

# Reflections

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FEATURE ARTICLE

**Awakening Faith in  
an Alternative Future**

Peter M. Senge, C. Otto Scharmer,  
Joseph Jaworski, and Betty  
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# Awakening Faith in an Alternative Future

## A Consideration of *Presence: Human Purpose and the Field of the Future*

By Peter M. Senge, C. Otto Scharmer,  
Joseph Jaworski, and Betty Sue Flowers

With so many social systems – families, companies, governments, communities and societies – in disarray, it often seems that the future does not look promising. The scenarios we imagine most easily reveal our worst fears rather than the legacy to which we aspire. What can we do? Based on extensive research, first-hand experience, and a multi-year dialogue, Peter Senge, Otto Scharmer, Joseph Jaworski, and Betty Sue Flowers – authors of the new book *Presence: Human Purpose and*

*the Field of the Future* – have concluded that in order to “create the world anew” we will be called to participate in changes that are both “deeply personal and inherently systemic.” Given Sol’s mission to support the interdependent development of individuals and their institutions, we are delighted to share highlights of the authors’ exploration into the essence of generative learning. The article that follows is based on the introductory chapters of their book.<sup>1</sup> — Sherry Immediato, Publisher



Peter M. Senge



C. Otto Scharmer



Joseph Jaworski



Betty Sue Flowers

**A**lthough the four of us came from quite different backgrounds, we did share one thing in common: we had all experienced extraordinary moments of collective presence or awakening, and seen the consequent shifts of 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 15 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 30 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 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, I never had any doubt from that moment that significant and lasting change would occur in South Africa.”

The four of us 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. 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**

*Presence* offers a theory of profound change that is both radical and simple, based first on 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 200 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.”<sup>2</sup> 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,” Fuller would say. “It’s a ‘pattern integrity,’ the universe’s capability to create hands.”<sup>3</sup>

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.”<sup>4</sup> 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, heart, or kidney cells, for example. 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.”<sup>5</sup>



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.”<sup>6</sup> 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*<sup>7</sup> 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 they create for finance, distribution and supply, and communication.

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.

This new species' expansion is affecting life for almost all other species on the planet. Historically, no individual, tribe, or even nation could 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 undifferentiated 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 grades to keep things moving like one giant assembly line. 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 new 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. Each of us carries the memory and expectations of our own experience as schoolchildren. The same holds true for the way business organizations, and their members, are places for the presencing of the prevailing systems of management. 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 increasing disharmony with the larger world.

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 presencing the whole as it might be, not just as it has been.

## **New Ways of Thinking About Learning**

When any of us acts in a state of fear or anxiety, our actions are likely to revert to what is most habitual: our most instinctual behaviors dominate, ultimately reducing us to the



