

Foundations, Principles and Inspirational Resources of **Integral Politics**



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5. Otto Scharmer: Theory U and the U Process

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Chapter 5

Otto Scharmer: Theory U and the U Process

One of the most interesting – and most important follow-up approaches to Integral Theory with regard to the dimension of states of consciousness is German-born MIT professor Otto Scharmer's "Theory U". Partially building on and indebted to Ken Wilber's integral thinking, Scharmer's work is based on many years of research on the driving factors of smooth and successful leadership that he co-developed in a circle of high-level academic colleagues and mentors, including Peter Senge, Joseph Jaworski and others. The U.Lab hosted by his Presencing Institute (<https://www.presencing.org/ulab-2x-2022>) meanwhile comprises and inspires a global community of change-makers and reaches out to tens of thousands of people who are using the U Process to support and co-create transformative social change.

Biographical notes

Otto Scharmer was born in 1961 and grew up on a Demeter farm 40 km north of Hamburg in Germany. Hence, he has been influenced and inspired early on by **Steiner's synthesis of science, consciousness**



and social innovation in a very practical, hand-on way. Furthermore, a number of **childhood experiences** have had a profound impact on his later work, as Scharmer has himself shared and reflected in his books and lectures. One of them was an observation and repeated teaching of his father who took the family out to visit the fields on Sundays. He would pick up a handful of soil, examining its consistency and explain to them that **the quality of the soil** (i.e. what is invisible, below the surface of the field) **determines the quality of the harvest**. This insight turned into the core principle of Scharmer's Theory U which he formulated in 2007.

Another important turning point in Scharmer's childhood was the experience of seeing his family's 300 years old farm burn down when coming back from school at age 16. Scharmer has described this moment as a process of waking up to **the inner dimension of events** that deeply reshaped his own identity. With all of what he had identified with so far dissolving, he began to notice an inner self that was remarkably calm, observing what was going on outside – and eventually pulling him to a space of possibility beyond what he had been, known and done so far (Scharmer, 2009: 47ff). This shift in consciousness would later become a crucial cornerstone of Scharmer's theory.

After studying economics at the university of [Witten/Herdecke](#) in Germany, where he received his diploma and later PhD for a dissertation about reflexive modernization and institutional learning, Scharmer went on to continue his work at the **Massachusetts Institute of Technology** (MIT) in Boston. Together with a circle of colleagues from the areas of management and organizational development at MIT's Sloan School of Management and the Society of Organizational Learning (SoL), he spent several years conducting intensive action research exploring the key factors that made businesses and other organizations successful in the long run.

As a result of their joint research in this inspiring environment, the group promoted a **shift of focus** in the field, based on the notions of “**presence**” and “awareness”, around which they co-developed a new paradigm of management and consulting. Scharmer’s book “Theory U” published in 2007 was a product and cornerstone of this cooperation, which continues to inform his work ever since.

As a senior lecturer at the MIT’s Sloan School of Management, chairman of the [MIT IDEAS](#) program for cross-sector innovation and author/co-author of several books, Scharmer now works actively to scale the effects of Theory U in service of **deep societal transformation on a global level**. To this end, he has co-founded the Presencing Institute (2006) and the MITx U.Lab, a massive open online course (2015) which has involved more than 140,000 users from 185 countries over the past years (<https://ephconference.eu/otto-scharmer-254>).

Essentials of Scharmer’s work in a nutshell

“The success of an intervention depends on the inner state of the intervener” (Bill O’Brien).

Scharmer’s most unique contribution to the field of integral politics is his Theory U – if the latter can be attributed to a single person, rather than a co-creative research and dialog process (see above). It is a fine differentiation of four different qualities of being, listening and awareness, culminating in a quasi-meditative state beyond the conventional, rational mind called “**presencing**” (a linguistic construction combining “sensing” and “presence”). Scharmer found that in this state, individuals and – more importantly – groups can access deeper sources of intuitive knowledge and insight, based on which they are able to come up with entirely new perspectives, qualitatively different ideas and much more effective approaches to given challenges.

The “**U-process**” building up on this research helps groups to consciously make use of and go through the different qualities of awareness. This can help them to purposefully access the “presencing” state in order to design, prototype and enact transformative solutions from there.

As an approach of “**Awareness-Based Systems Change**”, Scharmer’s U.Lab and related activities can be considered one of the most promising elements of an integral politics and a powerful, integrally informed avenue to leading profound systems change.

Summary Box: Key concepts, claims and elements of Scharmer's work

- * **Theory U** emerged out of Scharmer's studies into the secrets of successful leadership at the MIT.
- * **Focus:** working with collective states. "**Presencing**" as an attitude of maximum conscious awareness in the present moment which allows to sense into future possibilities that want to materialize.
- * **Core claims:**
 - The success of any intervention depends on the **inner condition of the intervener** and hence, we should deepen the quality of our present awareness in order to achieve better results.
 - On societal (and global) level, we are collectively producing results that nobody wants. Therefore, we must shift the focus of our awareness from outside behaviors and effects to their inner sources.
 - *Presencing* requires us to slow down our mental activity, suspend habitual patterns of thinking and to be open to what wants to emerge from the field of not-knowing. It then creates a sense of connectedness with our fellow (human) beings from which a sense of commitment and empowerment to work towards desirable futures can emerge.
- * **Essentials of Theory U:**
 - Theory U explains the art of deliberately working with social fields of attention and awareness.
 - The deeper and more intense the quality of awareness, the more powerful and effectively transformative are the solutions that emerge from a social field.
 - The U Process is the art of modulating social fields in order to take participants from habitual, more superficial qualities of awareness into deeper and deeper ones.
- * **The seven field qualities of a U Process:**
 - **Downloading:** habitual thinking and acting strongly pre-structures what is considered to be possible
 - **Seeing/Debate:** becoming fully aware of all available data in a given situation (infinite curiosity)
 - **Dialog:** Sensing into the situation with body and mind and seeing/experiencing oneself as part of it
 - **Presencing:** suspending all previous modes of awareness and becoming fully present for what is
 - **Crystallizing:** staying connected to the source while clarifying the vision and intention to go forward
 - **Prototyping:** producing a prototype as quickly as possible to obtain feedback from the field
 - **Co-creating/Performing:** fine-tuning the prototype and implementing it in real life systems
- * Each field quality has an opposing, antagonist quality (*blinding, de-sensing, absencing, manipulating, blaming, abusing* etc.). Together, these build an *absencing* cycle. Qualities of awareness can be shifted purposefully from *absencing* to *presencing* (and vice versa).
- * In order to **implement systems change**, we have to address **three fundamental divides**: the ecological, social, and spiritual-cultural one and heal the respective disconnects through more presence.
- * In view of using Theory U for transformative systems change, integral politics can work with eight "**acupuncture points**" to intervene more effectively, i.e. on a deeper level of awareness.
- * We need **infrastructures** to co-initiate, co-sense, co-inspire, (and) for prototyping and co-evolving.

From Presence to Presencing

„The longest road you will ever walk is the sacred journey from your head to your heart“ (Senge, Scharmer, Jaworski, Flowers, 2004: 234).

