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DEVELOPING PRESENCING MASTERY:

Drawing from the Works of Theory U, Dynamic Presencing, Mindfulness Practice and Systems Being

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Abstract: This article presents a leadership practice directed towards the cultivation of presencing mastery through the integration of Theory U, Dynamic Presencing, Systems Thinking management theories, and a Buddhist-based mindfulness practice as a method of leadership and organizational development. Each of these modalities are explored to gain insight into enhancing a leader's overall ability to lead viable organizational systems amidst current VUCA conditions. The article posits that capacities that cultivate presencing mastery are enhanced in particular ways through an overall integration of Theory U and Dynamic Presencing, as well as through a mindfulness and systems thinking and being practice, leading to more effective overall presencing leadership. As a whole, these progressive approaches reorient the pursuit of presencing mastery as an essential component of an integral organizational systems leadership framework.

Keywords: Presencing mastery, mindfulness, systems thinking, presencing leadership, Theory U, organizational equanimity

I. Introduction

Over the past couple of decades, the theory and practice of leadership has been undergoing a noted transformation in response to the rising level of VUCA conditions in our world. This emerging situation requires leaders to, among other

elements, acquire skills beyond those of traditional leadership where elements of diversity, multigenerational, and multicultural workforces have become the new normal. Today's leaders are challenged to find ways to embrace uncertainty and effectively uncover the wisdom within to lead effectively from the inner place or source from which attention, intention, and action originate. Initiated through the redirection of our intention and observation while leading, leaders can begin to access a deeper order of living presencing wisdom. By focusing, sensing, presencing, and learning to choreograph one's actions from this emerging generative way of leading, leaders can find ways to bring the future into being through their actions and presence. This enactment of presencing occurs when the mind is quiet, still, and centered and we are receptive to the movements of generative emergence. Through the cultivation of presencing mastery, mindful meditation, and a systems approach to organizations, new promising forms of leadership are emerging that are changing the landscape of how leadership is thought about and practiced.

For the purposes of our article, our exploration into the subject of presencing mastery is informed by the work of Theory U (Scharmer, 2009, 2013) and Dynamic Presencing (Gunnlaugson, 2020, 2021). In Theory U, presencing involves “sensing and actualizing one's highest future possibility” (Scharmer, 2013, p. 19). Per the Theory U process, there are three movements leaders can follow: observe, retreat, and act. Most leaders when acting within a system have a habitual way of thinking and behaving called downloading. A small or large disruption “triggers us to reconsider our current ways of knowing and behaving” (Cowart, 2020, p. 99), making openings for presencing. Cowart offers an example:

The present moment is viewed as possessing a past-facing and future-facing side. The past-facing side is shaped by past patterns of behavior and assumptions based on experience. The future-facing side is shaped by the future as it emerges. The past-facing present is where humanity historically and habitually resides; the future-facing present is the area where presencing seeks to focus our attention. Theory U is a framework, literally a U-shaped process, employed to achieve an individual and/or collective state of presencing, and then to action what is learned from this new level of awareness. (p. 98)

As an expanded, in-depth alternative to the presencing method outlined in Theory U (Scharmer, 2009), Dynamic Presencing cultivates a more advanced and in-depth form of presencing mastery as taking place in the overall shift to engaging presencing as a generative way of being. It digs deep into the inner embodied awareness of our presence, enabling us to uncover new ontological and embodied sources for our inner stillness, being, and leadership to flow forth from. With practice, the path and methods of Gunnlaugson's presencing approach develop a greater degree of discernment through increased overall presencing acuity, helping leaders discern the emergence of future

possibilities with more skill, depth and overall adeptness.

Alongside Dynamic Presencing, we also use a systems approach and a mindfulness practice to integrate learning and further support leaders in this work. As leadership and systems practitioners, we are relatively new practitioners of mindfulness meditation. As mindfulness practitioners, we have come to appreciate that a practice based in Buddhist philosophy provides a robust foundation for presencing leadership. With our understanding of presencing leadership in the U-process, the integration of mindfulness and systems thinking begins with sensing and continues through crystallizing in the seven archetypal field structures of attentions that map the territory describing the seven different ways of relating the self to the world (see Figure 1.0).