Figure 1: Reactive Learning

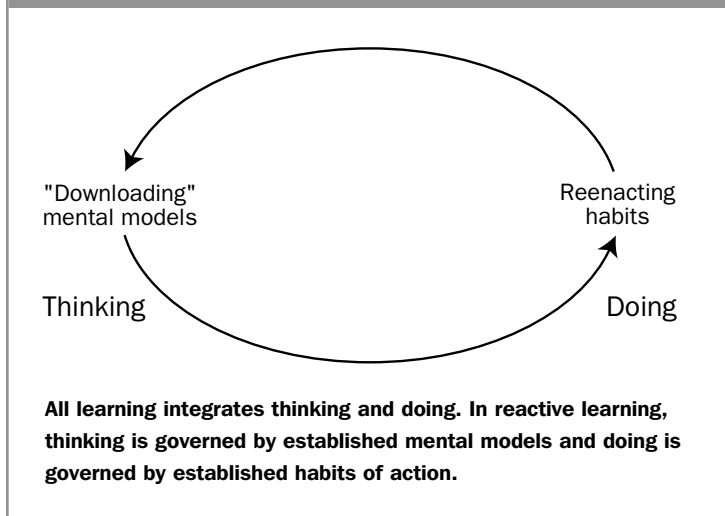
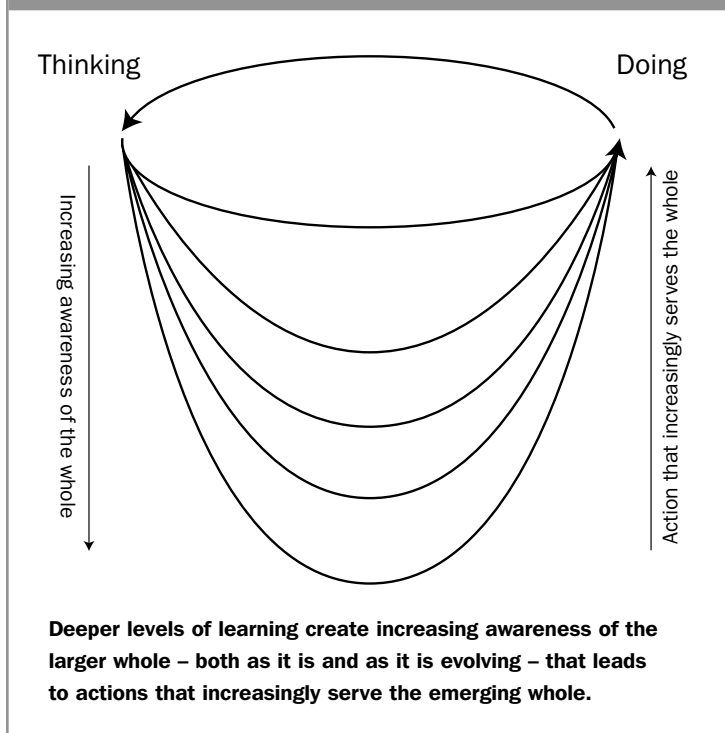


Figure 2: Deeper Learning



“fight-or-flight” programming of the reptilian brain stem. Collective actions are no different. Even as conditions in the world change dramatically, most businesses, governments, schools, and other large organizations 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 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. (See Figure 1: Reactive Learning.)

But different types of learning are possible. More than seven years ago, Joseph and Otto began interviewing leading scientists, and business and social entrepreneurs. The 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 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. (See Figure 2: Deeper Learning.)

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 the recognition 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 and our part in it.

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.”<sup>8</sup> 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 one of our interviewees, W. Brian Arthur, a noted economist of the Santa Fe Institute, told us, “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 really 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. While they know that their actions are vital to this accomplishment, they also know 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 us 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 shift 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. 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.

## **It All Starts with Seeing**

In a SoL leadership workshop several years ago, Fred, a Jamaican man from the World Bank, told a remarkable story. A few years earlier he had been diagnosed with a terminal disease. After consulting a number of doctors, all of whom confirmed the diagnosis, he went through what anyone would in that situation: for weeks he denied what was happening. But gradually, he came to grips with the fact that he was only going to live a few more months.

"Something amazing happened then," he said. "I simply stopped doing everything that wasn't essential. I didn't do anything that didn't matter. I started working on projects, with

groups of kids, that I'd always wanted to do. I stopped arguing with my mother. When someone cut me off in traffic, I no longer got upset. I just didn't have time to waste on anything like that."

Near the end of this period, he began a wonderful relationship with a woman who thought that he should get more opinions about his condition. He consulted some doctors in the United States and soon got a phone call telling him, "We have a different diagnosis." The doctor told him he had a rare form of a very curable disease.

"When I heard that," Fred told us, "I cried like a baby, because I was so afraid my life would be back to the way it used to be."

We've learned from years of scenario-planning exercises that imagining alternative futures, even negative futures, *can* actually open people up. Used artfully, scenarios can alter people's awareness of their present reality and catalyze profound change. In the mid-1980s, five years before Nelson Mandela was released from jail, citizens in public forums throughout South Africa confronted "the low road" and "the high road" – two scenarios about the consequences of, respectively, maintaining or stopping the country's apartheid policies. The key to making potentially fearful futures generative is to see that we have choices, and that our choices matter.

