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RECONNECTING SELF AND OTHER:

Recognizing and Facilitating the Human Need to Belong as a Path to Fostering Presencing Mastery

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Abstract: This article explores presencing mastery from the perspective of serving a human need that is universally shared: the need to belong. Starting from a personal experience I will set the context for presencing moving beyond a situational or systemic interventionist activity towards cultivating deeper causes and conditions of wellbeing. To then develop an understanding of presencing beyond its current framing in Theory U, I will draw on the fundamental human need to belong (Baumeister & Leary 1995). By rooting advances in presencing in this foundational aspect of human nature, I follow a thread of developing two interdependent capacities of presencing mastery. One, cultivating awareness and compassion in one's inner world to deepen understanding of how the need to belong shapes our way of being in the world. Second, as self-understanding of one's own nature gradually deepens inwardly, develop the skillful means to create conducive learning environments reflective of the human need to belong. These learning environments prototype the causes and conditions of satisfying the need to belong as a way of being, shifting our experience of separation towards realizing connectedness as a source of wellbeing. I will close by pointing to Gross National Happiness as a holistic societal development model integrating these two capacities towards the well-being of all.

Keywords: Presencing, presencing mastery, need to belong, conducive learning environments, wellbeing.

I. Introduction

In this paper, I depart from an understanding of *presencing mastery* as the capacity to apply skills to deepen the presencing process by tapping into a universal need of human nature. In the present article, I propose and illustrate two skills of presencing mastery that appear central for the effectiveness of presencing as a process for building social spaces. The first skill is to become aware, recognize and access the human fundamental need to belong. The second is to build and facilitate conducive

learning environments mindful of the deeper layers of human nature that help us to live and work, as well as innovate and organize systems skillful to live up to this need. While I do not aim to argue that these two are more important than other presencing mastery skills, I consider them central for two reasons. First, I situate the skills to recognize our need to belong and to facilitate environments responding to that need in the literature of psychological needs. As with our core needs, humans have a fundamental need to belong to others, ultimately also because it gives us an understanding of who we are (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). As important as food, belonging nurtures who we can become. Accordingly, we benefit from conditions that allow us to belong. Second, as the U-process seeks to move from ego- to eco-awareness (Scharmer 2018), the understanding of humans, stakeholders, and citizens is inherently social. The shift in the sense of self from being separate to belonging requires tapping into a deeper layer of what Gunnlaugson calls our *presencing nature* (Gunnlaugson, 2023). Therefore, I consider the exploration of any presencing mastery skill worthwhile, but here promote and focus on the introduction of the skills to recognize and facilitate our need to belong as crucial both to our presencing nature and the presencing process.

To illustrate the relevance of belonging, I start by arguing that the prevalent suffering in the world may at least partly be because we tend to live disconnected from our need to belong. That is, our learning, working, and living environments make us neglect our need to be connected and deny ways to live in line with it. Instead, the shift to eco-awareness in presencing multistakeholder systems – though not yet always consciously - awake a sense of self rooted in a universal need of human nature and hence speak to the relevance of belonging and find ways to practice it. Previous work on presencing has repeatedly highlighted the detachments of self and other, self and nature, and self and self (Versteegen & Versteegen, 2020). However, by founding this disconnect on the psychological need to belong, I hope to more explicitly advance our understanding how the shift from knowing to being at the bottom of the U is furthered by practicing insight into and recognition of our nature of belonging and facilitating the nurturing of this need as skills.

More practically, I argue that presencing scholars and practitioners will benefit from becoming more aware of this need. With growing practice and insight into it, the capacity of the facilitation team to nurture and live up to the need of *being with* each other amongst themselves to sustain oneself becomes sustainable and affects participants and organizations they work with. The effectiveness of the process arises from the quality of *being with each other and oneself*, rather than from applying techniques.

In turn, this collective experience will increasingly nurture a rising longing to develop personal livelihood and societal structures that allow to live in resonance with the need to belong as a source of being, which ultimately contributes towards well-being for all. For example, nurturing a culture of belonging at the workplace will not just serve workers to have “more fun” or be more effective, it increases well-being and meaning because it creates an experience of truthfulness in doing justice to a human need to *be*, rather than “do work”. From this perspective, presencing mastery comprises the skills of presencing scholars, practitioners, and facilitators to design learning environments that are conducive to realizing the belonging need as a source for refining self-other relationships and to then align our livelihood and organizations to this need. In so doing, this sense of presencing mastery mediates inner transformation with social innovation towards embodying a collective sense of meaning and belonging.