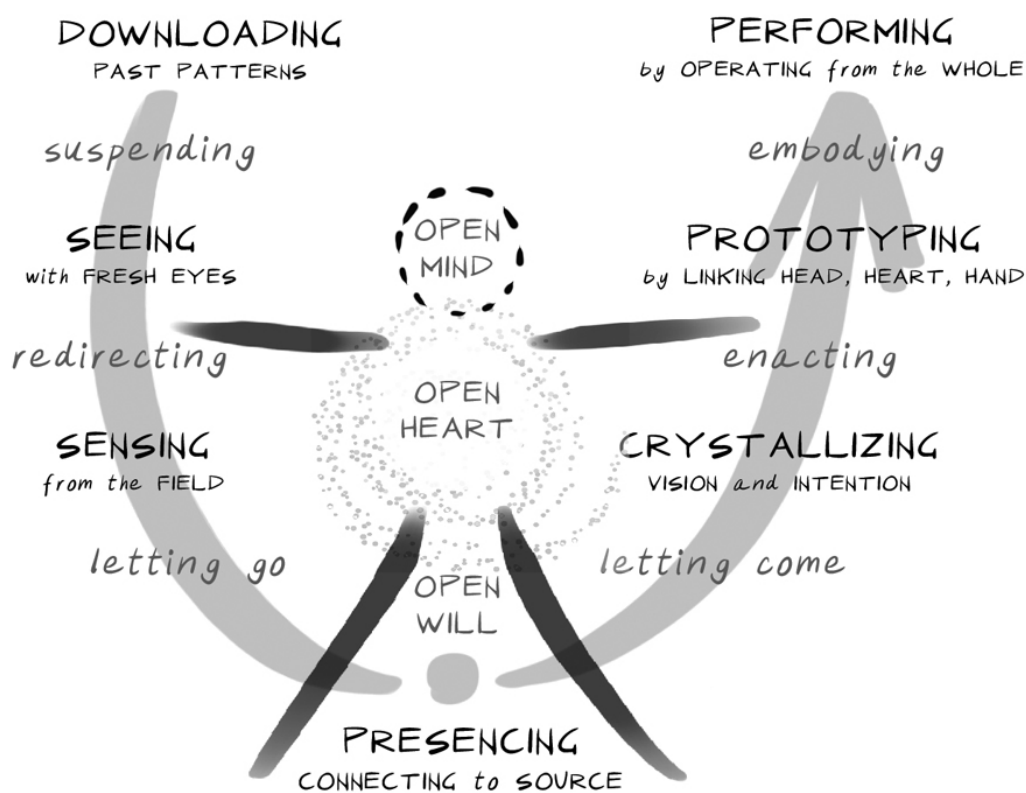


Figure 1.0: *Theory U: Seven Ways of Attending and Co-shaping* (Scharmer, 2018, p. 23). Copyright 2018 by Berrett-Koehler.

As we outline in this article, mindfulness enables us to develop a greater degree of presencing awareness and positions us to be ready to embrace the future-facing side of the U. In briefly examining mindfulness in the context of presencing, we then delve deeper into the connection between presencing mastery and mindfulness through the first four practitioner journeys of Dynamic Presencing (Gunnlaugson, 2020). In

addition, we examine the integration of systems thinking and systems being. Systems being is a way to embody systems thinking, bringing it to a new level of consciousness in what is referred to as evolutionary leadership (Laszlo, 2012), a concept closely aligned with presencing leadership. Systems thinking and systems being enhance our mindful connections to our world and our capacity for presencing mastery. Finally, we conclude the article by exploring the concept of organizational equanimity as it is achieved through mindfulness, systems thinking/being, and presencing mastery, offering suggestions for integrating these practices into one's personal and professional life.

II. The Bottom of the U: Mindful Presencing as a Means to Presencing Mastery

In Theory U's account of presencing, in order "to activate the deeper level of knowing, one has to go through a three-step process" (Scharmer, 2018, p. 21): observe, reflect and retreat, and prototype. Of these three, the first two can be refined through a mindfulness practice. We observe the arising and passing of our thoughts, enabling us to "connect to the places of most potential" (p. 21). This process of observation makes it possible to reflect on wholesome and unwholesome thoughts and retreat from the unwholesome ones, "[allowing] the inner knowing to emerge" (p. 21). These processes cannot take place unless we develop our ability of becoming aware through suspension, redirection, and letting go (see Figure 1.0). Suspension is defined as "the suspension of habitual patterns" (pp. 22-23)—from a Buddhist mindfulness perspective, the ones that are unwholesome and cause suffering. Redirection is achieved by shifting "from the "exterior" to the "interior" by turning the attention toward the source of the mental process rather than the object" (p. 23). Letting go takes place as a result of suspension, where we remove barriers and open our minds (Scharmer, 2009).