Early on in our work with *Presence* we received a remarkable article from Surdna Foundation president, and good friend, Ed Skloot. The piece, "Global Requiem" by religion scholar Jack Miles, was a speculation about potential cultural impacts if society started to realize that humankind might not overcome the global problems it faces, that we may not develop a sustainable society, and that, in fact, the human race might perish (see sidebar, "Global Requiem: The Apocalyptic Moment in Religion, Science, and Art"). Predictions of environmental or social collapse almost inevitably evoke denial, fear, and even paralysis. Given that their authors' intent is usually to mobilize action, they can actually be counterproductive. But what if, instead, facing a global requiem scenario led us to "wake up," as happened for Fred when he faced his mortality? What would happen if such an awakening occurred and, instead of inducing denial, led us to realize that our future as a species cannot be taken for granted, that there is a real urgency to our present situation, and that the time to start living together differently is now?

We believe such an awakening may be occurring around the world. This is based on the interviews we've been doing for more than seven years; on direct experiences we've had with profound change; and on coming to understand better how change occurs in living systems.

One of the most important books in the Mahayana Buddhist tradition is *The Awakening of Faith*.<sup>9</sup> Written in (or about) 500 AD, it provided a crucial bridge in bringing Buddhist philosophy and practice from India to China and hence, throughout the Asian cultures. The faith of which the book speaks is a deep conviction that enlightenment is possible, that we each carry within ourselves immense possibilities for connecting to the universe and participating in its generative process. In more religious terms, you could say the book's aim is to show that the infinite or absolute and the phenomenal, God and human, are inseparable, and that we have the potential to co-create our realities. But to do so we must first transcend the myth of separation that modern culture has taught us – separation from one another, from our highest selves, and from the generative processes of nature. Awakening our faith that the future can be different from the past will take nothing less than rediscovering our place, and that of our modern societies and institutions, in life's continual unfolding.

***The key to making potentially fearful futures generative is to see that we have choices, and that our choices matter.***

## Global Requiem The Apocalyptic Moment in Religion, Science and Art

If the first generations that assimilated Charles Darwin's thought were concerned with the origin of species, our own is concerned in an unprecedented way with the extinction of species and, above all, with the threat of extinction that faces the human species. During the 1850s, while Darwin was concluding *The Origin of Species*, the rate of extinction is believed to have been one every five years. Today, the rate of extinction is estimated at one every nine minutes. This raises the question, Will the human species be extinguished in its turn? The statistical question, perhaps the statistical likelihood, is complicated, morally, by the probability that human extinction, if it comes about soon, will prove to have been species suicide.

"Human reproduction," veteran foreign correspondent Malcolm W. Browne wrote in his memoir *Muddy Boots and Red Socks*,<sup>10</sup> "has some disturbing similarities to cancer.... [Humankind] will most likely destroy its planetary host before dying out itself." He cites the work of anthropologist Warren M. Hem, who compared satellite images showing the growth of Baltimore and the colonization of the Amazon basin side by side with pictures of cancer cells. As Hem put it: "The human species is a rapacious, predatory, omnivorous [devouring its entire environment] species."

As voices like Browne's are increasingly heard, the cause that until now has been presented as the defense of the environment, as if the environment were an importunate relative whom long-suffering mankind was being asked to support, is beginning to be presented as the self-defense of the human species itself. The environment is, after all, the human habitat, and time after time, extinction has followed on loss of habitat when the

species at risk was not able to adapt in time. Despite our large numbers, we are an endangered species.

As this paradigm shift takes place in the realms of politics and activist science, another change looms in the realm of the imagination and, perhaps also, in the practice of religion. If the earth is failing as a viable habitat for our species, then we can no longer imagine our individual deaths, as we have so long been accustomed to do, against a backdrop of continuing life. As we cease to do so, as we recontextualize our personal deaths in the emerging prospect of species death, can there – should there – be a religious wisdom that will accept species death as if it were personal death?

Such a prognosis, if it comes, surely will not come as it does in the disaster movies that are now so strangely popular; namely, with a warning that unless a given action is taken within ten days or ten hours, the world will end. No, it will come rather as an accumulation of ignored warnings from scientists and science journalists and an ensuing consensus that the opportunity to take the action that would have saved the species has come and gone. At that scientifically apocalyptic moment, should it be reached, and we can certainly imagine it being reached, actual extinction may still be far enough in the future that there will be time for a new kind of religion and a new kind of art to develop. These will be, no doubt, a religion and an art born of despair, but religion and art – far more than politics or commerce or science – are precisely those products of the human spirit to which we turn in times of despair. The last days of the human race may be, not to speak at all flippantly, our finest hour.

