from the Future as it Emerges. The Social Technology of Presencing.* (2007. Cambridge, MA: The Society for Organizational Learning, Inc.). It can be seen as a way of understanding the underlying processes behind deep change, and of enabling the enacting of such change processes.

In this essay, I will present a substantial overview of Scharmer's new book. The aim of this overview is to give readers a good feel for the scope and depth of this book, (even entice them to read it for themselves), as well as to set the stage for my own comments that follow. These comments will offer responses on two levels; one focusing mainly on cognitive development concerns and how they might have implications for his work, the second focusing on combining some specific points in Theory U and their implications with my own views and pointing to a perceived tension and possible blind spot.

A Whirlwind Tour of Theory U

My plan is to invite you along on the journey I took in reading this book. I will describe the work as I encountered it, chapter by chapter. I will summarize the main points and try to weave together a picture of how Scharmer unfolds his view. He covers a great deal of territory, so settle in for a long journey.

Introduction

The introduction to the book lays out the scope of territory that will be covered. Scharmer begins with a discussion of social inequities in the world, and describes current trends as pointing to a crisis in our society that is making the old forms of institutions and social

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structures obsolete. He sees them as falling apart, and in the midst of their rubble, something new has the possibility to arise. “What I see rising is a new form of presence and power that starts to grow spontaneously from and through small groups and networks of people” (p. 4). This is the new social field Scharmer sees emerging, and he sees the blind spot of this or any social field as “the place within or around us where our attention and intention originates” (p. 6).

His insight to this blind spot is derived from Bill O’Brian’s observation, derived from years of studying and practicing organizational learning efforts, that the “success of the intervention depends on the *interior condition* of the intervener” (p. 7). From this, the underlying question Scharmer poses is: “How can we act from the future that is seeking to emerge, and how can we access, activate, and enact the deeper layers of the social field” (p. 8)? Thus Scharmer lays out the core issue that his work revolves around.

Scharmer also opens by drawing on his farming background, using the term “field” from this context as a metaphor to describe how he views the “*field structure of attention*” (p. 10). The combination of the two elements above (our interior condition and acting from the future seeking to emerge) leads him to working with this “field structure of attention” as the mechanism that links what we say and how we act with where we operate from, or our blind spot. He begins to point to the ways in which consciousness (where we operate from) creates experience as the process or principle in operation in the construction of social fields. “The same activities can result in radically different outcomes *depending on the structure of attention from which a particular activity is performed*. Put differently, “*I attend [this way] – therefore it emerges [that way]*” (p. 13). This distinction leads Scharmer to delving deeply into how our attention is and can be structured as a major portion of the book.

Once this foundation is laid Scharmer sets out to build upon it and has three aims for book:

1. To provide a social grammar of the social field that illuminates the blind spot.
2. Exemplify this grammar by revealing four fundamental metaproceses that underlie the collective process of social reality, moment to moment: thinking, conversing, structuring and globally connecting (global governance).
3. Outline a social technology of freedom that puts this approach onto its feet and into practice through a set of principles and practices of presencing.

This leads to a call for “discover[ing] a more profound and practical integration of the head, heart, and hand—of the intelligences of the open mind, open heart, and open will—at both the individual and collective level” (p. 20).

Part I: Bumping into Our Blind Spot

Chapter 1: Facing the Fire

This brief chapter sets the tone by revealing the earliest intimation of Scharmer’s work. He describes the day when he was sent home from school to find the family farmhouse burning down, and how he stood watching everything he was identified with disappear. He then describes his experience of realizing that this burning away of his old identity allowed him to be present in a way previously unknown, that he was drawn out of his body and into being the “seer,” the true Self. He then relates this to a realization of two selves, which he frames as one being connected to the past, and the other as “who I could become in the future” (p. 25).

Chapter 2: The Journey to “U”

Much of this book describes the journey Scharmer has taken in coming to his understanding of how we can access and enact the future that wants to emerge through us. It begins with Bill O’Brian’s comment quoted above about the interior condition of the intervener. Scharmer calls this the blind spot of how we have approached change. He describes levels of subtlety at which change takes place as going from re-acting to re-structuring to re-designing to re-framing to re-generating. This last one he calls presencing, or “seeing from our deepest source” (p. 29).

Scharmer then describes his encounter with economist Brian Arthur and his description of two levels of thinking, a kind of reflex downloading and a deeper kind of knowing. Arthur’s process is described as lots of waiting and reflecting, or “observe, observe, observe, retreat and reflect, then act in an instant” (p. 34). This is then related to Francisco Varela and the core process of how one becomes aware, leading to the “three gestures of becoming aware. They are: suspension, redirection, letting-go” (p. 35). These then become the journey down the left hand side of the U. Going up the right hand side of the U is characterized as letting come, enacting and embodying. This creates a total of seven cognitive spaces: downloading, seeing, sensing, presencing, crystallizing, prototyping, performing/embodying. From this Scharmer calls for “a new type of social technology that is based on three instruments that each of us already has—an *open mind*, [IQ] and *open heart*, [EQ] and an *open will* [SQ]—and to cultivate these capacities not only on an individual but also on a collective level” (p. 40). The essence of presencing is described as our two selves (past and future) talking to each other.

This model of moving consciousness, collective or individual, is further shown to be marked by three gate keeping processes that go on in our minds. These are described as the three enemies of the journey down the U; the voice of judgment (VOJ), the voice of cynicism (VOC), and the voice of fear (VOF). Each of these can abort the process of deepening the field structure of attention. Scharmer says that all of these situations drive us to the need for examining our blind spot, or the source of our attention.

Chapter 3: Fourfold Learning and Change

This chapter focuses on a discussion of how the unintended consequences of our actions frustrate us. Four levels of change are described:

- *Reacting* or manifest action.
- *Redesigning*, or process and structure.
- *Reframing* or thinking.
- *Presencing* or the sources of intention and creativity.