The concept and practice of *presencing* is at the very core of Scharmer’s work and theory. It gradually emerged as a common bottom line of a joint research project based on an interview series that Scharmer launched in 1996 together with Joseph Jaworski, asking leaders in business and society: “what question is at the heart of your work?”. The findings collected from the interviews over several years successively became the subject of a series of informal reflective conversations held by a circle of four close colleagues between November 2000 and April 2002 which they documented in the book “Presence. Exploring profound change in people, organizations and society” (Senge, Scharmer, Jaworski, Flowers, 2004).

So in some sense, we can say that Theory U itself emerged as the outcome and first prototype of an extended U process *avant la lettre*, conducted by the above team and involving both each of their rich (personal and professional) individual experience, their collective insight and wisdom and their reflective practice of thinking together about the former. So before turning to the U process itself, let’s take a moment to focus on *presencing* as the **key concept** behind the theory, which later became known as “Theory U”, as well as on its implications for a new paradigm of politics.

Presencing has been defined by Scharmer as “a blended word combining *presence* (the state of being in the present moment) and *sensing* (feeling the future possibility)” (Scharmer & Käufer, 2013: 19). So in a nutshell, ***presencing* has two elements**. First, it is about moving our focus to an inner place and becoming aware of the present moment – and our own being in that moment. Second, through this, we become aware of the deepest source, from which we are operating (Senge et al, 2004: 5).

Turning the attention towards the **source** rather than to any mental or external object (which tends to be our default focus of awareness) – and to stay with it (ibid.: 42) – means to **slow down** our mental activity (ibid.: 46). This practice is well known from mindfulness teachings. Slowing down and becoming still ideally implies quieting the chatter of the mind and to stop or, in Scharmer’s terms, to suspend habitual thinking patterns and unquestioned assumptions (ibid.: 37). This not only helps to see connections between things that were previously perceived as separate and hence, to see the bigger picture, consisting of the many relations between the whole and its multiple, fractal parts. It also helps to sense the dynamic, emergent qualities in any given constellation of (living) entities.

Scharmer speaks of this second element of *presencing* as “sensing the emerging future”. In their joint book, Senge et al. explain this dimension by referring to **Goethe’s approach to seeing and science**. It is about shifting the focus of awareness towards “the living process” of permanent unfolding beyond the apparently static material level of things, i.e. bringing what is usually in the background to the foreground of attention. The more we notice these inner, living qualities of present reality (such as needs and exchange processes involved in development and growth) and their interconnectedness, the better we come to understand the underlying generative process as a whole.

Note that the specific quality of awareness that allows to see these connections and dynamics is not “a result of trying – it simply comes out of the stillness” of the mind. In other words, it is a result of mindfulness practice (ibid.: 50). For most people, this is a rather unusual state, because rather than seeking anything specific on the outside, it implies a willingness to get involved with one’s whole person and to accept moments of profound disorientation.

Presencing then allows to access deeper levels of knowing and provides insights into what is fundamentally going on below the material surface level of things. As a natural consequence, this practice also dissolves the perception of separation and creates a **sense of connectedness** between oneself and the world (ibid.: 85). Scharmer therefore also refers to it as “seeing with eyes and heart open” (ibid.: 52). When we enter the *presencing* mode, we allow to be personally touched by what we perceive on the inside and on the outside. As a result of this, we are creating a (more conscious) connection between our own deeper selves and our current reality. Hence, we start to see our own part in things, i.e. our role in the system(s) we are part of – and have likely been co-creating in the past. In this sense, *presencing* is a way to help what Donella Meadows calls the system seeing itself (ibid.: 132). It makes crystal clear that “the system isn’t something out there, it is what you (we) enact” together (ibid.: 105ff).

From this deep personal connection also tends to follow a **sense of commitment and empowerment**, inciting people to become active participants, not just observers of their reality. Simply speaking, *presencing* naturally generates a readiness to contribute to necessary change. So how can this quality be developed, cultivated and standardized?

As mentioned before, the capacities that Scharmer and his colleagues claim to be necessary for attaining the *presencing* state involve the whole person. The fact that this runs counter most of the cognitive patterns and emotional habits we are used to in our everyday lives makes clear to what degree this approach represents a completely **new paradigm**. In many regards, the required capacities are the exact **opposite** of the qualities that are valued in our current (post)modern world view:

- They are about opening up instead of hiding – or even “freezing” – behind professional masks or roles (Senge et al, 2004: 230).
- They are about slowing down (ibid.: 86) instead of the current imperative to speed everything up.
- They are about suspending and redirecting the focus towards the inside instead of letting it be driven by outside stimuli.
- Finally, they are about letting go and letting come (93) instead of needing to maintain and expand our control on things and so forth.

Consequently, “it needs a **discipline or practice** to not get stuck in old unquestioned stories”, habits or, mental patterns (ibid., 72). However, while existing transformative practices addressing these dimensions are of course a good prerequisite for *presencing* to work and unfold its power, the interesting thing about Theory U is that the process through the U – if well facilitated – can in fact substitute a thorough personal practice on the side of the participants. For the U process is designed to pick up participants where they usually spend most of their time, namely in a rather superficial, habitual mode of awareness, which Scharmer calls “downloading”. From there, it gradually takes them further down the U, towards deeper and deeper qualities of listening and awareness, ideally leading to the *presencing* state, called the “bottom of the U” and back up again on the other side.

And since Theory U is largely about states, not stages of development (in Wilber’s model), these can be accessed by anybody, provided they receive suitable guidance or scaffolding. So let’s now take a closer look at the building blocks of Theory U and the U process in more detail.

Theory U

As shown above, the essence and core insights of Theory U have emerged out of a collective reflexive and co-creative process, as much as Otto Scharmer himself deserves the praise for having put it in between two book covers. In “Theory U. Leading From the Future as it Emerges. The Social Technology of Presencing” (2007), he spells out the foundations, as well as the different aspects and elements of the theory in detail, thereby helping readers and users to identify and to implement them in practice.

Broadly speaking, Theory U is a theory of social fields which are defined by specific qualities of attention and awareness, and of their implications for the kind of actions and structures that tend to emerge from them. Put simply, each type of field enables and tends to bring forward a different kind and quality of outcome. This is true both on individual and collective levels, i.e. with regard to leadership on the one hand and to collective socio-political action in and of groups and societies on the other.

As to the individual level, Theory U’s key insight can be summarized by the much quoted statement by Bill O’Brien. In his interview with Otto Scharmer, he said: **“The success of an intervention depends on the inner state of the intervener”** (Scharmer, 2009: 29). Similarly, as inner states and attitudes of individuals bring forward specific behaviors, collective cultures inform and bring about corresponding dynamics in groups and even structures in societies. So while this theory clearly has its focus on the inner quadrants, namely on **individual and collective states**, its interest in the implications of these states in the outer quadrants turns it into a truly integral theory and hence, a valuable contribution to and inspiration for integral politics.