These "three gestures" (Scharmer, 2018, p. 22), as Francisco Varela referred to suspension, redirection, and letting go, are embedded in the seven core processes of Theory U (see Figure 1.0). Of these seven processes, it is from "seeing" through "crystallizing" where a mindfulness practice can be of use. Seeing begins by clarifying our intent, focusing on what matters, and suspending judgment (Scharmer, 2009). We accomplish this through the focus of concentration meditation and seeing the world as it is, not as we think it should be. More specifically, we can apply the Buddhist mindfulness concepts of right action and right speech to clarify our intent by speaking authentically and acting accordingly. The practice of right mindfulness, which requires an acute awareness of the activities of the body, sensations or feelings, activities of the

mind, and thoughts, ideas, and concepts (Rahula, 1959/1974), makes it possible to focus on what matters. Finally, suspending judgment is enhanced through equanimity, the result of a calm, concentrated mind (Thera, 1960).

Sensing takes place when our attention is redirected away from the self to the whole system, and we start thinking together and opening our hearts (Scharmer, 2009). Mindfulness makes it possible for us to let go of our egos and widen our perspective of the presencing process. There are four main principles of sensing: setting the container, diving deep, redirecting attention, and opening the heart. Setting the container means creating a safe space in which we can open our hearts and minds to new knowledge. Scharmer (2009) defines diving deep as “total immersion in the particulars of the field—in the living presence of the phenomenon. It is becoming *one* with the phenomenon you study” (p. 148). This “total immersion” requires a great deal of focus and concentration, something that the mental discipline of mindfulness helps us develop. Furthermore, the mental discipline of mindfulness makes it possible for us to redirect our attention to seeing the collective patterns of the system and our roles within it. When sensing connects with opening the heart, this “means accessing and activating the deeper levels of our emotional perception” (Scharmer, 2009, p. 149).

From sensing, we enter into the stillness of presencing by letting go of what was and “[connecting] to the surrounding sphere of future potential” (Scharmer, 2018, p. 24) where there is “space for the future to emerge” (p. 24). A mindfulness practice is an ongoing process of letting go of the past and the future and making space for the present, creating a serene sense of calm. Presencing extends and deepens many aspects of sensing, such as creating a space for deep listening and opening the heart and mind. A critical factor in presencing is whether or not we pass through what Scharmer (2018) calls “the eye of the needle,” which he describes as follows:

To pass through the eye of the needle requires three conditions: the opening of our mind, heart, and will. Open Mind means no judgment, allowing the Mind of the universe to operate through your thinking. Open Heart means no cynicism, allowing the Heart of collective to operate through your feelings. Open Will means no fear, allowing the Intention of the emerging future to operate through your actions. (p. 64)

Passing through the eye of the needle takes place when we let go of what was and allow what is to be to emerge. This process requires the wisdom of right understanding, when we see things as they truly are, making it possible to open our hearts, minds, and will. Mindfulness allows us to come into our higher, authentic selves.

If presencing means connecting to the source of our “highest future possibility” (Scharmer, 2009, p. 163), then “crystallizing means sustaining that connection and beginning to operate from it” (p. 195). It enables us to clarify “the

vision and intent of the emerging future” (p. 195). Presencing and crystallizing embody the Buddhist mindfulness concept of clear comprehension, also translated as “clearly knowing” or “fully aware,” in which we gain a clear understanding of what we are doing and why, demonstrating “that mindfulness is more than simply being present. With clear comprehension, we know the purpose and appropriateness of what we’re doing; we understand the motivations behind our actions” (Goldstein, 2016, p. 11). In other words, clear comprehension makes it possible for us to clarify our intentions and create opportunities for the future to emerge by listening to our hearts, minds, and will as one voice.

III. Dynamic Presencing as an Embodied, Ontological Path to Presencing Mastery

None of the core processes of seeing, sensing, presencing, and crystallizing can be effective without some degree of presencing mastery. In the work of Dynamic Presencing (Gunnlaugson, 2020) there are five “practitioner journeys” that develop our overall capacity for presencing as a generative foundational way of being. They are primary presence, primary knowing, primary perceiving, primary communicating, and primary leadership. The first four of these journeys create the foundation for primary leadership. In this section we will focus on these four journeys and explore how mindfulness enhances our ability to develop presencing mastery through each. Although *many* different facets of mindfulness can be applied to these journeys, we will concentrate on the aspects that have the greatest impact.