How prior organizational learning efforts were based on single and double loop learning is shown to be limited by only being based on learning from the past. This is in contrast to presencing, (the combination of presence and sensing) which is about learning from the future that wants to emerge. As a step in this direction, systems thinking is shown as being able “to help people close the feedback loop between the enactment of systems on a behavioral level and its invisible source of awareness and thought” (p. 55). This is highlighted in Scharmer’s interview with Peter Senge and his reference to Master Nan and the core issue facing the world of “*the reintegration of matter and mind*” (p. 54).

Chapter 4: Organizational Complexity

This chapter examines three types of complexity: dynamic, social and emerging. Dynamic complexity appears as systemic types of framing that systems theory addresses. Social complexity appears as a postmodern recognition that stakeholders have different views/perspectives. Emerging complexity is about disruptive patterns of innovation and change. Scharmer describes the movement of attention from products to processes and then finally to the sources of processes/products, and provides good examples of this movement. One example involved how people from Ford and Toyota both looked at an old Ford plant and saw very different things, and how this allowed Toyota to innovate in ways that gave them huge advantages. This different type of seeing was perceived to have arisen through the application of systems thinking. This led to a call for cross institutional places for productive conversations among relevant stakeholders.

Chapter 5: Shifts in Society

This chapter looks at three major shifts in society; the rise of a global economy (as distinct from a world economy), the rise of a network society, and the rise of a cultural-spiritual shift. The first of these shifts tends to reflect a socialist view of the need for economic equality as a right of sorts. Otto tells a story that reveals how his participation in an anti-nuclear protest shaped his journey in this work. During the protest police attacked protesters, and his group non-violently resisted, with the police gradually relenting. This event is shown to have significantly influenced his drive to work on changing “that system” that has dominated the global economy.

In discussing the networked society, he shows the changes in social capital from traditional forms of social relations typified by Putnam’s book *Bowling Alone* to NGO type social networks working quietly to change the system. He then describes the cultural-spiritual shift, defining spirituality “as the source of our creativity. It is distinct from religion, for it concerns experience and not belief systems” (p. 90). He also focuses on working across ecological, social and political streams of experience and institutional structures in an integrated manner.

Scharmer then goes into a deeper analysis of the structures or arenas of experience historically, identifying objectivity, inter-subjectivity and trans-subjectivity as arenas of clashing forces related to each of the three above domains. This produces a nine square grid, where he feels that each square needs to be taken into account. He identifies the most significant clash as being in the spiritual domain, between self and Self. In his framework this means who we have been and who we can become, our highest future possibilities. He mentions Ken Wilber and AQAL theory as the most comprehensive meta-framework developed to date to comprehensively address all of these domains.

He also uses the notion of the blind spot to highlight what he perceives as the issues not being addressed by any given approach, and calls for knowledge that enables the creation of the realities we talk about. He then says this requires us to “trust our own senses, experiences and insights – without having a clue as to where that journey will lead next” (p. 104).

Chapter 6: Philosophical Grounding

A pause is taken here to recount the journey so far, and pay attention to the epistemological and ontological roots of the inquiry. Husserl and Heidegger are mentioned as setting the stage for deepening our collective inquiry in the 21st century. Scharmer lays out a matrix showing the movement of systems thinking from linear to non-linear and on to self-transcending systems as a source point, and on the other axis the movement from explicit to tacit knowledge to “self-transcending primary knowledge” that is not yet embodied. The first four cells of this matrix have been developed and explored, but there is grey area in the domains of the third movement along each axis. He cites David Hawkins as he lays out the territory that this kind of knowledge is about love as being global and rising about the separation that we normally experience.

Chapter 7: On the Threshold

Scharmer then looks at thresholds in a way that describes the process of developmental shifts very clearly. In many ways this process follows Robert Kegan’s description of the developmental transitions. The movement across the threshold involves a kind of dying, a letting go of the old identity. He sees the key discipline of our time as being the capacity to attend to cracks that open up in our reality and to go and flow with them.

Part II: Entering the U Field

After presenting his rationale for why we need to look into our blind spots in Part I, Part II of the book goes into depth describing the processes and stages of the U process. The introduction given in Part I to this model laid out the basic territory, and now Scharmer proposes to take us on a deep journey into the “way we pay attention, the *field structure of our attention*” (p.117).

Chapter 8: Downloading

Here Scharmer introduces us to downloading by telling a story of a company that enacted old patterns of behavior used by the first and then subsequent three CEO’s, showing how they set the tone and culture of the organization. He points to four failures of attention that this story illustrates about downloading (recalling the language of the field structure of our attention).

1. Not recognizing what you see (decoupling perception and thought).
2. Not saying what you think (decoupling thinking and talking).
3. Not doing what you say (decoupling talking and “walking”).
4. Not seeing what you do (decoupling perception and action).

These four are shown to be barriers to learning and change within organizations. Reversing them leads to crossing the first threshold and entering into the second space of the U process, seeing.

Chapter 9: Seeing

The first shift occurs in moving from downloading, the result of this denial or decoupling, to seeing. In this process the field structure of our attention moves from being encased in the

center of things to seeing from the periphery or boundary. Here we can see the data in front of us instead of only perceiving the downloaded images of the past. An attitude of wonder is highlighted as essential to keeping the capacity for seeing open.

Scharmer borrows from organizational learning and change literature by reframing Bohm and Isaac's notion of dialogue from being the 'art of thinking together' to the art of *seeing together*. He then uses a story that recurs throughout the book of a patient-physician forum in Germany that shows how this quality of seeing was present when people moved from an outcomes downloading approach that left the room deadened, to one of looking into first person experience and focusing attention on what was present in the room at that moment. This then moves into chapter 10 and the notion of "sensing."