To illustrate this argument, I start with two observations. On the one hand, I observe a fundamental lack of connectedness that causes multiple crises in contemporary societies. This lack, I argue, can be attributed to the issue that many responsible for organizational, social or political processes currently lack the ability to recognize our need to belong and facilitate environments enabling it. On the other hand, I note how social connectedness has helped societies overcome major challenges. Arguably, this may not necessarily be because actors actively learned skills related to the belonging need, however, their practices and culture implicitly often emphasized the need to belong, and established various forms of being together. Consequently, I argue that we rely on skillful means that help become aware of the need to belong and cultivate interpersonal connectedness. Becoming aware of one’s sense of belonging alleviates suffering and helps to move from ego-awareness to eco-awareness, from knowing to being (Scharmer & Kaeufer, 2013; Scharmer, 2018).

Finally, I review mindfulness, presencing (Scharmer, 2016), and happiness (Gross National Happiness (GNH), Karma Ura & Karma Galay, 2004) as three related but complementary approaches to become aware of humans’ need to belong and facilitate environments that allow to live, work, and learn in line with it. I propose that reconnecting to self through cultivating belonging facilitates pro-social action and enables eco-awareness for the happiness and well-being of all. Therefore, presencing mastery in the way that I’m developing it makes it a skillful means to raise awareness for essential qualities of what it is to be human.

II. Illustrating the Present: Two Manifestations of Social Reality

Illustration I: Experiencing Adversity

The decades following World War 2 brought benefits worldwide, including economic growth, prosperity, and safety. However, its side effects are currently manifest in climate change, pandemics, social isolation, and inequality. Moreover, Western societies have experienced a surge of anxiety and depression (The U.S. Surgeon General’s Advisory on the Healing Effects of Social Connection and Community, 2023). Likewise, life expectancy is declining in the U.S. (CDC National Center for Health Statistics, 2022; Shmerling, 2022; Harris, 2021), and in some age groups, mortality rates are the highest since 1999 (Loucks, 2023). Arguably, current societies objectively are as healthy, secure, and wealthy as never before (Bregman, 2021). However, there seems to be a growing subjective experience that “things have gotten out of tune,” which causes both distress and a search for happiness (Versteegen, 2023). In fact, despite the considerable levels of wealth in the Western world, we increasingly learn that happiness does no longer substantially increase once a certain level of material well-being is reached (see Killingsworth et al., 2023, for a recent debate).

Especially young people suffer from financial and ecological instability in their daily lives (Chen et al., 2022) and sizable shares of young adults in Germany are threatened to impoverish (Arte.tv European Collection, 2022). While societies generally are technologically connected more than ever before, many suffer from loneliness (Mann et al., 2022) and relationships that do not foster happiness (Twenge, 2017; 2023). Instead, anxiety and depression drive suicide rates among young adults (Cohen, 2023). Never have young people been as unhappy as today and never have they been unhappier than the post-war generation of elders (Chen et al., 2022). Similarly, students nowadays are better educated than previous generations, but often feel unprepared to use their knowledge (Robinson & Aronica, 2016).

To summarize these first observations, a lack of social connectedness becomes apparent in contemporary societies. The massive challenges of our time demand collective creativity and every single person to contribute (Versteegen & Solberg, in prep.). However, the way we organize our systems make us often feel isolated, inept, and irrelevant. Arguably, this problem is multi-faceted. However, it seems like a *social* disconnect transcends to a lack of connectedness with oneself, one’s abilities, and society’s challenges. In turn, experiencing a disconnect from one’s own creativity and the lacking ability to contribute to a larger whole fuel a sense of being unheard and unseen in increasing shares of society. Ultimately, perceptions of social exclusion are associated with a mobilization of those feeling “silenced,” and sometimes even societal

polarization. Politically, these experiences may explain a radicalization across societies, which seek to portray individuals' perception of reality as objective "truth," and results in radical movements like populist convictions or uncompromising climate activism (Finkel et al., 2020). But while this lack of social connectedness has precarious consequences for various realms of society, our current situation is not that dire. Despite all adversity, there are many efforts around the world to recognize the need to belong and to build connectedness. Presencing and other programs—with their emphasis on designing and facilitating social processes and their intention to organize systems aligned with this need—are prominent examples of such efforts. Next, I will illustrate one case in more detail.