Primary presence (see Figure 2.0) is defined as the ability to “[draw] upon the innate wisdom and intelligence that resides [within the energetic source of our presence]” (Gunnlaugson, 2020, pp. 13-14). In other words, it is the capacity to uncover and connect with our presencing nature and being that is the key difference here that makes the difference. There are four stages to the core movement of primary presence: *being real*, *being witness*, *being essence*, and *being source* (Gunnlaugson, 2020). *Being real* means being true to oneself and to learning to be with reality as it is. *Being witness* means having a transcendent awareness that enables us to let go of the self and open up to new ways of being that await our discovery. *Being essence* refocuses us on “our sense of intrinsic purpose, drive and what it means to be truly human” (p. 49), connecting us to presence at a level that is core to who we are. *Being source* means connecting with the generative depths of our emerging presencing selves. Taken as a single core movement, each stage of primary presence can be amplified through a Buddhist-based mindfulness practice.

Being real can be experienced in an enhanced way through the practice of right speech (being truthful and authentic) and right understanding (seeing things as they are). The quality of our speaking affects our relationships, minds, and hearts (Goldstein, 2016) by aspiring to be truthful, authentic, and real. Practicing right understanding develops an applied wisdom that supports the process of “getting through to the truth of what is most real and letting this directly inform our presence and reality” (Gunnlaugson, 2020, p.40). *Being witness* embodies the Buddhist characteristic of no self. In mindfulness, letting go of our attachments to “me” and “mine” enables us to gain a broader perspective of who we are. *Being essence* begins to connect with the deeper nature of practitioners, though from a more personal point of view. *Being source* can be developed through deepened realization of reality and consciousness. For example, in insight meditation, we learn to see clearly into the nature of the mind and gain firsthand understanding of the way things are, resulting in a sense of deep calm that comes from knowing something for oneself and uncovering “a tangible and actionable way of relating with and actively presencing from source” (Gunnlaugson, 2020, p. 53).