Chapter 10: Sensing

The story of the patient-physician health care group experience continues in chapter 10 as the group clearly sees its assessment that the system they are working in and using operates at the mechanical/downloading levels, and that their desired notions of health care are much more holistic. Then the mayor, a teacher and a farmer all point to the same issues being present for their communities of practice. Scharmer uses this to describe the field structure of attention in sensing as allowing perception to move from individual heads to coming from not just the periphery of, but outside of organizational boundaries. The process of moving into this stage of the U involves:

1. Charging the container.
2. Deep diving.
3. Redirecting attention.
4. Opening the heart.

The story of Parsifal and Scharmer's meeting with the Circle of Seven (seven women who had formed a group for supporting their deep process work) then illustrates this process of opening to the wisdom of the heart. This leads into the work of Henry Bortoff and a distinction between counterfeit and authentic wholeness. Counterfeit wholeness is seen as attention within the mental constructs, while authentic wholeness is about sensing from within the field, having a perception from wholeness. This is linked to the story of Plato's cave, redirecting of our attention away from the mental shadows on the wall and around to the sources of those shadows and beyond to the reality outside.

Chapter 11: Presencing

This chapter on presencing goes deeply into the core of the Scharmer's work and the U theory. Presencing is described as a combination of sensing and presence. It is "a moment when we approach our self *from the emerging future*. . . . The key difference is that sensing shifts the place of perception to the current whole while presencing shifts the place of perception to the *source* of an emerging future—to a future possibility that is seeking to emerge" (p. 163).

This stage of the U journey is characterized by two core questions at the heart of creativity. Scharmer discusses his interview with Michael Ray as having best articulated these questions as who is my Self and what is my Work? The capital S self is one's

highest/authentic self, and the capital W work is not our career but our purpose for being here on earth.

Scharmer talks about the field structure of presencing by telling of his pursuit of the source of the Inn River in the Swiss Alps. There he found no single source, but a host of glaciers all contributing to a small lake, and realized the distributed nature of source being everywhere. In this way the field structure of our attention is not only outside of our normal horizons, but surrounds it as a sphere would.

He then goes into Eleanor Rosch's distinction between conventional analytical knowledge and "primary knowing" or wisdom awareness. This knowing is characterized as being open and has unconditional value. He goes on to tell how she described a very Eastern spiritual view of the source of this knowing and how it can act in the world. "That knowing capacity actually is the field knowing itself, in a sense, or this larger context knowing itself" (pp. 168-9). This is followed by examples of a sculptor whose hands know what to do, a businessman falling apart to break through, and a participant in a workshop for an organization breaking through a membrane to get at a vividly living question that transformed the project. He also continues with the patient-physician dialogue story, as well as another group project.

The Circle of Seven then describe what they call the presence of the circle being, which arises when someone in the group steps over a boundary and lets go of their normal way of being in the world. This leads to the identification of three conditions of deep listening: unconditional witnessing, unconditional impersonal love, and seeing the essential self. The presence of this circle being is described in terms of time slowing down, ears ringing, not speaking casually and a palpable shift in energy. Otto then gets to experience this as they ask if he would like his work held in this circle.

Scharmer lists principles of presencing as;

- letting go and surrendering,
- inversion or going through the eye of the needle,
- the coming into being of a higher (authentic) presence and self, and
- the power of place: creating a holding space of deep listening.

Otto's experience with the Circle of Seven brought an authentic quality to his description of the presencing phenomenon. While his interviews and research with leading scientists bring great knowledge and a learning journey of great depths, and his experiences of facilitating experiences for others illustrates the principles very well, it is this disclosure of his own experience of being held and seen in the way he is describing that conveys to the reader an energetic quality behind the theory and stories, infusing them with a more authentic and vibrant feeling.

Chapter 12 Crystallizing

Here we begin moving up the U, and learn the steps seen as critical to moving into the world from this deeper place of presencing. It is the work of keeping the connection to higher Self that is made at the bottom of the U that the next chapters focus on. The stories used in previous chapters continue to illustrate this stage of the U process, and this helps to give the reader a fuller sense of the richness of each story.

The early intuitions that arise about what wants to emerge from the future, or from our highest possible future, then require some clarification and grounding in forms that we can act on. Crystallizing “facilitates the surfacing of a living imagination of the future whole” (p. 195). We can create visions from anywhere, even downloading, but harkening back to O’Brien and how the interior condition of the intervener determines the success of the intervention, creating a vision and intention from the highest self is clearly a very different thing.

Crystallizing uses principles of the power of intention, and here Scharmer uses another personal story of creating a global peace university with five student colleagues after being inspired by the pioneering Norwegian peace researcher Johan Galtung. The next principle involved is letting come, involving the question of “how can you tune in to that intention?” (p. 199). The issue is letting go of the old ways of thinking and perceiving to make space for something new to come and the capacity to listen to the new deeply. Scharmer then describes the principle of operating from “grand will” and quotes Martin Buber to illustrate the surrender that is required to let go of the ego or small self’s habitual action of inserting itself and its images into our will. Finally he talks about venues for waking up, or environments/contexts that facilitate sustaining the attention in this consciousness.

Chapter 13: Prototyping

Using the concept of prototyping from the design industry, Scharmer shows how we can help to maintain this consciousness of the higher Self by utilizing the wisdom of our hands/bodies to act in ways that our heads can only catch onto later. He talks about the tension between and care to navigate between “two major dangers and pitfalls: mindless action and action-less minds” (p. 205).

The principles involved here begin with connecting to the inspiration, maintaining our connection to the source at the bottom of the U. This requires daily practice at making and keeping that connection. He has Joseph Jaworski describe how he stays connected through daily practice, then holds that deeper intention as much of the time and as long as possible, finally noticing and seizing opportunities when they arise.

The second principle is being in dialogue with the universe. This is working with synchronicity, trusting that the universe is a friendly place and that it will help you find and refine opportunities in alignment with your higher self. Then prototyping is connected to failing early and leaning quickly by putting things together and out for feedback before they are finished and polished.

The final principle is creating strategic microcosms, or landing strips for emerging future possibilities. This means doing things under the radar, or incubating them out of the glare of the kind of attention that can crush such projects by unnecessary criticism while the seeds are still tender and new.