Illustration II: Building from Rubble

During a recent visit to Vietnam—a vital, inspiring, emerging, and innovative economy of 100 million inhabitants with an age average of 32 years—I made two observations. First, I observed what it takes to rebuild a country out of the rubble. Second, I experienced that material growth and inner development may not be two separate things but, in fact, co-arise: On the one hand, what is seen and sensed inwardly will be expressed in what we value and attend to outwardly. On the other hand, what we build outwardly is formative for our inner experience of the world.

Regarding the first observation, I noted in Vietnam what I had just missed in my home country. Having grown up in the post-war years in Germany and France, I had been too young to fully grasp the many efforts and resources that had been activated to rebuild a country. It made me realize the mental and emotional efforts it must have taken to believe in a future and the possibility to build something whole and beautiful despite all loss, hunger, and harmful memories. These and many other countries have successfully rebuilt their countries and economies despite all hardship. In fact, people were able to act. Of course, facing the adamant truth of destruction was an unescapable reality. However, instead of surrendering to despair, it seemed to awaken a dormant possibility and an imagination of a world beyond the visible rubble that entrusted the survivors of a war with the courage to start anew. Interestingly, this relates to previous research showing that immediate and visible threats and extreme conditions often activate an energy of survival (Franklin, 2011) and connect us to our transformative capacities (Scharmer, 2020). While the resilience and willpower of these and other post-war societies are certainly due to various factors, I attribute them also to peoples' capacity to imagine a wealthier, healthier, and safer societal, that is, connected

future particularly for the next generation.

Specifically, my second observation concerns various initiatives and programs to explore and facilitate social belonging (Ha Vinh, 2022). Like in many other countries, amid the country's steady progress in material wealth, a social development took off in some parts of Vietnamese society. Particularly in business and education, this development questions one-sided material growth and suggests that visible societal development is a function of the invisible quality of connection to self, other, and nature. Various projects, trainings, and workshops across the country aim to build happiness skills for the purpose of advancing inner development (Ha Vinh, 2022). Specifically, they seek to implement Gross National Happiness (GNH), a new development paradigm (Karma Ura & Karma Galay, 2004) used to measure and mirror advances in collective well-being in education and business based on inner development and the quality of social cohesion. For me as an observer, it was impressive to witness the evocative and collective drive, skill, and vitality of these initiatives, as well as the aspiration of the organizations (i.e., public schools in various parts of the country and big corporations) pursuing them. They shared the aspiration to make the holistic development of an inclusive society towards happiness and well-being for all an overarching goal; aiming to mobilize encouragement, joy, togetherness, speed, learning, and compassion in finding ways of balancing material and non-materialistic development goals. Being trained in happiness skills, the teams establish profound connections amongst themselves. They embody mindfulness and social-emotional skills towards self, other, and participants while conducting programs, retreats and workshops. With mindful listening and speaking and other skillful means, the teams exemplify a community whose rhythm and flow carries a culture conducive to deepen social connections to which each participant can contribute. Enacted first within the team, the newly emerging relational patterns of interdependent, diverse, and kind contributions spread to participants (Engert et al., 2023). Together, they help create a culture of happiness generating free and authentic collective action (Ha Vinh, 2022).

To summarize their intention, they seek to master interpersonal relationships as a practice of mindfulness, kindness, and compassion. This cultivates an experience of distributed agency rather than single individuals running separate sessions or exercises lining up throughout the agenda. Participants adhere to the altering climate of their learning environment from *doing to being* as the social field of collective agency emerges. Their evolving social reality is inclusive, cultivates attention, gratitude, affection, responsiveness, and potentiality as the team masters its own social process as a

collective practice. Interestingly, to watch a team being kind and attentive to each other is contagious. It cultivates a motivation amongst participants to turn into their own capacity to contribute rather than to search for individual solutions. The learning experience invites participants to tap together into the deeper reality of becoming aware of each other beyond knowing about each other.