Its new paradigm quality also shows up in what has been one of Scharmer’s key motivations for the book, namely his observation that we as humanity (and in particular: we, citizens of the western industrialized world) are **collectively co-producing results that nobody wants**. We are doing so through the very structures and systems we have jointly created – and are re-creating day by day. For instance, environmental pollution, increasing social inequality, psychological imbalances and diseases such as stress and burnout are essentially caused by our materialistic, growth-oriented, consumerist lifestyle. As a result, we are exploiting the planet and thereby undermining our own life conditions and wellbeing in the long run. This current system works well for a small minority, but it is alienating the majority of us both from ourselves, our fellow humans and our natural environment.

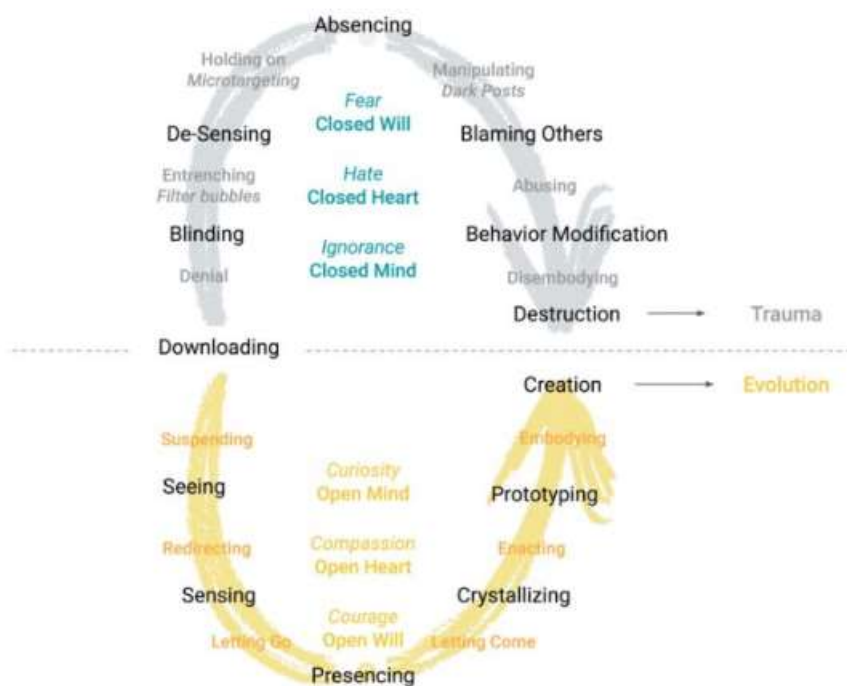
At the beginning of Scharmer’s work therefore stood the question how leadership could do differently, and how it could counteract these alienations, drawing on deeper sources of awareness, based on a sense of connectedness with self, fellow beings and nature. In other words, he explored how it could be put back in service of the larger whole. With this focus, he conducted a global, multi-year interview project asking 150 leading edge pioneers in the areas of management, change processes and organizational learning what it was that essentially informed and inspired their work and made it successful. He asked them which question was at the heart of their work, and what was the deepest source of their actions.

One of the first interviews he took as part of this series was with Peter Senge, director of the Center for Organizational Learning at MIT and author of “The Fifth Discipline” (1992) who talked about the power that comes from looking reality into the eye (Scharmer, 2009: 75). Moreover, in the course of his interview project, Scharmer found that there are varying degrees of (not) being aware, of listening and of acting based on this awareness, around which he built his model and theory. In a nutshell, he describes an emerging pattern of gradually differing degrees or qualities of being present with the given reality.

Figure 1: Presencing and Absencing Cycles (1)

Source:

<https://paarsemier.nl/-theory/>



Two responses to disruption — two social fields

More precisely, Scharmer found two opposing cycles of being, perceiving and (inter)acting which he calls **presencing** and, inversely, **absencing**, whereby the *absencing* cycle represents the pathological deterioration of the *presencing* cycle (ibid.: 267,280, 314). In each of these cycles, Scharmer distinguishes four distinct modes of (not) listening, (not) seeing, (not) communicating and being present (or absent) in the world and with others, along with three common fears, resistances and steps of enacting new, visionary ideas, or, in turn, sabotaging or blocking development. He calls these modes *field qualities*, because they have the power to shape the whole communicative setting or field in an invisible way.

Let us start by the *presencing* cycle and the elements that are part of the journey leading through the U. Figure X below illustrates this

Field 1: Downloading

The first field quality is called “Downloading”. By this, Scharmer refers to a mode of being that is primarily informed by the patterns of the past, reproducing what is already known and held to be true (common hour thinking). It is a form of habitual thinking and acting that is less aware of the given present reality than of how things have (always) been in the past, therefore assuming that they will continue to be that way in the future. Consequently, the downloading mode is a rather closed system of thinking, de facto preventing the person to see and sense into both actual reality and future possibility with an open mind and heart. Due to its focus on past thinking, it is also strongly pre-structuring the space of what is considered to be possible in the future.

As an example, Scharmer shares the story of a global study tour he went on with peace researcher Johan Galtung just a week before the Berlin wall came down. When Galtung made the prediction that

the wall was going to fall by the end of that very year, for most people in the group, it was hard to imagine that something that had been as stable as the “iron curtain” could collapse in a short period of time. The reason for this misperception was that expectations based on past realities prevented sceptics from actually seeing what was already happening beneath the surface of East European societies, and which ultimately undermined the power of the communist regimes.

In the area of political communication, another example of the downloading mode is the typical kind of “discussions” we are all familiar with from widespread public political formats such as talk shows or even parliamentary debates. More often than not, these are used by the participants to “offload” statements based on their existing positions, with the aim to present themselves to a wider audience, rather than in view of entering a real conversation based on exchanging arguments and ideas with their competitors. Downloading pre-existing positions is therefore mostly directed towards the audience that is watching them on TV, rather than the person sitting in front of them.

In some sense, the competitive setting of a talk show forces speakers into the downloading mode which implies that they are already internally preparing their own response, while listening to their competitors (or: opponents). Hence, they are less – or not present at all. In other words, they are listening in order to better contradict, rather than to appreciate what the other person has to say.

From a cognitive-psychological perspective, the downloading mode generally implies a large degree of projection. Because I know or expect somebody to be my opponent, I project all sorts of negative expectations onto them (i.e. they cannot have good arguments, they cannot be right etc.), before even listening to them (cf. Scharmer’s example of Watzlawick’s anecdote about a man shouting at his neighbor: “you can keep your hammer!” before even asking him to borrow it, since he expected a negative answer; Scharmer, 2009: 126).

Scharmer mentions **four barriers** that are typically inherent in the downloading mode, and which tend to prevent people from being more present, i.e. from seeing and perceiving (*presencing*) reality as it is. They all have to do with incoherence between perception and action, between the inner and outer dimensions of a person’s being and behaving, and/or between the different aspect of one’s personality (such as thinking, emotions, intuition etc.):

1. **Not seeing what one perceives:**

Instead the person rewinds old patterns of thinking about how things are, even if factual evidence contradicts those patterns. We see a lot of this in the context of “post-truth” movements which stick to specific beliefs about the world despite evidence proving otherwise. People are so closely identified with their beliefs that giving them up in favor of a more factual seeing tends to threaten their identity.