— Jack Miles

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Jack Miles** is senior advisor to the president of the J. Paul Getty Trust and author of *God: A Biography* (New York: Alfred P. Knopf, 1995). This excerpt was adapted and reprinted with permission from Jack Miles, "Global Requiem: The Apocalyptic Moment in Religion, Science, and Art," *Cross Currents*, Fall 2000, Vol. 50, Issue 3.

## Endnotes

- 1 Peter Senge, C. Otto Scharmer, Joseph Jaworski, and Betty Sue Flowers, *Presence: Human Purpose and the Field of the Future* (Cambridge, MA: SoL, Society for Organizational Learning, 2004).
- 2 According to physicist and philosopher of science Henri Bortoft, *The Wholeness of Nature: Goethe's Way Towards a Science of Conscious Participation in Nature* (Hudson, NY: Lindisfarne Press, 1996).
- 3 Amy Edmondson, *A Fuller Explanation*, 56-59 (Birkhaeuser, Boston, 1987) and Buckminster Fuller, *Synergetics: the Geometry of Thinking* (NY: Macmillan, 1976).
- 4 See "Conversation with Rupert Sheldrake: Morphic Fields," interview by C. O. Scharmer (London, September 23, 1999), [www.dialogonleadership.org](http://www.dialogonleadership.org).
- 5 See "Conversation with Henri Bortoft: Imagination Becomes an Organ of Perception," interview by C. O. Scharmer (London, July 14, 1999), [www.dialogonleadership.org](http://www.dialogonleadership.org).
- 6 Ibid.
- 7 Arie de Geus, *The Living Company* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Business School Press, 1997).
- 8 *The New York Times*, June 24, 1993, 1, 9.
- 9 *The Awakening of Faith*, attributed to Asvaghosa, translation and commentary by Yoshito S. Hakeda (New York: Columbia University Press, 1974).
- 10 See Malcolm W. Browne, *Muddy Boots and Red Socks: A Reporter's Life* (New York: Times Books, 1993).

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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**Joseph Jaworski** is the chairman of Generon Consulting and cofounder of the Global Leadership Initiative, founder of The American Leadership Forum, and author of the critically acclaimed *Synchronicity: The Inner Path of Leadership* (Berret Koehler, 1996).

**Betty Sue Flowers** was a professor of English at the University of Texas at Austin and an international business consultant prior to her current role as the director of the Johnson Presidential Library and Museum.

**If you would like to contact the authors about this article or about their new book *Presence: Human Purpose and the Field of the Future*, please email them at [presence@solonline.org](mailto:presence@solonline.org).**

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**To access reader resources or to order *Presence*, please visit [www.presence.net](http://www.presence.net). Order the book direct from the site to receive the complementary 40-page *Presence Workbook* free.**

## Commentary

By Darcy Winslow



Darcy Winslow

This article (and even more so the book, *Presence*) is remarkable in at least three ways. First, the authors' work has extraordinary emotional as well as intellectual impact; it continued to affect me long after my initial reading of it. Second, I found that the insights I gleaned from the work depended on what was happening around me. I suspect I will take away different messages each time I read it. Third, the authors somehow opened me to unexpected messages and opportunities in my own life. Perhaps because they speak so eloquently of the need to sense one's own connections to the world, my reading of *Presence* coincided with many seemingly chance encounters that in very real and specific ways reinforced my connections with others.

One of the book's themes, suggested in the article, is the idea of crystallizing intent – disciplining oneself to retreat and reflect, to listen to the moment. That is something I have done over and over again in my own work. It was essential a few years ago when I started thinking about how corporations could create a more sustainable future. I first had to crystallize my own goals, intentions, and actions – for the year, the next three years, and the rest of my career. That process helped me find new ways to connect with colleagues, customers, and the larger community. I then found that there are always people in organizations, often far from the top or entirely beyond the walls of the enterprise, who are actively engaged in the “right” work – practicing their values, building connections, and actively pursuing a shared vision.