In the next section, I attempt to identify the deeper forces underlying both illustrations, which allow or impede turning individual knowing into collective action. Specifically, I will argue that we need to rebuild the relational world to scale up our capacity to balance material and immaterial development towards living in harmony with all living beings. While this has been suggested elsewhere (Ha Vinh, 2022; Karma Ura & Karma Galay, 2004), I here emphasize the relevance of social connectedness as a central human need. Put this way, the capacity to recognize humans' need to belong and the capacity to organize systems in line with it are central skills of presencing mastery.

III. The Lack of Connectedness and Why it Matters: The Need to Belong

In this section, I develop previous arguments observing divides between self and other, self and world, and self and self (Scharmer & Kaeufer, 2013). I build on my illustrations above to argue that these partly result from lacking connectedness and, in turn, reflect the potential of facilitated connectedness.

The first illustration shows the lack of connectedness, the challenge it implies, and the consequences thereof. Post-war societies have been amazingly successful in rebuilding the foundations for physical safety, nutrition, and economic prosperity. Yet, this did not touch the cause of social disconnection underlying the original material destruction. Specifically, it remains neglected that our way of connecting to ourselves, each other, and nature likely contributed to these adversities. For example, current technological progress seems to suggest independence from each other. However, the consequence of highly individualized, self-optimizing lifestyles is often social disconnect and isolation (Twenge, 2017). The U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory calls loneliness a crisis on the order of smoking and obesity (The U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory, 2023). The Cigna 360 Well-Being Survey (2021) shows that more than half of the U.S. population are lonely and marginalized, lower income groups and young people are particularly likely to report loneliness. Unsurprisingly then, the surgeon general calls for a "culture of connection" (The U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory, 2023). The first illustration portrays this disconnect and loneliness, where a predominantly material reconstruction is followed by a mental and physical health crisis leaving many in search

of purpose and meaning (Silver et al, 2021; Van Kessel & Silver, 2021). While I consider the recognition of social isolation a necessary first step, it seems to remain a rational and momentary conclusion. However, to overcome this problem, we need to recognize and internalize the relevance of social belonging beyond a rational understanding. Presencing entails this recognition, when it moves from knowing about social processes to the skillful means of awakening the remembrance of our deeper nature of belonging as an essential skill of presencing mastery.

The second illustration emphasizes the relevance of social connectedness as a collective practice. It also shows that social connectedness does not necessarily result from a workshop that educates participants about social connectedness. Instead, it takes the high-toned effort of a whole team of skillful practitioners to sustain their being with each other. In this illustration, the team understands itself as a community of practitioners embodying a culture of high-quality interpersonal relationships. Together, they master a state of awareness that shapes the in-between space of relational interdependence as a culture. The ability to operate from an awareness of one's team's shared source shapes its inter-relational culture toward the well-being of all leveraging the social whole. Such teams, organizations or groups model a culture of connectedness as a source of well-being and happiness amongst themselves that is socially contagious and spreads amongst participants (Christakis & Fowler, 2012; Engert et al., 2023). As they practice mindfulness and social awareness towards each other, they experience joy. In my observation, it was the practice of kindness and compassion for each other that helped to expand and shift the sense of self within the team and between the team and the participants. Participants longed to become part and be seen as contributing to the well-being of the group as well.

Thus, this second illustration unites two essential aspects. First, it shows how people become aware of the relevance of social connection. Second, it shows how skillful means allow to set up a learning environment and to facilitate it so that it enables social connection. Both aspects represent presencing mastery skills as they bring out the potentialities of a way of being while a sense of community starts to percolate, allowing the individual to act from their comprehension and freedom and the collective to become aware of itself. The community creates a holding space for the individual and collective potentiality to manifest. Potentiality in turn co-evolves with rising group awareness, growing skillfulness, and declining suffering caused by disconnect. In short, a sense of agency evolves from the group when it recognizes its potential once social connectedness starts to build.

Arguably, many presencing researchers and practitioners already know that belonging and connectedness are essential in the U-process. However, by tracing them back to humans' fundamental need to belong (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Brewer & Garner, 1996), I hope to raise further awareness for why they matter and, consequently, why their recognition and facilitation represent crucial skills that support the development of presencing mastery. The need to belong is “an innate motivational drive to form and maintain interpersonal bonds with other people” (Allen et al., 2021, p. 1138). Conceptualized as a *need*, belongingness is not a “nice to have.” Instead, the motivation to form positive, long-lasting, interpersonal relationships is of existential and evolutionary importance. As Allen and colleagues put it, “the human mind contains a basic and nearly universal drive to form and maintain relationships with some other people” (Allen et al., 2021, p. 1136). Our innate dependence on groups has profoundly influenced our motivation to be social (Over, 2016). Importantly, the need to establish social connections and to be accepted is not just focused on specific individuals but on social relationships more generally. This matters because it suggests that communities will get dysfunctional if their actors remain detached. For the need to be fulfilled, two criteria must be satisfied: first, individuals must have relatively frequent positive (or at least neutral) interactions with a few others. Second, these interactions must happen within a framework of long-lasting mutual concern for each other's welfare (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Allen et al., 2021).