2. **Not saying what one thinks:**

Oftentimes, we are closely tied to and bound by habitual patterns of speaking, i.e. traditions and conventions of “how one does things” and what is “perceived to be right” in a particular context or community, even if we might not share all of it at a closer look. Yet, the (felt) power of conformism, superficial politeness and/or the fear of losing face, a position or community support if one spoke out more freely are quite strong.

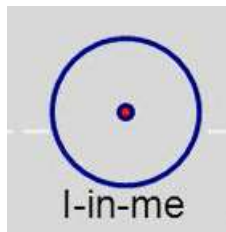
3. **Not doing what one says:**

We all sometimes display incoherence between our words (which might be informed by specific values, speaking habits or norms) and our behavior (informed by what we truly think). It is therefore not surprising that we often see this behavior in politics too, with politicians publicly subscribing to high moral values without complying with them in practice.

4. Not seeing what one does:

If we are subject to particular seeing habits, these might cause us to focus only on what we want to see, i.e. the positive, beneficial side of things, as well as any aspects that confirm our habitual belief system, while fading out of awareness the negative consequences of our behavior. This pattern is a huge issue when it comes to all sorts of externalities of our current consumerist lifestyle and its implications on the health of the planet and global society.

Figure 2: Downloading¹



In other words, the downloading mode is rather self-centered, identified with a given way of seeing, thinking about and doing things, which the self has so far held or practiced. It is primarily informed by its own needs and habits, with little flexibility to respond to external information, data and challenges.

The graphic representation shows the self-centered focus of the downloading mode and field quality (figure 2): The red dot is the focus of self and awareness while the blue circle is the embedding context of the person, for example an organization, family, group or nation.

So the main challenge in the downloading state is to become aware of these patterns, in order to allow for a more open and less biased perception of reality.

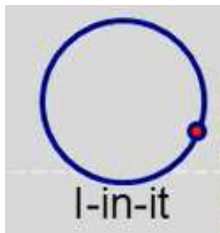
Field 2: Seeing / Debate

The second field quality is all about transcending the limitations of the first one: starting to **see what is really the case**. As compared to the habitual downloading mode, in which we are driven by routines and habitual patterns of thinking, perception and action, the field quality of *seeing* is often connected to a moment of “waking up” to a more truthful perception of reality. Giving up an existing, even though rather limited view of reality can sometimes be quite painful, as in Scharmer’s own experience of watching his family home burning down.

While it is normal for most of us to be in a routine-based mode of awareness at least some of the time, *seeing* requires to consciously leave that mode in order to **become fully aware of the data that a given situation presents us with**. This means to look at, perceive and explore the respective context in the way a scientist does, trying to fully understand the problem in question. Interestingly, for Scharmer, this does not imply a mere cognitive or mental approach, which for him is a characteristic of the downloading mode where the mind operates in dissociation from other dimensions of perception and awareness. Rather, he stresses that *seeing* ideally requires the whole person, i.e. body, mind and fully fledged experience rather than a just a cognitive process. Moreover, drawing on Goethe and Steiner again, Scharmer compares the *seeing* quality of awareness to the **infinite curiosity** of a child, or to a state of amazement, marvel or awe in the face of new discoveries where one is simply present with what is there (on the outside).

¹ Figures 2-5 are taken from Scharmer, 2009.

Figure 3: Seeing



The graphic illustration of this field quality shows the focus point moved onto the circle itself which represents the given outside reality. So the focus is right on the object. Note that both in science and politics, the notion of objective seeing is associated with the assumption of an external observer who, provided they have the right lens, method or theory to look at reality, has access to “reality as it is”. Therefore, the **ideal type of communication** in this field is the **debating mode**, which is exclusively interested in the best argument about an issue. Scharmer also speaks of “talking tough” in the sense that speakers in this mode break with the routine of politeness and call a spade a spade, regardless of anyone’s sensitivities (Scharmer, 2009: 233). It is no coincidence that the Latin word *debate* is used here, meaning to metaphorically knock one’s opponent out of the conversation.

Given that the *seeing* mode usually requires a conscious act, a willingness to go beyond personal routines and to accept certain rules, this mode can and must be entered based on a (joint) decision. In this case, Scharmer stresses, *seeing* opens up new sources of energy for dealing with a given situation.

In view of political uses of **Theory U**, it is important to note that the field quality of *seeing* is first and foremost a collective quality and activity. Since an unclouded perception of reality is a matter of truly diving into the given context, we need a group of informed peers (scientists or others) to harvest a multitude of perspectives. Only joint *seeing* helps to fully illuminate the picture, including previously neglected blind spots and data that might contradict one’s own presuppositions. Moreover, Scharmer points out that like in (good) science, “today’s contradictory data are the raw material for tomorrow’s theories” (ibid.: 138). And since everyone brings their own blind spots to the table, it is all the more powerful to engage a whole group in the seeing exercise.

Accessing this second field requires four steps:

1. a conscious decision to suspend habitual thinking and perception
2. actively putting oneself into the context one wants to explore
3. perceiving what is there with available senses and capacities
4. entering a joint space of seeing, in other words, a conversation about what is seen and perceived in order to build a valid, joint understanding of the context in question.

Referring to physicist David Bohm and dialog theorist Bill Isaacs who define dialog as “the art of **thinking together**”, Scharmer extends this definition to include the quality of “**seeing together**” (ibid.: 140). In fact, the leadership approach proposed by Theory U is based on the capacity of facilitating groups’ capacities to **jointly see reality**.

In our *Collaboratory* workshops ([Fein, 2018](#) and [Fein & Kunze, 2018](#)), we like to use the Fishbowl format for facilitating this phase of the U process. It places a group of (usually very diverse) participants in a number of concentric circles with a set of free seats in the middle. Participants can now take turns to express their perspectives on the given topic, building up on their predecessors’ perspectives and thus gradually painting a rich, complex picture of reality. From this usually emerges a deeper kind of insight and understanding, followed by an increased readiness and commitment of all participants to take action on what they have jointly identified as their shared challenge.

Field 3: Sensing / Dialog

The next, deeper field quality in Scharmer's model goes beyond the *seeing* mode's focus on the object(ive) level of things by including their subjective dimensions, i.e. the ways in which we are personally relating to them. This means that the observer who has been separated from the object of observation in field 2, now leaves their neutral position and becomes themselves part and object of what is observed. In other words, the borders of "inside" and "outside" become fluid, allowing the observer to see themselves as **part of the whole**. So in this mode, the focus shifts from specific objects to a larger, interrelated system of phenomena, including the observer, which can be called systemic (or systems) thinking.

Ideally, what happens when a group enters the *sensing* mode, is that its members establish a heart connection with each other (ibid.: 155) and, on this basis, begin to see both the systems they are co-creating together and their own role in these systems. Hence, they start to see their own contribution to the current (mostly dysfunctional) situation. Scharmer reports about a workshop where, once the group had entered the *sensing* phase, individual group members stood up one after the other and conceded, that no matter in which area, whether in the health system, in education, agriculture or politics, they started to see that they had so far been dealing with problems merely on superficial levels 1 or 2, thereby producing outcomes that nobody wanted – and that were detrimental to the system as a whole.