Chapter 14: Performing

In order to carry the field of presencing into this stage of enacting in the world, Scharmer talks about how we need to stay connected with the macro level while acting personally. Attention moves to the larger kinds of institutional ecologies that our work is embedded in. The field unfolds in a more integrated way with the center flowing out to the periphery as an

integrated whole rather than a crossing of boundaries. The principles involved in this include systemic integration, innovative ecosystems, and field shift of the evolving ecosystem. He then lists eight observations that he has noticed over time that support this kind of work; core group composition, primacy of praxis, practice fields and tools, parallel learning structures, purpose and shared principles, passion or personal embodiment of purpose, perception-driven participation and finally products.

This completes the in-depth tour of the U process, and paves the way for examining how it can address the issues outlined in Part I.

Part III: Presencing: A Social Technology for Leading Profound Innovation and Change

Here Scharmer lays out the rationale for this work, reiterating the importance of moving beyond examining what we do and how we do it to the inner source from which we operate, or our blind spot. His proposition boils down to being able to distinguish that any action we take can emerge from one of four sources or fields of attention; “from the center (I-in-me), from the periphery (I-in-it), from beyond one’s periphery (I-in-you), and from permeating all of one’s open boundaries (I-in-now)” (p. 228). How we learn to navigate these fields is seen as depending upon learning a new grammar in order to be able to make appropriate distinctions on our journey.

Chapter 15: The Grammar of the Social Field.

Scharmer has 21 propositions that outline what he calls the grammar of the social field. He is explicit in building on the early work of Kurt Lewin in describing social systems as fields. These propositions are in effect laying out a way to make distinctions about the U process his research has revealed, and are the core tools for learning how to direct the field structure of attention. They cover much of what has gone before, and package it in a concise manner. However this is not a cursory outline of highlights. Each of the 21 propositions is explored in sufficient depth to get a good feel for what is involved in actualizing it. This lengthy chapter is also full of diagrams that build on previous diagrams to illustrate how various propositions reveal the implications of the U process. Many matrixes are the result, showing how this pattern of movement shows up in a comprehensive array of human experience and endeavor.

This mapping also includes the opposite movement that is not only possible, but in many ways dominant. The differences between presencing and its U cycle of activity are compared to the cycle of absencing, which results in not seeing, de-sensing and absencing/hubris, followed by self-deluding and aborting and destroying, and how this shows the archetypical pattern of the anti-cycle. That we as humans live in the tension between these is pointed at, but not so clearly illustrated is how these tensions may hold us in the center, not moving too much through either cycle.

Chapter 16: Individual Actions

In this chapter Scharmer focuses on choices we make as individuals, leading to mapping out the “anti-space” of the U, which depicts the processes and outcomes that arise when we move in the other direction and allow the seeds of downloading or reenacting the past to drive out attention and actions. The anti stages are *blinding* leading to not seeing, *entrenching* leading to de-sensing, and *holding on* leading to absencing/hubris. From this place begins the

processes of *manipulating*, *self-deluding*, *abusing*, *aborting*, and *annihilating* all leading to destruction. In this cycle open mind becomes stuck in one truth/view, open heart becomes stuck in one world/ us versus them, and open will becomes stuck in one self/will. He calls this the space of social anti-emergence, or the shadow space of absensing. He describes how we can flip quickly between these two spaces, and points to staying awake as the way to stay connected to the source, or our highest Self.

Chapter 17: Conversational Fields

In this chapter, Scharmer lays out his work around how conversations can move through different fields. This incorporates and extends the work done by Bill Isaacs on dialogue, which itself helped to bring the original impetus that David Bohm brought to the field. This is summarized by using the matrix of the four fields used throughout the book to describe how conversations can evolve.

- The first field of downloading is enacted by speaking from what others are perceived to want to hear. This brings about the kinds of polite routines and empty phrases that we know so well. Central to this is not saying what you think, creating an *autistic* system.
- Then the second field of debate emerges when people begin to speak their minds, and is characterized by “talking tough.” People speak from what they think, and are embedded in and identified with their point of view. The system here is *adaptive*, and people say what they think.
- The third field, or dialogue emerges when reflective inquiry begins and when conversation arises as speaking from seeing one’s self as part of the whole. Instead of defending the viewpoint that was identified with at the previous stage, participants are able to inquire into other viewpoints. A *self-reflective* system emerges, with the capacity to see and reflect on one’s own part in the creation and maintenance of the system.
- Finally, in the fourth field, presencing occurs and is characterized by a generative flow. Speaking arises from what is moving through the field, which has qualities of stillness, collective creativity and flow. It becomes a *generative* system with an identity shift to the authentic self.

Scharmer then maps these four fields of conversation onto the figure showing the anti-space of absensing. Here the movement begins with the same kind of downloading or talking nice of habitual conversation. Moving in the opposite direction, it goes through silencing the views of others through blaming others to absensing and hubris. From there it moves through intrigue and disinformation, and harassing and bullying, resulting in collective collapse. He describes the result as “conversations that pollute, poison and pathologize our collective thought (through intrigue and disinformation), that poison microcosms of emerging futures (through harassing, bullying, stifling innovation), and that eventually destroy the structural collective ground itself (collective collapse)” (p. 287).

The dynamics between the U space and the anti-space are seen as dialectical and non-linear, being able to flip back and forth instantly. He brings up the question of how can one awaken and train a capacity to perceive the threshold between the two, which is seen to exist at a very subtle level. He describes “this eyelike entity, from which sparks of our attention and intention originate, is what I call the *I-in-now*. It’s the invisible origin of your real presence and power” (p. 295). Examining how the different places of origin open up spaces

for different levels of conversational possibility, he charts the precursors of each of the four conversational fields, showing how the movement to each level or field is dependent on the origins of the communication; whether they are originating from downloading, factual connections, personal connections, or source connections.