To be sure, most of what happens in most companies is driven by the financial pressure to reward shareholders. But I see an increasing yearning among people and their organizations to be part of something greater than themselves. We tapped that yearning at Nike to develop new, environmentally friendly womenswear products. We wanted to inspire people to think differently about the products they buy or sell, and ultimately we wanted every product to advance our goals for environmental, social, and financial sustainability. However, I soon discovered how complex the process of developing sustainable products would be. We had to establish a new set of design principles, engage our supply chain, and build a network of technical experts (many of whom we found through SoL and other outside partners). It was an organic process of learning and building across whole systems – something that the authors capture vividly in their work.

From the authors' thinking, represented in both their article and book, I take with me two lessons in particular:

- *Changing demographics are a force for change.* I have found in my own work that women and youth are leading many of the best efforts to achieve sustainability. Whether due to an ability to connect, a sensitivity to social and natural imbalances, or a mindset that is less tied to the structures of the past, women and young people are natural carriers for the message of long-term, systemic change. However, to build bridges to these emerging constituencies we must all be-

come better listeners and open ourselves to ideas from remote and unexpected sources.

- *We need to measure what matters.* The “soft stuff” – values, aspirations, commitment – is the hardest to measure. But it is what forms a culture and enables change. By contrast, the metrics that drive most companies – revenue, growth, return on investment – are not very inspiring. I have found that embracing people’s deeper purposes and principles can drive a lot of decision making in an organization. Within my own division, for example, we have four guiding principles. One of them is “Live and lead in favor of the future.” We constantly ask ourselves how that is manifest in our operations, processes, and products. It is a much better way to manage: decisions that flow from a clear set of principles are almost always better and more widely honored than those based on purely financial metrics.

Peter, Otto, Joseph, and Betty Sue call us to reflect, individually and with one another, about what we share and where our future lies.

*Presence* ends with a powerful line: “If we find our place, we will find our purpose.” I think that is the real work for all of us.

#### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

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## Commentary

By Elena Diez Pinto



Elena Diez Pinto

In “Awakening Faith in an Alternative Future,” the authors articulate a message that is fundamental to people everywhere: the connectedness of all things. Their discussion of parts and wholes resonates both intellectually and emotionally; it confirms what I have found in my conversations with people around the world, and in my own work.

In my seven years of work supporting civic dialogue in Latin America, I have come to understand that social and personal transformations take place through a conscious process of connecting people with each other, and with themselves. In *Presence*, the book from which this article was drawn, the authors tell the story of Vision Guatemala, a team of government officials, human rights activists, businesspeople, and military officers that came together in 1997 in the wake of a brutal, 30-year civil war. That group, with which I was involved, sought to develop a shared understanding of the country’s present and to create plausible scenarios for the future.

In our first dialogue, one of the participants described witnessing an exhumation of a mass grave (one of many hundreds) from a massacre in Rabinal, a Mayan village. The grave included the remains of a mother and her unborn child. When he finished talking, everyone in the room was silent and many of us wept. Later, many recalled that moment as a “large communion”; everyone understood that the tragedy of Rabinal was a manifestation of the whole of our society. We discovered that day that when we listened to one another, putting aside our usual fears and prejudice, we were able to connect deeply and see the world differently. Our connection with one another

allowed the people in the room to step back from the abyss and create an alternative future. We saw what the authors have called “an emerging future that depended on us.”

Peter, Otto, Joseph, and Betty Sue remind us that there are powerful processes for translating our aspirations into reality. They suggest that by opening ourselves to the world and to the living systems that sustain us, we can create meaningful and lasting change. This may sound idealistic, but it is extremely practical. I have learned that when I have to make a decision or want to know what to do in the future, I need to listen to myself. If I listen with my heart and my body, not just my mind – if I am fully *present* and not distracted from what my senses and intuition tell me – I gain deeper understanding and arrive at better, more viable decisions.

This way of being in the world is a matter of survival – for individuals, organizations, and societies. Listening, thinking together, and trying to understand the whole comprise the essence of dialogue and the extraordinary opportunity that the authors have revealed. They make visible the connectedness among people, and call on us to get much better at seeing it.

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Elena Diez Pinto** is the director of the United Nations Development Programme’s Democratic Dialogue for Latin America and the Caribbean, and a member of Vision Guatemala.