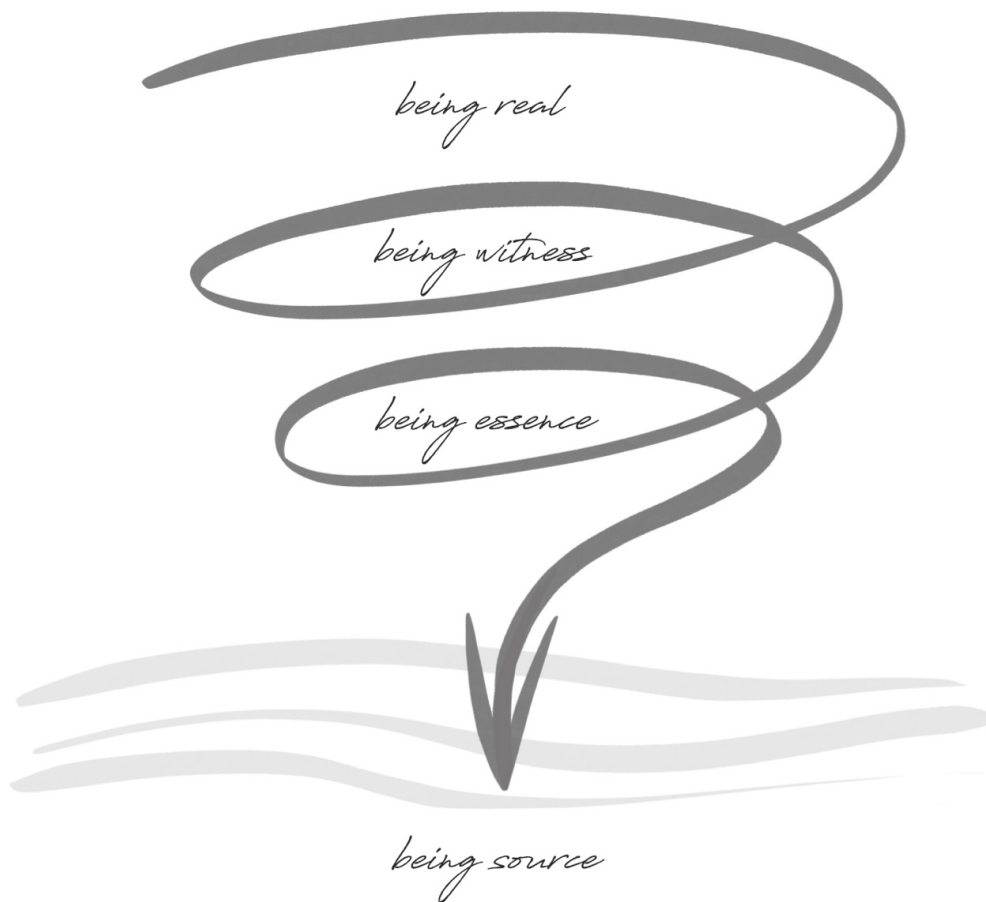


Figure 2.0: Core method of Primary Presence, (Gunnlaugson, 2020, p. 15). Copyright 2020 by Trifoss Business Press.

Primary knowing (see Figure 3.0), the second journey, builds upon what is uncovered by primary presence through a deeper active form of embodied knowing: “when our process of coming to know is brought down through the body and our being as a sensemaking process, this invites a somatic integration and embodies cognition” (Gunnlaugson, 2020, p. 65). There are three stages to the core movement of primary knowing: *letting go*, *letting be*, and *letting come* (Gunnlaugson, 2020). *Letting go* and *letting come* sit on either side of presencing at the bottom of the U (see Figure 1.0) and represent the releasing of our old habits and discerning emerging wisdom respectively. *Letting be*, a new presencing movement, provides a missing bridge between *letting go* and *letting come*, allowing us to deeply connect with ourselves and the foundation of our presence so as to facilitate a deeper embodiment of it. Practicing mindfulness with primary knowing enhances our ability to let go of our current thinking and open our minds to any insight or emerging wisdom we may experience. Insight meditation connects the mind and body, developing a sense of calm through sustained inner-directed awareness and attention, allowing primary knowing to flourish through “somatic integration.”

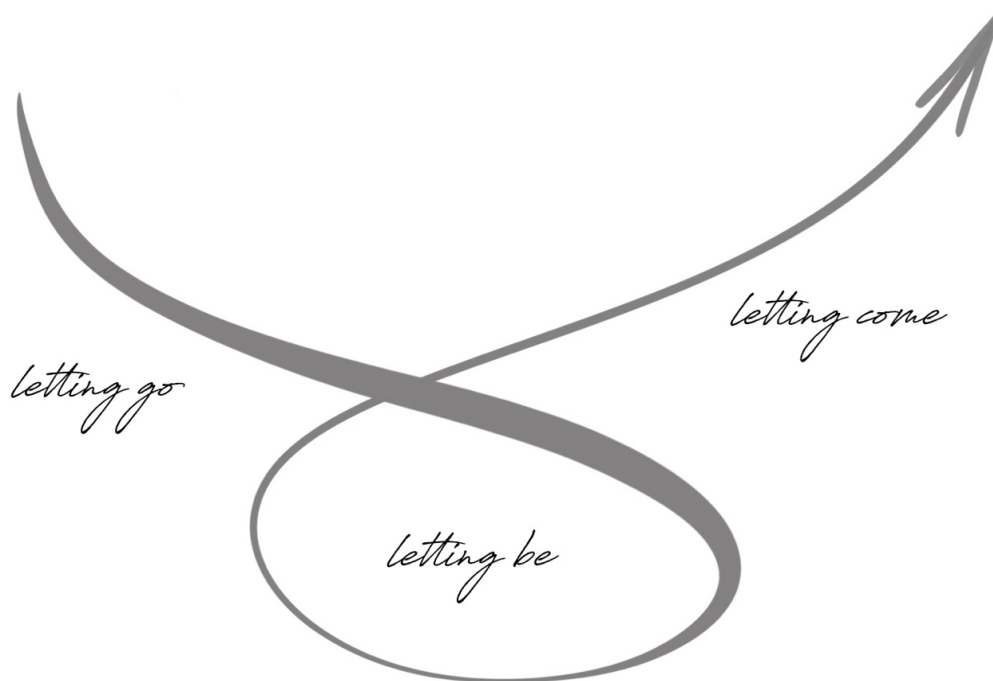


Figure 3.0: *Core Method of Primary Knowing*, (Gunnlaugson, 2020, p. 16). Copyright 2020 by Trifoss Business Press.