Scharmer notes that most individuals do not aspire to enact the anti-space, but to live from the deeper levels of conversation, and asks why it is that our institutions seem to be stuck in the grip of pathological patterns of conversation and action. He maintains that this is from our lack of ability and capacity to direct attention to the sources of our conversation, especially the deepest source or our highest Self. He identifies the key to developing this capacity: "That journey is about deepening our attention *first* before we start to act on an impulse" (p. 299).

Chapter 18: Organizational Actions

This chapter applies the same structure to examining the evolution or devolution of organizations.

- Level 1 organizational structures are characterized by centralization and machine bureaucracies. The source of power is the hierarchical structure and complying with central rules. They are center driven and have a logic of economies of scale around production.
- Level 2 organizational structures are characterized by decentralization and work through divisions. Their source of power is market success so they operate by meeting market demand and are thus periphery driven. The operating logic switches to economies of scope related to customers.
- Level 3 organizations are networked, and have relational or matrix structures. The source of power is networked relationships, and thus they are relationally driven. They operate on a logic of economies of innovation, focused on product innovation.
- Level 4 organizations are seen as ecosystems of innovation, whose sources of power are the field of emerging possibilities. These organizations shape innovation ecosystems which are driven by this emerging field. The logic is economies of presencing and system innovation.

Stories of DEC and Enron help to illustrate how organizations have fallen due to either not moving to deeper levels (DEC) or from falling prey to the operations of the anti-space (Enron). This anti-space begins in the same place, or in centralization of the organizational structure, but the movement is characterized by institutional ignorance, arrogance and hubris leading to disinformation, sclerosis and collapse. Each of these is illustrated though following the collapse of Enron and of the socialist system in Eastern Germany.

He closes the chapter by pointing to the deeper aspects behind the development of the different levels of organizational structures, showing how functional processes and centralized structure, core processes, stakeholder conversation process and ecosystem innovation processes are the sources of the four levels of organizational structures.

Chapter 19: Global Actions

This chapter brings the focus of the U theory to the domain of global development issues and the core structures underlying them. The example of health care opens the discussion by

showing how little attention is placed on support for changes in lifestyle that have clearly been shown to have a strong impact on the highest cost (in terms of dollars and quality of life) health issues. Scharmer identifies three areas of activity at this level, business, politics and civil society.

- Communication between these sectors at the downloading level takes the form of things like commercials, propaganda and bribery, soft money and lobbying. The inequities in the current structures of society are shown to work with these forms of communication to reinforce the dysfunctional operation of systems in our world today.
- At level two, the realm of debate, we get consumption as the beginning of two way communication between business and civil society, elections as communication between politics and civil society, and regulations between politics and business.
- Level three communications, dialogue, shows up between business and civil society as stakeholder dialogue, between politics and civil society as referenda, and between politics and business as public conversations.
- The fourth level sits in the center as collective presence and co-creation that operate across all of these boundaries.

The examination of the field structure of attention in this domain has:

- Level one centralized structures of government systems with emerging private sectors. The source of power is in the court and state and the coordination mechanism is center driven planning. The driving force is the politics of the court.
- Level two is characterized as decentralized with market competition and an emerging private sector. The source of power is capital and business, coordinated by a periphery driven market. The driving force is then the demands of this market.
- Level three is characterized as networked, with negotiation and dialogue with an emerging civil sector. The sources of power are public opinion and NGOs. They are coordinated by dialogue and are relational driven. The driving force behind this level is a values based civil sector.
- Level four is characterized as ecosystem presence, with emerging cross-sector action. The source of power here is the presence of the emerging whole and presencing is the coordinating mechanism coming from the emerging field. The driving force is cross-sector awareness and action.

The U and its anti-space are described as beginning from the public sector in terms of the state and government hierarchy, and with the suspension of state-centric power the private sector emerges with its capital, business and markets. The redirection of market-centric power leads to the rise of the civic sector and the focus on people, NGOs and dialogue. The letting go of system-centric power allows for the emergence of ecosystems of innovation and collective cross-sector creativity. Going up the left side of the U, letting come brings communities of cross-system co-creation. Enacting these leads to strategic microcosms of the future, and embodying these brings about deep direct democracy.

The anti-space is described as the public sector being stuck in or blinded by one power mechanism. This leads to a special interest state and lack of competition. The entrenching of this leads to being stuck in one world or logic, producing structural violence and a lack of dialogue. This is furthered by being stuck in one self, and a holding on that brings us to a collective absencing and disconnect to the emerging whole, or being stuck in the old self.

From there, the downhill ride continues with manipulating and public disinformation and anomie. The abusing of this brings about societal sclerosis and an inability to redirect attention which brings about annihilating and the destruction of democratic foundations and social cohesion.

Scharmer then outlines a way that can be used to support the transformation of capitalism and democracy through the leverage point of infrastructure innovations. He outlines innovations in democratic, market, cultural and power place infrastructures. His analysis also leads to identifying a lack of leadership “capacity to collectively sense, shape, and create our future” (p.352). This leadership must have the capacity to address the four meta-processes of the social field covered here, those of thinking, languaging, structuring and evolving.

Chapter 20: Catching Social Reality Construction in Flight

As we approach the end of this journey through the social fields, Scharmer takes us to the next level of reviewing and integrating all that has been covered at a meta-process level. He describes how the core capacity of being able to notice differences between the field structures of attention can allow us to alter their structure and direction. The place from which we can overcome our blind spot is described as the *I-in-now*.

He invites us to conduct a thought experiment by thinking of these social field structures as living entities, and to envision our jobs as being to help them become aware of themselves and evolve to the next level. He then proceeds to review the journey thus far that has taken us through multiple domains of inquiry and see what meta-patterns and processes are at the heart of the whole.