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## Commentary

By Robert Fritz



Robert Fritz

Among the many discoveries within this brilliant new work by Peter Senge, Otto Scharmer, Joseph Jaworski, and Betty Sue Flowers, one, perhaps not obvious at first, is nonetheless particularly radical. It is a shift of fundamental orientation.

If we are to move from relating to the world as fragmented parts to systemic wholes, we must change our basic way of thinking. Not just what we think, but *how* we think. The change is:

- from abstract and symbolic conception to acute and profound observation;
- from metaphorical thinking to original and direct inquiry;
- from the habit of *not* looking freshly to the discipline of finely tuned investigation; and
- from reliance on concepts to bring a sense of order to the world, to an open quest to see what's really there, even if it makes us feel uncomfortable, unsure, insecure, and mystified.

To make this shift, we must move from presuming to know before we look, to looking freshly without the limitation of a concept, metaphor, theory, or history of previous experiences. Another way to say this is: start with nothing, e.g., without an idea of what we might find.

This is the essence of deep listening. How can we hear if we are filling ourselves with the sound of our own concepts? How can we hear the music that is playing if we are singing our own song in our minds? Originality comes from deep listening, and deep listening comes from focusing on reality without an agenda, something that is difficult

when we are in the habit of comparative thinking.

Comparative thinking is most common in our society. It is a this-is-like-that act of categorization. We compare our "database" of previous experiences, theories, models, concepts, or worldviews with what we are observing. Therefore, we bias our perception and create what Otto Scharmer calls "blind spots." When we think we know, we don't ask vital questions, we settle for easy answers, and we live in a world of presumption rather than a world of dynamic inquiry.

Deep listening is a long tradition for those who forged new insights. Newton, much reproached these days as proposing a mechanical universe, was not a metaphorical thinker. He did not think in terms of mechanical, or any other, metaphors. Others, who were not as original, did.

Newton was a deep listener, a creative mind, a man who invented calculus in order to further his inquiry. Those who made his work into metaphor misunderstood the creative process that was central to his work. He looked without a theory. If he were living in this day and age, he would be using his deep listening to observe reality freshly, and, perhaps, come to different insights. He said, "Hypotheses have no place in science." In his book, *A History of Knowledge: Past, Present, and Future*, Charles Van Doren describes Newton's gift this way: "...a mind entirely free of traditional prejudices and capable of seeing the universe [in] a new way."



Descartes said, “To understand some phenomenon or set of phenomena, first rid your mind of all preconceptions.”

Deep listening can lead us to a deeper and often new understanding of reality. Composer Karlheinz Stockhausen has written, “We need to close our eyes for a while and listen. There is always something unheard of in the air.”

In the arts, students must learn to see what is before their eyes without a concept in mind. Painter and teacher Arthur Stern said, “...the basic problem that every painter must face [is that] the mind stands in the way of the eye. That’s why most beginning painters don’t paint what the eye sees, but what the mind lets the eye see. They paint what they expect to see.”

If the universe is, indeed, a living system, and if we look deeply enough, we will see it for what it is – parts in relationship to each other and to the entire whole – a dynamic, with an organic nature, that is always shifting, evolving, and emerging.

It is from deep listening, rather than from an imposition of theory or concept or metaphor, that our understanding becomes immediate, direct, and authentic. Living systems, as the authors point out, are capable of change and self-creation. Understanding this principle as the

reality it is, rather than simply a concept to adopt, gives us a chance to have an active role in the emerging creation of our world.

Without such a revolution, we are trapped by our outmoded, and now dangerous, styles of thinking and acting. At this moment in history, technology, the politics of identity and world-view, environmental conflicts, and the harsh consequences of not understanding the actual interrelatedness of our paths, cannot be addressed with the limitations of our traditional, fragmented thought processes. This is why the ideas explored by the authors can lead to new possibilities of hope, and can move us away from a precipice and toward a vastly wiser civilization.

#### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

**Robert Fritz**, composer, filmmaker, and organizational consultant, is founder of Technologies for Creating,<sup>®</sup> and author of *Your Life as Art* and the international bestseller, *The Path of Least Resistance*.

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# Reflections

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