Research shows that the human being is substantially a social being and not able to survive without others. Baumeister and Leary (1995) review how this need becomes relevant in various aspects of life, including physical and mental well-being, performance, emotional and cognitive functioning, and societal problem-solving and cooperation. Strikingly, Bregman (2021) even discusses how humans' need to be connected differentiates them from apes. In fact, it is not humans' mental capacity but their evolutionary advantage to signal their need for social connection, as well as their ability to search for and offer it. To survive, humankind must realize its social potential. Consistently, Baumeister summarizes that “inner processes serve interpersonal functions. What happens inside the single mind is a learned or evolved means of enabling us to work together.” (Allen et al., 2021, p. 1138). There is no separate individual. But we need to learn to attend to our deeper nature to be.

As I sought to exemplify in the first illustration, the prevalent suffering may, at least in parts, be due to the belonging need being unsatisfied. The ways we organize our livelihood, our institutions, social organizations, and systems often do not fit humans'

need to belong. They rarely encourage frequent, positive interactions or build long-term relationships towards some overarching goal of mutual well-being. Thus, despite all scientific knowledge about the need to belong, we continue to build systems that organize around the “knowing about” rather than “being with.” We organize our livelihood, institutions, and social systems in ways that disconnect us from each other and do not nurture our need to belong.

In the second illustration, I alluded to conditions that facilitate belonging. I described how suffering may be overcome if people become aware of the belonging need and live up to it, regardless of external adversities. Given the centrality of social connectedness, it is vital to satisfy this need to move from *knowing* problems into addressing them by feeling belonging. Moreover, satisfying the need to belong helps to open to potentiality, reconnect to ourselves, and ultimately facilitates social renewal. Satisfying this need will also remind us of our deeper nature. Thus, the initiatives discussed in the second illustration reflect the potential of what can happen if this human need is recognized and lived up to.

In the next section, I describe how mindfulness and compassion, presencing, and GNH serve to specifically practice these two skills of presencing mastery, such that they help becoming aware of our need to belong and help us design environments in line with this need.

IV. Recognizing and Facilitating the Need to Belong as two Presencing Mastering Skills in Light of Mindfulness, Presencing, and GNH

To recall, I consider the capacity to recognize our need to belong and the ability to build conditions that allow to work and live in line with it two essential skills of presencing mastery. The presencing process – applied in various contexts and with various tools – builds on the premise that stakeholders of the respective context move from an ego to eco-perspective (Scharmer 2018). This shift entails a shifting sense of independent self to a sense of self as being interdependent re-balancing our sense of individual and collective. Recognizing the need to belong is the result of ongoing contemplative cultivation to awaken and keep alive remembrance of our true nature as humankind: that the human mind itself expresses the universal drive to relate (Allen et al. 2021). Being related *is* our true nature. But then it seems we get distracted. The first skill of presencing mastery is to learn to see through the resulting suffering of not belonging as a kind reminder that we *need each other to sense our belonging* to one common source rather than to who we have become as our habituated self. The second skill of

presencing mastery is to create learning environments that cultivate awareness of the non-duality between the individual and the collective: that we are constantly influenced and shaped by the collective (i.e., other stakeholders) and are in turn co-creating the collective that conditions and influences us (i.e., a dysfunctional organization, food chain etc). The skill also entails the means to provide a healthy balance between being open to receive, sensing and being aware of the collective without becoming over-conditioned or burdened or otherwise alienated.

Baumeister and Leary (1995) originally framed the need to belong as forming one-to-one relationships that satisfy the human need to be seen and accepted. However, Leary argues that this one-to-one level framing likely applies to larger groups and organizations (Allen et al., 2021).