- Field one is characterized as being made up of *autistic* systems. This is from seeing that nothing new gets into systems that operate by downloading or any other level one quality. Responses to the environment are limited to automatic reflexes, habits and routines from the past.
- Field two is characterized as being composed of *adaptive* systems. There is now an opening to data from the environment and other level two characteristics across the domains encountered. One good example of how integral or meta-systemic Scharmer’s Theory U is emerges when he discusses how the work of living systems describes this field of activity through the mechanism of structural coupling. The view that social systems are auto-poetic entities is popular in this approach, and a powerful framework for understanding living systems. Applying the U theory framework to the domains covered by structural coupling, Scharmer identifies the truth that this perspective brings as well as the limitations of the approach in that it does not recognize the other three levels or fields in how it views the world.
- Field three is characterized as being composed of *self-reflective* systems. He notes that the simple test to see if you are in field three is if you begin to see yourself as part of the system. In this way the system is able to see itself, and thus is self-reflective. When the capacity to operate from this system is present, environmental stimuli can trigger responses or reacting (level 1), adapting (level 2), or self-reflecting (level 3). Thus the range of choices available expands significantly, and the potential outcomes along with the different sources that can be chosen. Another feature of this field is that instead of boundaries being closed as in level 1, or when

entities influence one another across boundaries in level 2, boundaries begin to open and even partially collapse in level 3.

- The shift to field four has yet another fundamentally different quality of being *generative*, that Scharmer characterizes as moving from being connected to the current reality to “connecting with the deepest presence and source of the best possible future possibility that is seeking to emerge” (p. 361). One can now notice that “*I attend* [this way], *therefore it emerges* [that way]” (p. 361). The shift to this field is also characterized by a collapse of the boundaries between systems, and a sense of wholeness becomes much clearer.

He then presents a summary of the grammar of the social field that outlines all seven stages of the U process (downloading, seeing, sensing, presencing, crystallizing, prototyping and performing) in ten categories (gestures of paying attention, place of operating, seeing the world as, knowledge, social space, social time, collective social body (complexity) as, primary causal mechanism, episteme and self). The last three categories are then examined more closely (the others having already been covered). Different types of causal relations are categorized according to the four fields or levels and Aristotle’s four types of causation (material, efficient, formal and final). How we epistemologically move through the U is explored briefly, and a section looking at how the self is experienced is explored. This section is of relevance for those familiar with developmental models, as Scharmer demonstrates how the stages (sliced and named somewhat differently by different researcher’s foci) describe a universal human condition. He is clear that this aspect is “the most fundamental grounding condition” (p.375). The movement of the self “progresses through stages and states that shift from emphasizing the subjective, objective, intersubjective and trans-intersubjective” (p. 375) realms.

Chapter 21: Principles and Practices of Presencing for Leading Profound Innovation and Change.

In this final chapter (other than the epilogue) Scharmer moves from the theoretical and technical discussion of Theory U to providing readers with a “how to” approach, the practitioners view. This involves 24 points, complete with examples and practices for each. This provides the reader with a shift in perspective, allowing the theory to come alive in a new way that is more active. Passing over the same territory with another iteration taken from a different slant enables a kind of triangulation for the reader. It helps to emphasize that the theory has resulted from practice and experience as much as reflection.

Suggestions for how to engage others in this process, how to apply it in various contexts and situations, and how to prepare one’s self in the navigating the various transitions all round out the picture in a rich and engaging manner. It also demonstrates that this is not just a theory, that Scharmer has practiced what he preaches.

Epilogue

The closing few pages of the book tells more of Scharmer’s story, activities and aspirations for his work. He is very candid about his hopes and dreams, and the unknowing and trust in the emergence of the open will or surrender to the higher Self and its capacity to act for the greater good. There is much to be inspired by, as his enthusiasm flows through and between the lines. A kind of transparency of self is present, and you can *feel* your way into the space he creates through his stories. The epilogue is in a sense a call to action, an

invitation, although not explicit. How readers choose to respond to this call will be the next phase of the story.

Critiques and Reflections

I will now offer some critiques and reflections on Scharmer's book. Beyond my general interest in the field of leadership, I have focused on the intersection between understandings of higher state and stage structures of consciousness and leadership in particular. This area of research overlaps with the territory that Scharmer covers in his book, in particular the aspect of deepening consciousness and leadership's relationship to the capital S higher Self.

I begin with a response of gratitude for Scharmer having taken the time and effort to distill what is clearly a life's journey into a clear, coherent and well organized volume. Scharmer presents his material in an accessible manner by taking an initial overview and then unpacking it through multiple iterations. These iterations cover what is revealed near the end to be the meta-process underlying all of the various iterations. There is also a deep underlying coherence in how the work hangs together. An example is the way in which the figures (which do a great job of illustrating the text) are able to repeat and add in different aspects of the process to show how this meta-process manifests in various forms.

From this stance I will now examine a few ideas presented in the book that could benefit from some further elucidation or development. The first thing that drew my attention was that it seems that the further up the right side of the U Scharmer goes in his description, the thinner the details and descriptions of how we can actually embody and engage the consciousness of presencing are at these later stages. This may be because there is simply less to say about it – the preceding groundwork makes it evident where the leverage points are, in getting to the bottom of the U. If we don't get there, we don't get the full benefits on the upward side anyway. Or it could be that there is less known about how to operationalize it in the world. Either way, the emphasis is clearly placed on the left side descent to the bottom of the U.

Chapter 15 on *The Grammar of the Social Field* contains Scharmer's 21 propositions for understanding social change. These offer a summary of Scharmer's view and understandings in one concise area, and I will frame my comments around selected points.

Identity and Creative Being

In point six, I perceived a potential blind spot related to notions of identity. By talking about the move from level three to level four, Scharmer says that an open will "requires *letting go* of old identities and intentions and letting come new identities and intentions that are more directly connected with one's deepest sources of individual and collective action and energy" (p. 242). This description is reminiscent of Robert Kegan's discussions of transformations between levels of consciousness, and I think would fit quite nicely within this framing of the process of how identity shifts with development.