Figure 4: Dialog



So how does the *sensing* mode differ from the *seeing* one in practice? While the latter is pretty much about adding and gathering perspectives in the form of statements from various stakeholders in the system, the *sensing* mode expands the process of perceiving into the **inner dimension**. It is more about creating personal connection between all involved parties, people and participants, allowing everyone to emphasize with everyone else's deeper intentions, drivers and sources of being and action. Therefore, it is more about **asking questions**

than sharing opinions.

Whereas in the *seeing* mode, we dive into the context and the objects we want to explore, the *sensing* mode invites us to become one with that context – and to acknowledge how we have always been part of it in the first place.

As part of this shift of awareness, the focus also turns towards the patterns in which the conversation takes place, acknowledging that these patterns are part of the bigger picture and have an influence on the kind and outcomes of the conversation that takes place (ibid.: 233). For instance, dialog spaces with a high degree of trust will allow people to open up and to show up more holistically than they would do in the debating and downloading modes. This allows to touch and tackle relevant, but difficult issues more directly, instead of remaining on the surface level.

Scharmer also gives some examples, showing how relational spaces of trust can be built and entertained over time. One of them is a so-called **circle of seven**, consisting of a group of seven (in this case) women who meet regularly to support each other on a deep personal level. During their meetings, they build a space of presence and appreciative mutual relationships in which deep personal support and cooperation can unfold. Through this work, the circle has ultimately also gained a wider impact on the groups and communities the members are working with. In fact, this is as a good example of the

fractal, quantum notion of social fields and shows the entangled relationship between both: The parts being fractal of a larger whole and the whole being present in its parts. Moreover, Scharmer stresses that in order to meet the whole, we usually have to take the road through working with its parts.

While there are many ways of creating similar containers of trust and appreciative inquiry, for the *sensing* mode to unfold, it needs a continuous focus on this container to allow for deeper connection and hence, relevant contents to emerge. Once this field quality is established, the deeper “shadow” aspects of reality can be addressed and integrated, which were invisible below the surface of awareness before. However, the full picture of reality remains incomplete without these deeper aspects. Scharmer therefore states: “We cannot expect that a society that is not seeing (and sensing) the true reality can act successfully” in today’s times (Scharmer, 2009: 167). This is because only if that reality is sensed holistically, with body, mind and heart, people can start to see: we are doing to others what we complain about they are doing to us (ibid.: 162).

Consequently, this field quality has substantial implications not only for science, but also for politics. In both areas, a more immersed role and perspective of the core actors could help to increase the quality of outcomes tremendously, shifting them from symptoms to systems level interventions.

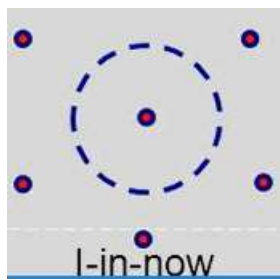
Field 4: Presencing

Finally, in field 4, our journey leads us down to the bottom of the U where the quality of *presencing* is located. As *sensing* deepens the *seeing* mode, *presencing* extends *sensing*. The core difference between the two is that while *sensing* focuses on the whole picture of *present* reality, *presencing* turns the focus beyond it, namely towards the **sources of a future reality** that wants to – or is about to emerge. While this may sound unusual at first, we are probably all familiar with situations of personal (or systemic) breakdown, where life as we knew it no longer worked or was harshly interrupted by some kind of disruption or cut. It could be the death of a close person, losing one’s job or home, or some other event that turned our life upside down. For Scharmer it was the experience of seeing his family home burn down, destroying the life and identity he had known before. In this situation, he reports that he could at the same time feel another part of himself (which was still there), calling him into a yet unknown space of future possibilities.

Scharmer describes this state as a **deeper source of inner knowing** of who we really are, beyond our habitual surface patterns, which might not be perceptible for us most of the time. It either requires us to put our focus there by very conscious decision, thereby letting go our usual patterns of thinking and perceiving, or we are forced to do so by an external event.

In fact, when trying to explore and describe the essence of *presencing* more precisely, he came across a number of insights gained from his interview partners. For instance, Michael Ray, a creativity trainer at Stanford Business School, shared that he always asked his participants two questions: “**Who is my self**” and “**What is my work?**” (Scharmer, 2009: 169), thereby inviting them to connect with their deepest future possibility (or “higher, future self”).

Figure 5: Presencing



Note that there might not be one specific place or source of this future reality. Rather, by expanding our awareness, we can access a field of knowledge that is fed by a sense of connectedness with a larger reality. The graphic representation of this field quality therefore shows a permeable circle with focus points that are distributed over the whole place. Moreover, this kind of knowledge stems from a combination – and **merging of analytical, bodily, emotional and intuitive sources of insight and wisdom**. Since mind and reason are not separated from the world, knowing and insight occur in a light

and spontaneous way.

So how can we access this field quality practically? The best way to access intuitive wisdom is probably a state of deliberate, **conscious silence**. We are invited to hold a space of emptiness and not-knowing with curiosity, yet without specific expectations. Entering this kind of space requires the **readiness to let go** of habitual patterns of thought and perception, as well as of personal evaluations and identities which might or might not be conscious to the person at all. Scharmer uses the biblical metaphor of casting off all ballast and anything that is not essential in order to be able to go through the “eye of the needle” in order to illustrate the *presencing* state.

The journey into this field quality **can – and generally has to be facilitated** in order to occur in groups, because opposing habits tend to be strong, and, as Scharmer puts it, “bad conversations drive out the good ones” (Scharmer, 2009: 179). Yet there is no single recipe or one right way for doing so, partly because what it needs for a specific individual or group to enter the *presencing* space depends on their experience and practice in the area of mindfulness and self-awareness techniques.

In a nutshell, the challenge is to support people to enter an **attitude of letting go** (of current ideas, plans etc.) without them having to go through an existential experience of loss or trauma. For while strong emotions connected to a sense of personal risk or even the experience of death (ibid.: 178) can be a trigger towards the *presencing* state, they can also have the opposite effect of pushing people into the *absencing* cycle (see below).

Also, most of the time, it is necessary to make those more habitual ideas, perspectives, plans or identities conscious, before it is possible to let go of them – and thus, be able to fully surrender to the dynamic of deepening the field quality. Therefore, for the process of letting go to happen, it is generally helpful to first **take people through the previous phases of the U process**, allowing them to voice any preconceptions, evaluations, projections or fears they might be holding about the topic in question, and thereby to “offload” these into the shared space for everyone to witness and consider. As mentioned above, this can happen in different ways, depending on the given group and context.

Scharmer stresses that *presencing* is ultimately like a birth process which has its own essence and timing: you cannot push it, but have to tune into its natural rhythm (ibid.: 181). For what ideally happens for individuals and groups in the *presencing* state is that two (mostly) different selves are brought together: the present one and the future one, which is usually sleeping and inactive (ibid.: 191). This feeling of being seen as a whole person can be compared to a state of divine love, which is free of evaluation, expectation and critique, and thus, ultimately healing existing trauma.

If individual or, even more so, groups succeed in entering this state, the essence of *presencing* is not only a healing, but also fundamentally **creative field quality** (ibid.: 176). Therefore, once a group has

arrived in the *presencing* state, it can access new dimensions of insight, knowing and wisdom from there (ibid.: 187). These are the basis for what happens on the right side of the U.