Primary perceiving (see Figure 4.0), the third journey, involves a form of seeing from “an embodied perceptual process” (Gunnlaugson, 2020, p. 87) that clears the way into creative seeing, which is integral to presencing leadership. There are three

stages to the core movement of primary perceiving: *attuning to what is*, *entraining with what is emerging*, and *discerning the arising new* (Gunnlaugson, 2020). *Attuning to what is* means paying attention to the fullness or suchness of the here-and-now, which lies at the heart of the practice of mindfulness, drawing on an awareness of the activities of the body, sensations or feelings, activities of the mind, and thoughts, ideas, and concepts (Rahula, 1959/1974). Insight meditation develops our ability to be present, and helps foster the practice of right understanding, which helps us see the world as it is with less of the veils of prejudice. *Entraining with what is emerging* involves synchronizing with what is emerging, that is, merging with it in a subtle, somatic way via a state of flow (Gunnlaugson, 2020). Mindfulness similarly fosters becoming one with our current environment through the practice of being present and opening our minds to what arises. In particular, the practice of right concentration enables us to calm our minds and develop the equanimity we need to integrate with the emerging wisdom. The final gesture, *discerning the arising new*, involves refining how we see and connect with what is emerging. A mindfulness practice supports discernment by helping “[pause] and [refresh] our attention within” (Gunnlaugson, 2020, p. 98), something that is part of a daily practice.

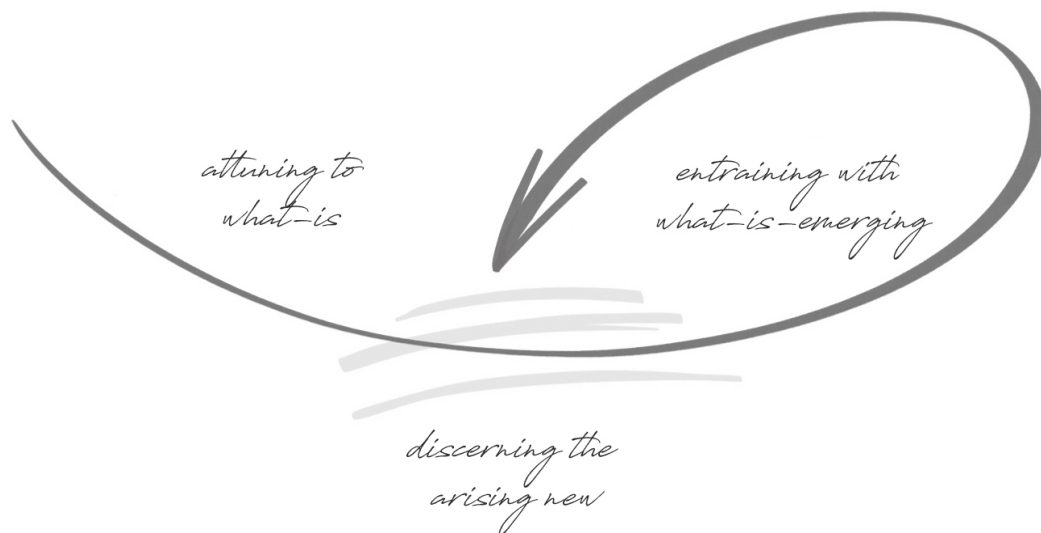


Figure 4.0: *Method of Primary Perceiving*, (Gunnlaugson, 2020, p. 19). Copyright 2020 by Trifoss Business Press.

Primary communicating (see Figure 5.0), the fourth journey, encompasses the four presencing field spaces that comprise the presencing field: *the i-space*, *the you-space*, *the we-space*, and *the all-space* (Gunnlaugson, 2020). In the *i-space*, we are “connecting with our presencing self” (p.116). It is here where mindfulness can help practitioners access a clearer self-awareness in relation to the collective dimension of the presencing field. The

you-space involves connecting with another's *i-space*, acknowledging the distinct interior dimensions of who they are. In the *we-space*, we are connecting to the collective dimension of presencing, while also honoring the individual dimensions of our *i-* and *you-space*. The *we-space* is informed by the Buddhist view of interbeing. As Shen and Midgley (2007) note, "reality is viewed as a dynamically interdependent process. Everything exists in a web of mutual causal interaction, and nothing, whether mental or physical, whole or part, is immutable or fully autonomous" (p. 171). Finally, in the *all-space* we are connecting to the larger whole or system—not just the human realm but all more-than-human as well.