In short, *presencing mastery* is reflected in the advanced ability to facilitate the shift from ego- to eco-awareness by balancing awareness about the individual coming into being with the skill to *recognize* (i.e., contemplating awareness about the need to *be with*), that individuality is rooted in a common source that makes us feel included and belonging. To be clear, the first skill, *recognizing* our need to belong means more than rationally “knowing.” It is being mindful about one’s own inner search to *be with*, to take notice and to evolve with this deep longing is a universally shared need that in itself is a gateway transcending the boundaries of ego-awareness. The skill refers to the capacity to observe where belonging is absent and present, to experience the relevance of belonging for oneself and others, and to be aware of humans’ connectedness with others. Likewise, the skill to *facilitate* environments that nurture belonging does not mean to organize one-time social events. It rather pursues an enduring commitment to grow mindfulness and learn/teach social-emotional skills to build a resilient culture of well-being as a livelihood that prioritizes social exchange and service towards the well-being of all. The facilitators are skillful to maintain within the team and towards the participants a fluid navigation that balances care for the individual to become who she or he truly is with the apparent opposite that becoming oneself is interdependent with being seen and recognized by a community responding to one’s need to belong. Responding to the need to belong, they practice to let go of self-expression in order to receive, to be seen, to be supported by what others want to give. To express their own individuality, they let come what others may need them for and they give what is needed by the others to be seen and to belong. Together, the two skills complement each other balancing inner, individual development with societal transformation towards communities of well-being.

In the presencing process, these two skills unfold their contribution on two levels. On the individual level, presencing mastery skills maintain an inner practice to cultivate mindfulness and social-emotional skills to enable frequent positive or neutral interactions towards belonging and mutual care. On a collective level, it allows to design and facilitate learning environments conducive for multiple stakeholders to collectively engage with each other towards developing frameworks and structures of mutual care in their respective fields.

The final part of this article explores how presencing mastery can be understood from the perspective of the need to belong and how it can be developed as a skill to facilitate learning environments balancing inner development with social transformation. While presencing mastery as an ultimate goal obviously cannot be reached, I confine this exploration to mastering the journey by focusing on three key movements of the U-process that transform the relationship of self and other. Finally, I describe how mindfulness and compassion, presencing, and GNH are complementary practices and frameworks to embody presencing mastery as a way to *be* rather than to *do*.

V. Sensing: Expanding the Self from Transactional to Sentient Relationships

From the perspective of the five movements of the U-process (Scharmer, 2016) belonging means the progressing stages of assimilating individual and collective self-awareness with social reality as experienced from the perspective of self (seeing), other (sensing), and presence (presencing). To establish belonging according to the need to belong means to gradually expand one's sense of self (Brewer & Gardner, 1996). The stage of co-sensing implies to become aware of and connect to the stakeholders and players in the field, and to change one's sense of self by experiencing the challenge at stake from the other stakeholders' perspectives. The goal is to establish a social relationship between self and other that is open-minded and open-hearted (Scharmer, 2016). It requires the capacity to be present, connected to self and other, kind, and empathetic. Instead of seeing the system from the outside as something presumably known, detached, and given, scholars, facilitators, and practitioners move inwardly to a place of humble not-knowing. From this place, they can know from the heart and feel the beingness of the other as a sentient being they truly are interested in and want to feel with.

The process of opening the heart towards sensing as connecting can be supported by practicing loving kindness and gratitude (Macy & Johnstone, 2022;

Salzberg, 2004), gradually expanding the sense of self towards other-regarding motivations. Again, connectedness is not merely a superficial affiliation. Deep sensing and feeling into others changes the sense of self. Sensing is instrumental for gaining new insights, but also a fulfilling practice to be. It cultivates *being human* as a fundamental capacity (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Brewer & Gardner, 1996). Rather than wanting to change the other person or situation, by connecting, we seek to change our relationship *to* the person or situation. We practice seeing and addressing someone's highest potential. Including into ourselves what seemed to appear outside of ourselves will open something new within ourselves. Mindfulness, "the capacity to be aware of what is going on and what is there" (Nhat Hanh, 2008), is the starting point for any sensing activity, listening and speaking. By calming our mind, connecting to body and breath, becoming still inwardly, we create the inner space to stand in the shoes of our counterparts to see and feel what they see and feel. Mutual understanding and care can arise and nurture belonging as recognizing that otherness may dissolve into "just like me."