However, Scharmer has in places drawn on David Bohm's work, and I find that there is a subtle distinction that Bohm offers that is relevant to how this point is framed. While I agree with the letting go of old identities, this misses Bohm's point in his inquiry into the concept of thought as a system, that the most essential blockage or incoherence occurs from the process of identification itself, and that a more *creative* sense of being is more appropriate. I

think that this is one area in Scharmer's work where some further exploration of what is going on at this deeper level could help to clarify the depth of demands that this stage is making.

At point 16, Scharmer does address the issue of identity at the bottom of the U in another way that aligns more with Bohm's sense of a creative notion of being. "Here the self functions from its open boundaries and its surrounding sphere as a generative vessel through which a new collective reality is coming into being. There the self is no longer locked into the center, rather, it co-evolves by participating in the coming into being of a new social collective" (p. 254). This also comes up in point 14 where Scharmer recounts an incident related to this. "When I returned that evening, I was no longer the same person (implying that somewhere along the way I must have had an encounter of connection with my emerging self)" (p. 251). This very interesting quote reveals something about the relationship between an identified sense of self and the "emerging self" or "highest potential future self" which has a more creative than identified focus. On the next page this comes through as well; "to an authentic self that is identical to our highest future possibility and that comes into being through the open boundaries of the human body field, both individually and collectively" (p. 252).

These points reveal to me some of the complexities and challenges involved in attempting to convey the subtleties of conceptions of the self that are outside of the normal conceptual constructs of general public discourse. While the notion of changing identities is covered in point six in a way that is easy to understand, the more fluid and creative, process oriented descriptions of being in points 14 and 16 could benefit for further clarification, and I believe that Bohm's notion of a creative notion of being would make a good a good ground for this. Later in this review, I offer further considerations on this point and what I perceive as implications for Scharmer's work.

Developmental Issues

In point nine, Scharmer talks about an open heart as the "capacity for empathic listening, for appreciative inquiry, and for 'exchanging places' with another person or system" (p. 244). While this is indeed a valuable quality, what are not discussed here are the prerequisites for doing this. One may have an open heart in many ways, but there are specific action-logic stages at which the capacity to actually take another person's perspective emerges and goes through degrees of growth. While many adults have a rudimentary level of this capacity, it also seems apparent that many people do not have some of the more complex degrees of this capacity. For instance, Bohm points to the reflex defenses of the system of thought that can hide self-deception. Noticing, illuminating and suspending such reflexes of thought entail a capacity to notice complex internal processes that are relatively rare in society today.

What then is the implication of this? Is this another case of the implicit curriculum making demands that place people "in over their heads?" Can this lead to presencing and the U theory being limited to an elite spectrum of the population such as the so-called "cultural creatives?" Scharmer addresses this in one way in chapter 20, where he talks about how "the collective serves as a gateway to access the deeper states of awareness and knowing" (p. 375). I have also discussed this with others as how a facilitator can use their own access to higher states of consciousness and action-logics to create a space or container where people can "draft" into it and engage deeper levels than they might on their own. However these

issues sort themselves out, I think that there is further work to be done here to clarify and strengthen how the U process deals with these issues.

One area in which this is discussed to some degree is in chapter 17 on conversational actions. Here I think that it would further strengthen readers' ability to apply the U process by having a discussion on the relationship between the process of dialogue (as one involving participants moving through the four stages outlined) and the capacities required in terms of action-logics. Key issues could be framed in terms of a distinction between *structural* stages (relating to relevant action-logics as centers of gravity) and *state* stages (relating to this aspect of the field of attention).

Another approach could be to examine in more detail the relative impact of the structural stage capacities present in individuals within a group on how well a structured process can facilitate people moving into these higher state experiences of reflective or generative dialogue. What level of higher order cognitive capacities are necessary, or how much can this process act as a holding space for structuring state experiences? How much of any of this is dependent upon or facilitated by the level of cognition and or state experience and presence of a facilitator?

It is these kinds of questions that arise from reading through this section of the text. As this happens, my attention is drawn to inquire into what other areas of the work are also dependent upon higher action-logics. At the same time, I also reflect on how other aspects of our being in the world may be able to influence or open up space for this kind of work in ways that can transcend developmental limitations. This is an ongoing area of research fueled by conversations with colleagues and personal experience.

A Blind Spot?

I think that for me to engage the U theory and process at its deepest level, it might be helpful if I were to make some of the underpinnings of my view explicit first, to allow you to take into account my biases going into this. I will use a story to illustrate the essence of my view. I have a Jesuit friend with whom I have had an ongoing conversation about the nature of the relationship between human persons and soul. What I hear from his theological perspective is that we humans have a soul, (kind of like we have a liver or a right foot). The underlying connotation is that we *are* this physical body and that any idea of a soul must be some kind of appendage, situating itself in relation to the body. I would argue that this didn't make sense to me. I said that from my view, humans as physical bodies are transient and temporal (we live and die in time) while soul is eternal and various other qualities of a transcendent nature. How could the transcendent end up as an appendage of the transient? It made much more sense to me that we *are* soul, and that the relationship between soul and being human was that soul was having human experiences.

This view is seldom relevant in most of the conversations that I have, but in this case I found myself noticing how it could be relevant to a number of issues that arose for me in Scharmer's text. I use the term soul in a manner that I interpret Scharmer describing as our highest Self, our highest future potential, or our authentic Self. (Further framings of a more non-dual nature are also possible to use about these distinctions, but for current purposes the distinctions as laid out serve a relevant purpose). This is in contrast to the self that is constructed by habits and past experiences. The mechanical self acts in the world from a place of disconnect from the present as well as from the wholeness that is seen to be at our

authentic core. The authentic Self acts as the *I-in-now* and comes from this place of wholeness. While it can be present to the current realities surrounding it, Scharmer makes a distinction about it primarily acting to bring forth what is proposed to want to emerge from the future. I highlight the similar meanings apparent in our use of different terms to emphasize what I perceive as a common aim.