In our Collaboratory practice and trainings (for a collection of case studies see the [LiFT Case Book, Fein & Kunze, 2018](#)), we found that the deeper we managed to lead a group into presencing, the more powerful were the results that would ultimately come out of the process.

Field 5: Condensing / Crystallizing

Crystallising or condensing means staying connected to the source and slowly clarifying the vision and intention to go forward (Scharmer, 2009: 203).

Otto Scharmer compares the deepest point of the U "with an inner gate (...) that demands to drop everything that is not essential" (ibid.: 193). It is this which allows us to open up to the emerging future. Consequently, in view of politics, we have to transfer these practices to "groups, organizations and communities" all the way to politics. So how can we establish a "connection to the authentic self or to the very highest future possibility" of a collective? If this connection succeeds in the course of *presencing*, a kind of vision, a deep insight into a future possibility of the group, organization or society in question reveals itself to the participants. The next step is then to condense this vision in such a way that its quintessence "gets legs", i.e. becomes so concrete that practical steps towards its implementation become visible.

In the field quality of *condensing*, what has initially merely been intuitively sensed as a future possibility is now put into a picture or described in words. During this process, a close connection is maintained with the respective inner picture that has emerged during the *presencing* of the vision. It is important to first make any intuitive inner images visible and also tangible for others, i.e. to describe them and give them a linguistic or also plastic or other artistic form. In the course of this, a "real pull forward" can often be felt, an urge to take immediate next steps towards making them more concrete.

Scharmer describes this field quality as "letting come", that is, as a conscious opening of the will in the sense of letting go of one's own ideas in favor of listening to impulses from the field of unlimited possibilities. The intention, i.e. the orientation towards the vision experienced during the *presencing*, always serves as the guiding principle. In this context, he also speaks of the small (one's own) and large (deeper, larger) wills (ibid.: 202), which must be brought into harmony with each other. Thus, the small will submits to the large will and becomes its tool.

One of the specifics of the U-process is that it is always about concrete changes. A vision is therefore never developed for its own sake, but as a source for **concrete practical action**.

To this end, it is helpful to reduce the vision to a few concrete points or aspects that can be implemented within a manageable period of time (e.g. three months). At the same time, it is crucial to maintain the momentum of implementation, i.e. to follow the "movement into realization" based on the connection with the vision, with the aim of condensing its core in such a way that the next steps can become visible and, as it were, tangible.

Based on this condensed vision, the next step is then to develop the first prototypes of the future vision and test them in practice.

Field 6: Testing / Prototyping

As soon as an idea has been condensed and its outlines have become concrete, it is important to subject it to a reality test as soon as possible. Scharmer calls this the testing and prototyping phase. In our *Collaboratories*, we invite participants to formulate project ideas that can be implemented within three months. Anything else runs the risk of "procrastination" and, in Scharmer's words, "analysis paralysis". In this phase, the aim is to present a prototype as quickly as possible and to obtain feedback from the field, which, in turn, can be used to improve the idea and the prototype. In other words, it is not about perfect solutions, but about actionable solutions that can be tried out directly in practice.

In this way, Theory U basically implements postulates that many life and success coaches, and, in part, the agile movement, also emphasize again and again:

- Fail fast, because you learn the most from your own mistakes.
- Act before all details are clear and thought through to the last detail ("make your move before you're ready!", Mary Morrissey).
- The universe comes to the aid of those who take the first step.

Scharmer himself repeatedly points to the importance of a practical integration of the three intelligences: head, heart and hand (Scharmer, 2009: 206), which help us to explore the new, as it were, with all our senses, including our hands. Here, too, maintaining the connection with intuition, intention and inspiration is important, as is the permission to make mistakes. In this regard, Scharmer cites a principle of the company Cisco Systems, according to which in every project a "first prototype must be presented within three or four months. This prototype does not have to work. It is not the 1.0 prototype", but a 0.8 prototype (ibid.: 210).

It often takes a lot of practice to overcome cultural conditioning on one's sense of perfection, in order to suspend our inner critic and allow ourselves to surrender to the wisdom of a higher intelligence.

Field 7: Bringing into the World (Performing)

The seventh and final field structure within Scharmer's theory U is that of putting the previously developed prototypes into practice. As mentioned, this serves to get feedback as quickly as possible, with the help of which the prototype can be further "honed, refined, cut" (Scharmer, 2009: 214). In this phase, it is important to optimize the prototype's fit with its embedding context so that the change impulse brought into the world by the prototype can unfold its optimal effect. For no tool or instrument is an end in itself. Rather, they serve to unfold a certain effect in a designated area of application, i.e. to serve certain user groups.

Figuratively speaking – here Scharmer uses a metaphor of the violinist Miha Pogačnik – the practical test should help to tune one's own "little violin", i.e. the instrument, the prototype itself, to the "big violin", the cathedral as a sound space. What changes do we still have to make so that our instrument makes the whole cathedral sound?

In this phase of bringing something new into the world, we must always "act from the larger overall system (eco system)" (ibid.: 216). In terms of shaping politics and society, this means thinking of the respective prototype within the framework of an institutional ecology. The latter encompasses at least the three sub-sectors of economy, politics/government and society in equal measure and supports their acting together (= the "macro-violine").

Sometimes this work on new systemic prototypes is accompanied by the observation that the cracks of our existing systems have in the past usually only been repaired in a makeshift way instead of really tackling the underlying problems. Not infrequently, in the course of U-processes, the participants realize that these are dying systems, and that it would be better to "let them die with dignity", so to speak, instead of continuing to repair them more badly than well (ibid.: 215).

Scharmer considers that both for overcoming dysfunctional systems and for creating new, systemic innovations, it is crucial to practically confront those who are responsible with real situations and on-site experience. Moreover, he holds this to be the central driving force of successful change, "combined with the possibility of joint reflection" (Scharmer, 2009: 219). This is the best way to establish a lasting and binding "relationship between system and self", which is necessary for the implementation of profound transformations (ibid.: 220).

In addition to the primacy of practice, the active creation of practice fields, feedback loops and learning structures, Scharmer names the following success factors of system innovations:

- the existence of a core group that directs the process through its intention and holds the space for it
- a committed leader who "holds the whole thing together and is personally responsible for its implementation
- a culture of "perceptive activation" in which motivation arises through recognition, appreciation and shared perception by all.

The Grammar of Social Fields

Based on these seven field qualities, Scharmer has developed what he calls a grammar of social fields, comparing the characteristics of each of them in multiple dimensions. This exercise makes clear that the field qualities are fundamental types of states that are shaping and have shaped most of our everyday practices in nearly all systems in the different area of our lives, even though we are generally not conscious of this. **Table 1** illustrates some of these characteristics, with a particular focus on the first four field qualities (on the left side of the U).

Interestingly, this typology of Scharmer's field qualities, i.e. *states* of awareness, to some degree has **parallels to models of structural, vertical growth and complexity development** as discussed in the chapters on Gebser, Graves and Wilber, as well as by other developmental thinkers. However, whereas the implications of deeper states are similar to those of higher levels of development, states are much easier to access and to facilitate in groups than structural personal development. In this sense, Scharmer's state model and the U process as its practical enactment are a powerful tools to enhance progress in the area of collective action, if not also to foster human growth altogether.