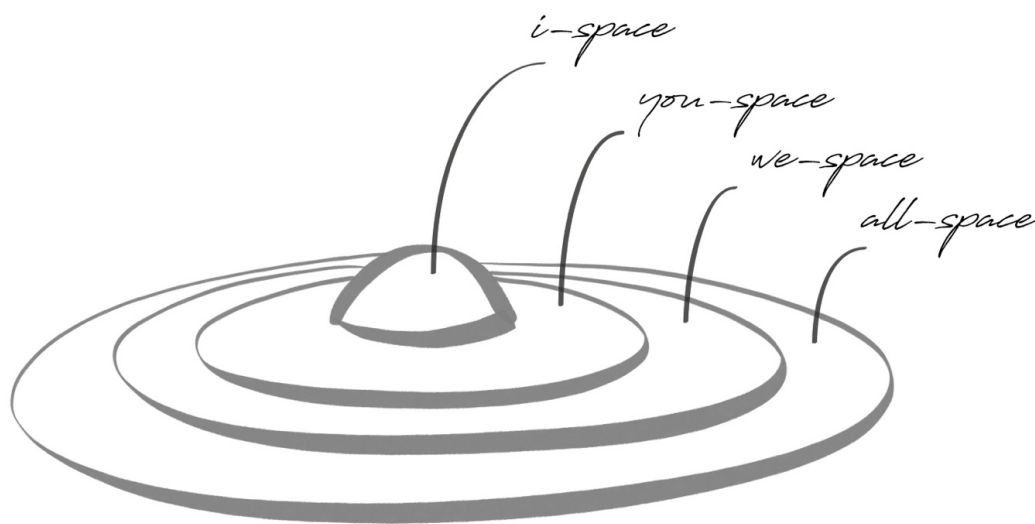


Figure 5.0: *Core Method of Primary Communicating*, (Gunnlaugson, 2020, p. 20). Copyright 2020 by Trifoss Business

IV. Systems Thinking and Systems Being

As mindful systems thinkers and leaders, we seek out those aspects of systems science, complexity science, and leadership theory that will help us develop organizational equanimity and the cessation of suffering. As presencing leaders, we apply a systems approach to see with fresh eyes the larger systems and our imbeddedness, connections, and relationships within and outside them. At a level of interdependence where possible leverage points within the system can be illuminated, "systems thinking is precisely about changing the focus of attention to the forest, so that you can see the trees in their context; understanding the forest gives new and powerful insight about the trees" (Reynolds & Holwell, 2020, p. 3). Living well among the world's systems requires our full humanity, one of the key cornerstones of systems being. In this context, wisdom is reflected in our effective use of intelligence, as evidenced by our

capacity to alleviate suffering and increase joy in human and organizational systems. A systems perspective provides mindfulness practitioners access to a critical toolbox of theories, archetypes, methods, and models with which to describe our environments and map complex situations. Systems thinking involves learning to think in terms of the unfolding processes of the “big *moving* picture” (Laszlo, 2012, p. 97), which is the future emerging from the present, exactly where presencing leadership interventions are needed. By taking into account the notion that the environment is in constant flux, within this context leaders must find their inner calm and equanimity. From a presencing leadership perspective, the future of leadership depends increasingly on a leader’s capacity to make effective discernments and interventions that confront these deeper complex issues at their very root source. As mindfulness practitioners and systems theorists, we propose complementary systems thinking practices that would supplement our mindfulness practice and enhance our overall presencing mastery through our internal sense of well-being. Turning to the concept of systems being, we can begin to form the outlines of this leadership practice. Laszlo (2012) defines systems being as follows:

The expression of systems being and systems living is an integration of our full human capacities, the expression of an evolving humanity. It involves rationality with reverence to the mystery of life, listening beyond words, sensing with our whole being, and expressing our authentic self in every moment of our life. The journey from systems thinking to systems being is a transformative learning process of expansion of consciousness – from awareness to embodiment. (p. 101)

Laszlo’s description emphasizes the importance of authenticity and the embodiment of conscious awareness. Systems being and presencing leadership speak to the expanded worldview that is a fundamental basis for leadership with a long-term perspective – one that sees events in the present in light of the evolution of humanity with “a capacity to mobilize oneself and others to consciously and effectively redefine world views, cultures, and institutions for a more just, sustainable, and flourishing world” (Ovchinnikov, 2016, August 30, para. 5). Leaders who display the capacity to exhibit quality leadership in the moment, being fully aware when this moment arises, operate in moments of pristine clarity and wisdom. Through these practices, we can envision alternatives to redesign worldviews, cultures, and institutions to bring about new socio-economic orders that light the path to the maturation of our individual, organizational, and societal levels of practice.