From this common ground, I want to point to a tension and possible blind spot I perceive emerging from bringing together two points from the text and introducing an implication of how these are potentially impacted by a different view I will introduce. The first point from the text is O'Brian's insight that the success of any intervention depends on the *interior condition* of the intervener. The second point is how we need to deepen our attention and connection to our authentic Self *first* before we act on an impulse. The view I want to contrast arises from a reaction I noticed in myself to a number of characterizations of the state of affairs of the world, (and that I point to in my opening remarks), is that there is something fundamentally wrong or unfair about the world in its present condition. I want to contrast this with a view of the world as being *exactly as it should be*.

As I mentioned in my introduction, most people would (and will) think that you (I) must be blind or in serious denial to think other than that the world is unfair, in a mess, or headed for destruction unless we do something soon. There are a number of places, such as the introduction to Scharmer's book, where this view is put forward as a kind of assumption about the current state of the world. Later (p. 299) Scharmer lays out a similar critique (that gives the impression of a rant) of how children are raised and schooled through TV, violent video games, downloading schooling and drugs to treat attention deficit disorder, that display this underlying perception.

In contrast, what is described as emerging in the world has to do with many efforts at making this world a fairer and equitable place, eliminating poverty, distributing economic rewards more evenly and so on, and indeed there are many such efforts underway today. The reaction that arises in me reading these kind of descriptive statements is that the only acceptable response to the current state of affairs is moral outrage and activism to change things. I am reminded of a saying I once saw posted on a door to the effect that – “if you're not outraged you're either asleep or not paying attention.” This sentiment is not particular to Scharmer. I find it in many places in the world. I also want to make clear that I see this particular perspective as a part of the larger view presented in the book. (I want to be clear that this does not mean that I think we shouldn't do anything to make the world a better place. I feel that one of the core purposes of our existence here is to learn how to leave things better than we found them).

This brings me to the tension I perceive arising from the application of the two points from the text to the difference in view I present. If our interior condition impacts the success of our interventions, then the view we act from is the highest leverage point we have. The need to pursue the source of our connection to the whole, or our highest future selves, as fully as possible before taking action in the world seems to me to be central to our interior condition. The view that arises for us would also seem to be connected to the route we take and how far we have gone on our journey.

The tension I perceive is between poles wherein the world is fundamentally flawed or exactly as it should be. Where one views the world from along this continuum will have a significant impact on the interior condition being applied to any intervention seeking to help

make the world a better place. I would characterize the pole viewing the world as fundamentally flawed as a “social consciousness.” While the social consciousness often wants to “save the world” from its fundamental flaw, the view arising from the other pole can offer a degree of non-attachment and alleviate the “should” energy of the social consciousness. I would propose that this quality of energy arising from the social consciousness pole of this continuum could impair the interior condition of the intervener and lessen the effectiveness of any interventions. There is a razor’s edge here, between the desire to be of service to the world and one’s fellow human beings, and the quality of energy one brings to these acts of service.

Thus what I perceive to be at issue here is a mix of views. On the one hand there is the social consciousness that is driven to save the world from the view of a flawed world. On the other hand the U process drives consciousness to deeper and deeper connections with something beyond self that in some spiritual perspectives arrives at a place of non-attachment, acceptance and compassion. This view can coincide with seeing the world as being exactly as it should be, and can make space for a different quality of energy in the interior condition of the intervener.

This brings to my mind Bohm’s inquiry into the root causes of challenges in our society. His view was that it is incoherence in our thinking that continues to worsen the situation. To solve these problems we think about them, but are not necessarily using thought from our highest Self, or soul in my vernacular. Instead, we allow thinking to be in charge, allowing the social consciousness (my view of it as being a symptom of the reflexes of thought) to hold sway and continue to perpetuate conditions that maintain and justify the view that the world is fundamentally flawed and in need of rescuing.

The view I introduced of our being soul and having human experiences can shift the view and place from which we make our interventions. It is much easier from this view to let go of an existential identification with or attachment to the human body as the ultimate source of our existence, which can shift energy away from the social consciousness pole. The creative process of an unfolding sense of being can be seen as soul continually revealing and coming to know itself in the actions of being in the world – being in this world but not of it. The locus of Self is not ultimately dependent upon the condition of the world. At the same time, from a place of non-attachment, acceptance of the world as it is, and compassion for all, the interior condition of our interventions aimed to make the world a better place can have a better chance of success.

This is a potential blind spot I see in how the U theory and process is described by Scharmer. The tension between the two poles described of a spiritual and social consciousness, and the tendency prevalent in our society today to act from an interior condition charged with energy more from the social consciousness end of things could be a limiting factor in attempting to solve the very issues the approach is intended to deal with.

Epilogue

After writing this overview and reflections, I had the opportunity to discuss them with Otto Scharmer over breakfast. Our intense and stimulating conversation covered many facets of these ideas and areas for future inquiry and research. As well, in response to my description of a potential blind spot, Scharmer made a comment that I felt revealed the sense of depth of view that came through between the lines of his book. As I described the

widespread consciousness of the world as fundamentally flawed and in need of rescuing, he replied that his writing reflected a phenomenological reporting of a kind on the times he had grown up in and experiences that shaped his view. This revealed to me a feeling of him being able to talk about his entire body of work on Theory U as an object of reflection, something that he could take a perspective on. While my reading of his book gave me a sense of something between the lines beyond what was being said, it was not so clear until the moment of his response to my critique. From this experience, I came away with a deeper sense of the potential that Scharmer's work with Theory U has, and at the same time how much it is a work in progress and a rich avenue for future research.

Jonathan Reams, Ph.D., *is Editor-in-Chief of Integral Review and currently an associate professor in the Department of Education at the Norwegian University of Science and Technology, where he teaches organizational counseling, coaching and leadership, and is pursuing research in the areas of leadership, dialogue and counseling.*
Jonathan@Reams.com