Table 1: Overview of important qualities of all field structures
(adapted from Scharmer, 2009)

Field structure	Social space	Source of knowledge	Structure of awareness	Typical mode of communication	Inner enemies	Organizational action	Global implications
Downloading	One-dimensional	Self-centered	Habitual world	Downloading, conformism	Voice of judgement	Centralized	Hierarchies
Seeing	Two-dimensional	“objective” data	Rational, material	Debate, confronting	Voice of cynicism	Decentralized	Market
Sensing	Three-dimensional	Contextualized, relational	Interpersonal, relational	Dialog, reflective	Voice of fear	Interconnected	Dialog
Presencing	Four-dimensional	Decentered, intuitive	Source, authentic	Presencing, co-creative	Control	Innovation ecosystem	Sense of connection
Crystallizing	Four-dimensional	Intuitive, vision	Letting come	Vision & intention	Impatience	Make space for innovations	Downloading alternative futures
Prototyping	Three-dimensional	Embodied vision	Birthing	Linking head, heart, hand	Perfection	Cosmological innovation	Seeding innovations
Performing	Systemic	Embodied vision, systems awareness	Embodying	Enacting	Doubt	Agile organizing	Systems change

The dynamics of Absencing and Anti-Emergence

Based on his observation that each of the first four field qualities goes along with a typical “inner enemy”, threat or antagonist, Scharmer has also identified an opposing cycle of dynamics counteracting those of the *presencing* cycle. Whereas the latter is about increasing presence and awareness, what he calls the **absencing cycle** consists of typical steps of narrowing down our presence and awareness as we let ourselves be guided by our fears instead of by curiosity and affection. And while becoming more and more present is a condition for emergence, withdrawing our presence from the collective space creates “anti-spaces”, disconnecting us from our deeper sources. This can have various reasons, from personal, to situational/experiential to historical.

The two cycles have their connecting point in the field quality of downloading which is characterized by a repetition of past patterns and habits. From here, the dynamic can either move towards *presencing* or *absencing*. The typical steps of the *absencing* cycle mirror those of the *presencing* cycle on both sides of the U. They are the following:

On the perceptive (left) side of the U:

- *downloading* as an absence of curiosity and awe with regard to anything that goes beyond one's existing patterns of the past
- not seeing (becoming blind towards and excluding) the concerns and perspectives of others, freezing the mind, thereby remaining attached to and merely defending one's own truth
- not sensing (entrenching), freezing the heart, thereby remaining attached inside a specific WE (one's own WE group) while seeing all evil outside of one's own group, blaming others while not connecting with them.
- holding on (instead of letting go), freezing in one's own ego/will, which is generally driven by feelings of distrust in other people and what they or their joint effort might have to offer. Scharmer calls this the most subtle form of absencing, because it implies a disconnection between a person and their higher self.

On the active (right) side of the U, absencing can take the form of:

- manipulation and intrigue, aiming to influence the behavior of others by withholding important information from them or providing them with false information. This causes separation from the highest potentials, because it poisons the sources of thinking and communication.
- Mobbing, intimidation and abuse are more active forms of poisoning social interactions and relationships. It can take the form of verbal or physical attacks on individual persons, groups or minorities, disabling any co-creative process between them (Scharmer, 2009: 286).
- Finally, the ultimate quality of *absencing* is the destruction of existing relationship, either by complete withdrawal or by physical attacks up until war, all of which can result in the complete breakdown of existing systems of cooperation.

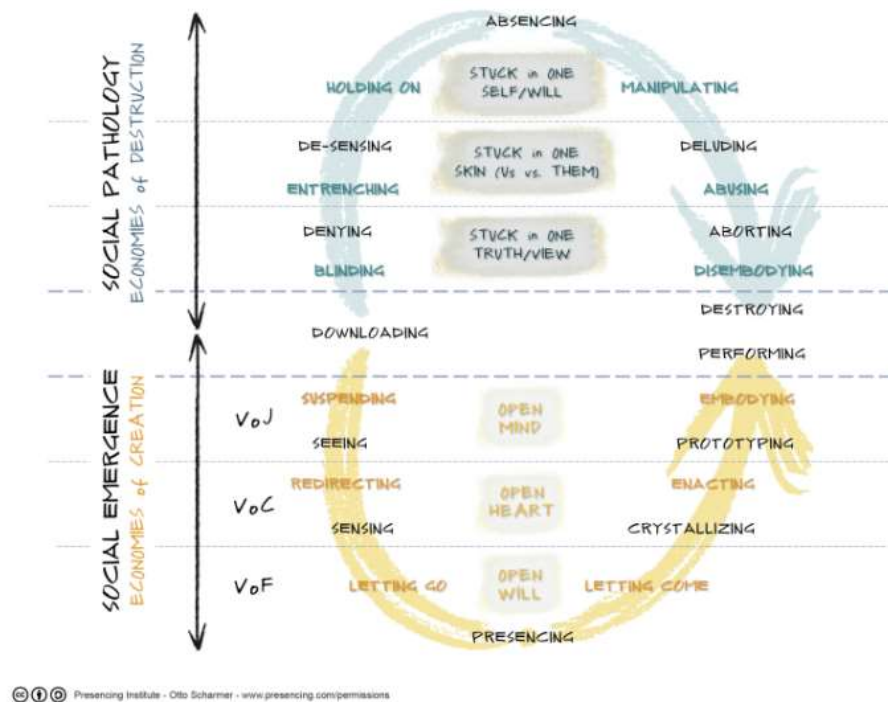
So in some sense, *absencing* can be thought of as a social pathology, which allows, at best, to maintain a given status quo, but often has much stronger negative, or even destructive consequences.

Similar to the dynamics of *presencing*, those of *absencing* can occur in a timely manner both in face-to-face communications, in organizations and in larger institutional settings such as societies as a whole. As an inner state, it can become virulent whenever we are losing firm ground in the sense of losing the connection with ourselves, our fellow-humans or our surrounding context. And if we do, this has an immediate impact on this context and on the people we interact with.

While states are often unconsciously held, they can as well be observed and made conscious, which allows us to manage them in a more deliberate way. Note that Scharmer describes all of these field qualities as states which generally anyone has access to. In other words, assessing them is a fundamental human capability, independent of personal development. And the fact that these insights apply to any human interaction, makes Scharmer's theory and model extremely relevant for an integral, transformative approach to politics and society, both in view of diagnosing and understanding dysfunctional dynamics and in view of designing more healthy settings where the dynamics of the *presencing* cycle can take over and help groups to tap into their highest potential.

Figure 6: Presencing and Absencing Cycles (2)

Source: Presencing Institute, <https://uwellblog.wordpress.com/2016/09/24/making-conscious-societys-darkness/>



From Ego- to Ecosystems – socio-political uses of Theory U

As mentioned above, the initial focus of Scharmer and his colleagues was leadership in organizational contexts and their work with companies seeking advice with transformative challenges. However, the model as such immediately shows that in order to successfully engage with any serious challenges, we need to take the larger systemic context into account, in other words the embedding political, socio-economic and cultural systems which are entangled with or have co-produced the challenges in the first place.