V. The Integration of Mindfulness and Systems Thinking/Being

The exercise of systems thinking, when applied to the wicked problems

encountered by organizational systems, emphasizes the importance of cohesiveness and interdependency within organizational structures and communities. As organizational architects, we seek the truth of situations in order to properly intervene. Systems thinking encourages us to examine how our actions influence others in our individual and collective systems and includes learning to recognize the ramifications and tradeoffs of the actions we choose (Senge, Kleiner, Roberts, Ross, & Smith, 1994). As we develop our minds and increase our awareness of our systemic sensibility through study of the principles and practices of systems thinking, we increase the frequency with which we encounter these arenas. This awareness highlights the importance of systems awareness and knowledge to aid the evolution of our culture, organizations, and leadership systems. As noted previously, both mindfulness and systems thinking/being support the development of presencing mastery. Specifically, the mental discipline, presence, and inner calm of mindfulness combined with the whole system view and appreciation of interrelationships and emergence of systems thinking/being create a powerful foundation for exploring Theory U as well as the five journeys of presencing mastery outlined in Dynamic Presencing. All three of these practices are holistic in nature, supporting the development of presencing leadership acumen while increasing organizational and leadership effectiveness and clarity.

In our view, a mindfulness practice helps optimize the path towards cultivating systems being. As we develop our presence and awareness, we become conscious of the systems within which we live and work. We see the interconnections that create the emergent properties of the system, the patterns that appear over time, and the constant change in our environments. We expand our view to see how all things are interrelated. As a transformative learning process, there is the possibility of expanding one's consciousness and cultivating new ways of being drawn from the presencing patterns of change in our environments and relations. To develop our systems awareness of presencing, scientific thinking can be integrated with a humanistic perspective through an embodied way of integrating our experience and mindsets as essentially interdependent (Shen & Midgley, 2007). Herein lies a presencing leadership development opportunity for a lifelong process of personal and professional development through a presencing mastery practice supported by mindfulness and systems thinking/being.

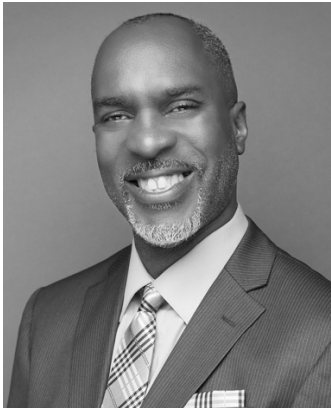
VI. Conclusion

Through our brief exploration of the ideal of presencing mastery, it is our

hope that new possibilities for becoming an effective presencing leader and practitioner have become evident. Practicing mindfulness at the bottom of the U enhances our ability to engage the emerging future in our presencing leadership. From this deeper ground, in the work of Dynamic Presencing we are able to mindfully see *what-is* and bring forth *what-is-emerging* through an embodied immersion into the four journeys of Dynamic Presencing that deepen our presencing mastery capacities as a foundational way of being. Developing presencing mastery is also enhanced by engaging a systems approach to our leadership practice, enabling us to see the larger systems we are embedded in with fresh eyes and senses to observe the connections and interrelations. Systems being, the embodiment of systems thinking, is accomplished through learning to live in and from embodied systems awareness. Creatively integrating these four approaches—Theory U, Dynamic Presencing, Mindfulness and Systems Thinking/Being—offers a holistic path towards cultivating a more in depth overall presencing mastery. In learning to effectively access our inner calm, spaciousness becomes active to be engaged creatively for new thinking and forms of being to emerge. As Margaret Wheatley (2017) eloquently reminds us, “facing reality is an empowering act—it can liberate our mind and heart to discern how best to use our power and influence in service for this time” (p. 5). As presencing leaders, we are both empowering ourselves and those with whom we work to uncover emerging promising paths of wisdom which can be meaningfully lived through the complexity and chaos of today and the uncertainty of tomorrow.

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