Together, mindfulness and empathy deepen our sensing experience by becoming aware that we belong to a whole ecology of relationships. As becoming aware of connectedness is central to the presencing process, mindfulness and empathy are relevant capacities of presencing mastery. Gradually decentering from our ego-awareness, we start being embedded. Mindfulness and other social-emotional skills help us gather the percept or sentience quality of sensing. Becoming aware of the sentient quality of what surrounds us, for example, by feeling that a mountain is a being as much as a hiker walking on its surface, will move us from experiencing a world of transactional relationships of disconnect to a world of sentient, living relationships. Thus, sensing is a powerful way of connecting and belonging, as it shifts patterns of relationships from disconnect to connecting self-other (Versteegen & Versteegen, 2020; Scharmer, 2016; 2018), in turn building our relational presencing capacity. By practicing a change of perspective towards seeing and feeling from other and seeing oneself from the future possibility of the whole, self-awareness is activated and with it the potentiality of moving the sense of self towards an overarching collective motive.

VI. Presencing: Cultivating Compassion as a Transpersonal Motive for Pro-Social Action

Becoming aware of our interdependent relationships is one of the many outcomes of sensing. The experience of interdependent relationships is characterized by

mutual concern for the interest and outcomes of the other (Brewer & Gardner, 1996). When the self realizes belongingness and the concept of self changes, social motives shift, too. If we do not recognize that we are embedded in relationships, we help for egoistic reasons. If we experience connectedness, we help for selfless, altruistic reasons. We move from being social for self-interest to concerns for the well-being of others (Brewer & Gardner, 1996). At the collective level, group welfare becomes an end in itself, even when it means to trade off personal gains against collective good (Brewer & Kramer, 1986). Presencing expounds the inner process motivating this shift from helping as a self-interest to selfless care for others as a shift in awareness. It moves from being attached to ego-self to letting go, subsequently to becoming aware of oneself as part of a network of similar natural beings (“eco”-awareness) and letting come (Scharmer, 2016). The sense of self and identity is changing and with it the purpose and meaning of being.

Presencing mastery draws upon the skill to facilitate social processes in support of the self as co-evolving with patterns of relationships fueling changes in self-perception that encourage eco-awareness. Recognizing each other as part of a network of similar beings motivates care. Presencing resonates with the need to belong as human nature is capable of culture. Here, we connect through our shared humanity from the perspective of how to cultivate our capacity to become aware of ourselves and be compassionate. Compassion motivates people to recognize and relieve others’ suffering (Singer & Klimecki, 2014). Unlike empathy, it is not just sensitive to the emotional aspects of suffering and mirroring a “feel as” but a “feel for.” Thus, it generates a motivation to alleviate suffering. Put differently, compassion motivates people to not only notice and feel but to change something for the better. Compassion as prosocial behavior aims at benefitting communities, organizations, or society. But practicing compassion needs a home, a community. While practitioners will not be surprised that community building is vital, I emphasize that its popularity and success may, at least in parts, be because they are in tune with humans’ need to belong.

The second skill of presencing mastery means to support community building as a second home for practitioners to cultivate awareness practices. Recent research shows that “compassion has to be understood in a social-interactional context, which it can “ripple” (Engert et al., 2023, p. 2) and that the cultivation of meditation-induced positive change can spread from practitioners to their social networks. To shift presencing leadership from a passing, temporary state of program towards being embodied in livelihood, it is vital to establish an individual practice and join a

community of practice. The community fulfills the need to belong as meaning and purpose of life are shifting, and the benefits of regular group practice will ripple across social networks in multiple ways. Presencing mastery means to embody a livelihood that connects practice and community in a way that both can shape each other towards long-term-relationships creating meaning and belonging. The sense of belonging, as it emerges from compassion, is a function of becoming aware that the individual and the collective are not two. We feel that the world is in us and we are part of the world.

VII. Prototyping: Measuring Holistic Development to Approximate the Quest for Happiness

Belongingness is a stronger predictor for happiness than any external circumstance (Baumeister, 2005). But our prevailing economic model values single-minded material growth, our institutions often hinder belonging, and we keep ourselves from developing individual agency and collective ability to respond. Measures like the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) barely account for and distract our attention from our need to belong. Economic reports mirror and reinforce our anxieties of scarcity and exclusion despite a factual abundance.