In their more recent book “Leading from the emerging future” (2013), Otto Scharmer and his co-author Katrin Käufer spell out the implications of Theory U for **global systems transformation** in more detail. Based on their work with Theory U in many experiential settings, they had sufficient opportunity to observe that in most cases they were invited into for support, people were trapped in the logics of field 1 and 2 awareness. Without being particularly conscious about it, they were either repeating patterns of the past or remaining on a superficial fact-based level of repairing symptoms, without addressing the larger context, the deeper sources of their problems and their own roles in the dysfunctional system that were co-producing these problems on a daily basis. Referring to the famous iceberg model, Scharmer & Käufer therefore stress that “the **blind spot in global discourse** today” is what is below the surface, namely the widespread failure to be and stay connected to “the deep (...) inner place from which we operate” (Scharmer & Käufer, 2013: 3). From this results their conclusion that “**we are collectively creating results that nobody wants**” (ibid.: 6).

Over the course of the book, Scharmer & Käufer unpack the roots and consequences of this claim in view of the great challenges that humanity is facing in our time. In all areas, so they state, we have

created systems that are following the logics of fields 1 and 2, in other words, which have been “designed to *not* learn” (ibid.: 7). Most of our current systems lack the feedback loops and the deeper qualities of awareness that would allow decision-makers to see their own role in creating negative externalities that other members of the systems are subjected to.

At the core of this mess, they argue, are **three fundamental divides: the ecological, social, and spiritual-cultural** one, disconnecting people from their natural environment, from fellow humans and, ultimately, from their own deeper sense of self and purpose (ibid.: 4). These, in turn, give rise to corresponding **systemic disconnects**, for instance

- between the financial system and the real economy,
- between our need to survive and the harm done to the planet,
- between the belief in (infinite) growth and the highly competitive growth economy on the one hand and the finite resources of our planet and larger global wellbeing on the other
- between those who benefit from the current system and those who do not, but are affected by its externalities
- between “the people” and the institutionalization of leadership
- between our need for connection and the disruption of interpersonal relationships caused by our competitive systems, and ultimately,
- between reality and our awareness (ibid.: 5-7).

Generally, those who cause the externalities are mostly not the ones who have to carry the larger part of their burden. So it is safe to say, that our current system works for a few privileged people, while trapping most others in roles of serving dysfunctional structures.

In order to heal these disconnects, Scharmer & Käufer argue that we need to “upgrade” both our global socio-economic system, as well as the dominant operating systems of our thinking and decision-making (ibid.: 11). Moreover, they suggest that we should be moving all our systems, including governance and democracy, from 1.0 to 2.0 or 3.0 versions to 4.0 systems, governed by the field quality of *presence* and co-creation.

Let us therefore end this chapter with a closer look at **how Theory U is relevant for integral politics**. In their book, Scharmer & Käufer go through eight core areas of life (which they call the **eight acupuncture points**), from economics and finance (growth, income, consumerism) to technology to governance and leadership (ownership), showing how in each of them, specific field qualities are currently dominant and how they have historically emerged and transformed from 1.0 to 2.0 or 3.0 versions. They then discuss how they could be further developed – and what the 4.0 upgrade might look like in each area.

Quite generally, the challenge in each one of these areas is to “reintegrate mind and matter”, or: reality and awareness, as spiritual teacher Master Nan put it in an interview with Otto in 1999. In other words, we need to become aware of the three divides, reclaim ownership for them (Scharmer & Käufer, 2013: 136) and, on this basis, engage in a **4.0 version of politics**. The authors call **this awareness-based collective action (ABC**, ibid.: 127). This implies, first and foremost, to “get rid of the toxic layer of level 1 communication (bribery, soft money, commercials and other forms of propaganda and manipulation) and to develop new spheres of level 4 co-creative stakeholder relationships in which partners (...) come together to co-sense, prototype and co-create the future of their ecosystem” (ibid.: 179).

Table 2: Overview of socio-economic and political evolution
(adapted from Scharmer & Käufer, 2013: 52, 148, 196)

	Primary societal challenge	Primary state of consciousness/awareness	Typical response mechanism	Primary sector, social actors	Primary source of power	Dominant political model/democracy
Society 1.0	Stability	Traditional	Commanding: hierarchy	State/government	Coercive (sticks)	State-centric
Society 2.0	Growth	Ego-system	Competing: markets	Capital/business, along with state	Remunerative (carrots)	Neoliberal, dormant state
Society 3.0	Negative domestic externalities	Stakeholder awareness	Negotiating: stakeholder dialogue	Civil society/NGOs, along with state and business	Normative (values)	Socio-democratic welfare state
Society 4.0	Disruptive global externalities, resilience	Eco-system awareness	Presencing: awareness-based collective action (ABC)	Cross-sector co-creation: civil society, along with all others	Awareness: actions arising from seeing the emerging whole	Eco-system, distributed dialogic

Impressive examples of how this institutional transformation can look like have been provided by numerous **U.labs** initiated by the Presencing Institute which have been conducted by partners from its network in cosmo-local experiments. They have come up with an impressive number of prototypes, that are acting as “seedlings for global U-based innovation”. These labs have seen many participants holding political or government functions. For instance, officials from the Scottish and Chinese local governments have taken the U.Lab in an organized way and are now using the methodology in their work (<https://www.presencing.org/ulab-2x-2022>).

Scharmer & Käufer make crystal clear that at any moment, **it is our own choice how we respond** to a given situation, whether we decide to freeze (*absencing*) or to open up and lean into the unknown (*presencing*). For the good thing about *states* as opposed to stages of structural development (cf. chapters 2-4) is that anyone can access them at any time, provided they either engage in a corresponding act of mental discipline or have access to the respective field quality in their given surrounding. Entering a particular field quality can be an act of will for some of us, especially if we are familiar with awareness and mindfulness practices. Others might need support by their context. As Scharmer and his colleagues have shown, the deeper field qualities of *sensing* and *presencing* can be created in groups through skilled facilitation and carefully designed spaces of listening and awareness. Consequently, in Schamer’s **Democracy 4.0** approach, power and decision-making are distributed qualities. In this sense, Theory U helps us to learn to “pay attention to our attention” (ibid.: 149) and to turn this more self-reflective mode into the new normal, rather than to allow ourselves to go on autopilot and end up in the fear-based *absencing* mode (ibid.: 31).

However, this vision is not what most of us are usually exposed to most of the time. Therefore, if we want to make the states of the *presencing* cycle more common in our public spaces, politics needs to provide social technologies, tools and methods, as well as institutional structures (URQ in Wilber's model) that allow to build and hold them. We need **"infrastructures to co-initiate, co-sense, co-inspire, (and) for prototyping and co-evolving"** (ibid.: 187). And to create these is a truly political challenge. At the same time, since decisions are always taken by the stakeholders themselves, there is **no one size fits all policy**, ideal polity or vision to copy & paste into other contexts. Nevertheless, while no-one is particularly "to blame" for the mess we are in, we are all co-responsible for it – and hence everyone becomes a politician (Scharmer & Käufer, 2013: 182) with a potential to help facilitate the **death of a civilization and the birth of another one** (ibid.: 252).

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