What societal model serves the need to belong as an essential quality of being human? Can we design systems in the pursuit of enduring happiness as ways of living in harmony with self, other, and nature that direct collective attention to what we value? In short, how can our collective actions be informed by the well-being of all? *Sensing* connects mindfulness and other practices to social reality by expanding the self from ego-awareness to whole-systems awareness. *Presencing* connects compassion as the practice to internalize a system's suffering to transforming it into a motivation to alleviate it. With *prototyping*, individual and collective action are informed by seeking well-being for all rather than pursuing self-interest. Belongingness research suggests that the concept of self will shift from self-interest to altruistic behavior when the individual feels seen and accepted (e.g., Baumeister & Leary, 1995). However, it remains unclear how collectives shift from accounting for the results of different parts of the whole seen as independent from each other to accounting for the impact they have on serving the well-being of the whole.

Bhutan is prototyping a new societal model that has inspired other countries to move from architectures of separation to architectures of connection (Scharmer, 2018). Gross National Happiness (GNH) manifests the idea of a holistic development framework based on mutual care among all living beings (Karma Ura & Karma Galay,

2004). As an assessment tool, it mirrors back to society how policy choices impact the interdependent balance of nine domains of life. The goal is to pursue enduring happiness and well-being for all, not as a transient state but as a social form of attending to harmonizing relationships to self, other, and nature (Ha Vinh, 2022). GNH is complementary to mindfulness and compassion practices, as well as to Theory U as a learning environment. It furthers participation and creates a system that aligns attention to intention and brings to awareness what is collectively valued. By means of national surveys, citizens state their currently experienced happiness and well-being, allowing the country to see itself through a multifaceted mirror (i.e., the GNH Index; Alkire et al., 2012). This creates a sense of belonging and support for ethical decision-making toward the well-being of all.

GNH shows how other-regarding motivations, such as collective well-being can be scaled up to a policy level. The leaders of Bhutan recognize the need to belong. They do not just “know” that belonging matters but have experienced and processed its relevance. In turn, they cultivate an understanding that governments should create happiness for their people: “If the government cannot create happiness for its people, then there is no purpose for government to exist.” (Bhutan’s ancient legal code: GNH Centre Bhutan, 2022; Bowman, 2000). Thus, they serve the happiness of their people and facilitate a national learning environment. Building a society based on belonging requires first to become aware of the need to belong. Second, it means to develop mindfulness and compassion to maintain the connection to self, other, and world. Third, it entails to establish conducive learning environments, where leaders and practitioners meet presencing masters who are guides on the path in service of happiness and well-being for all.

VIII. Conclusion

In this paper, I developed previous work on the disconnect between self and other, self and nature, and self and self (Versteegen & Versteegen 2020) by motivating the relevance of the need to belong. While many other skills of presencing mastery remain to be explored, *belonging* is both a fundamental human need (Baumeister & Leary, 1995) and essential to advance presencing from a more situational interventionist activity to understanding and mastering the causes and conditions for enduring well-being and happiness. I chose to root this exploration on the need to belong as a universal human need driving the underlying causes and conditions of well-being and happiness as I exemplified in two illustrations. If well contemplated and recognized,

satisfying the need to belong implies to develop a practice of mindfulness and social-emotional learning. It can support presencing leaders and facilitators to navigate between seeming dualities of individual and collective, doing and being, bringing together inner development with social transformation as a way of constant refinement and being, rather than a series of interventions along the U-Process. This is why I described the capacity to recognize our belonging need and to facilitate environments in line with it as central presencing mastery skills. Hence initiatives aiming to transform systems like education, business, or societies to attain well-being through the U-process or related frameworks will benefit from a more explicit emphasis of the belonging aspect. I expounded how attending to the need to belong and the cultivation of inner practices may advance presencing towards mastering a balance between inner development and social change as a way of *being* rather than *doing*.

Arguably, most Theory U practitioners will be familiar with the idea that these practices have a vital function for community-building. What I sought to promote, however, is to recognize this function not as just one of several benefits but as a central and necessary one. Thus, presencing mastery draws upon the skill to embody the awareness and understanding of our most central human needs and to facilitate learning environments that help align our lives and institutions to be in harmony with these needs. While I hope that this understanding will help develop advanced presencing and presencing mastery, this article can only be a start into a larger exploration.

IX. References

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