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## BEING EMBODIED IN NAVIGATING CHALLENGE:

### *A Catalyst for Presencing Leadership*

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**Abstract:** The challenges of our complex, uncertain and ambiguous world take us to the limits of conventional ways of knowing and being in leadership. We might see this as an invitation to move beyond the conventional and attune to our wider senses and field consciousness, which allows us to access presenced ways of knowing and navigating that hold generative potential. Integrating a presencing disposition in our leadership, however, is not a temporary practice to add to our toolbox; it requires an ontological apprenticeship of grounding our being in deeper realms of presence from where new answers and resources may arise. These states of presence are not accessible or sustainable without being deeply connected to our bodies and -through that- to our deeper essence and source. Based on a two-year collaborative action research process with a group of executive leaders, this article highlights the catalysing role of embodiment in navigating leadership challenge – not only to facilitate a presencing disposition on a day-to-day basis, but also to ground us in an ontological paradigm that enables a way of being and relating to reality in a generative presencing way. In particular, this article suggests two practices that facilitate our deep embodiment in this apprenticeship: The regular practice of grounding, and the practice of navigating with the felt sense of a presencing insight over time. Both micro practices, being implemented into day-to-day leadership long-term, they appear to have the potential to enable us to navigate the complex and unknown with an embodied compass, to ground us in an ontological paradigm that allows us to access resources and insights beyond the rational-analytic realm, and to tap into the generative potential inherent in our given reality.

**Key words:** Presencing, leadership, embodiment, process ontology, presencing mastery, presence

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## I. Introduction

As an executive coach and presencing practitioner, I often witness leaders, including those

with presencing experience, being stuck in recurring crises as they run up against the boundaries of analytical thinking in their approach to complexity and challenge. Being the very strength that got many executives to where they are, limiting ourselves to analytical thinking tends to be a barrier to harness ways of knowing, and more importantly, ways of being, that hold more generative potential in a complex environment and that are only accessible through deep embodiment. These presenced ways of knowing connect us to a realm of insight and clarity that is not accessible through the analytic mind and offer new possibilities of leading amidst complexity and uncertainty (Scharmer, 2016; Scharmer & Kaeufer, 2013). Integrating a presencing disposition in our leadership, however, is not a temporary practice to add to our toolbox; it requires an ontological apprenticeship of grounding our being in deeper realms of presence from where new resources and ways of knowing can arise. These states of presence are not accessible or sustainable without being deeply connected to our bodies and -through that- to our deeper essence and source. Based on a two-year collaborative action research process with a group of executive leaders which was part of a more extensive research project (Sell, 2021), this article suggests two embodiment practices that seem to catalyse an ontological apprenticeship of presencing leadership.

What makes embodiment a central aspect for a presencing way of being and leading? And why is the apprenticeship of embodied presencing leadership an ontological one? Phenomenologist Merleau-Ponty (1962) regarded the human body as the mediator between human experience and the world, which in return means we need to be embodied in our presence to experience the world fully. Transpersonal psychologist Rosemarie Anderson argues that “[l]iving in a body is to live fully attuned to the sensual matrix of the world. We are situated in an animate world within and without.” (Anderson, 2001, p. 90). This attunement to the sensual matrix of the world, the hidden dynamics within and around us, links to physicist David Bohm’s ideas of an underlying wholeness and implicate order (Bohm, 1980), seeing the essence of the cosmos as pure process – a flowing movement of the whole. Within this order (which as presencing practitioners we might call the realm of source) mind and matter are not separate, the entire universe is intricately connected in a relationship. Based on this interconnectedness, systems thinker Gregory Bateson (1972) claims that nothing can be understood in isolation, everything has to be seen as part of the unified whole. This stance grounds us in the interdependent ontology of a participative paradigm (Heron & Reason, 1997; Lincoln, Lynham & Guba, 2011), which “allows us... to know that we are part of the whole rather than separated as mind over and against matter” (Heron & Reason, 1997, p. 275). Within the participative ontology, our body has a central role in making contact with the realm of wholeness. Philosophers Lakoff and Johnson argue that our mind is embodied, that our “conceptual systems arise from, are shaped by, and are given meaning through living bodies” (Lakoff & Johnson, 1999, p.

6). Hence, our body operates as a source of “human meaning- making through our visceral connection to our world” (Johnson, 2007, p. 3). Being embodied is therefore much more than having a body with its internal processes; it is a way of experiencing the world and interacting with it with all our senses. And these senses appear to be wider and more refined than our five biological senses. As Anderson argues,

*[o]ur bodies are a web, a delicate filament of senses coupled to the world. (...) There are a myriad of subtle senses, not five. (...) I need only slow down and listen and Wow! the world starts to reach out to me, bending to my knowing as I yield gently to its whispers. (Anderson, 2001, p. 98, emphasis in original)*

Accessing these senses requires us to slow down and listen – in presencing terms, letting go of our habitual mental models and redirect our attention from thinking to sensing. Then we might tap into our body’s capacity to naturally “apprehend insights and solutions that are not accessible through our thinking minds” Anderson (2001, p. 98). Incorporating presencing more deeply in our leadership therefore asks for a way of being that keeps the contact to our wider senses alive on a day-to-day basis. Harvesting the learnings of two years of action research in our leadership group, the following section introduces two embodiment practices that seem to catalyse our apprenticeship of presencing leadership and enable us to co-create with reality through a participative paradigm.

## II. Grounding: The transformative potential of a regular embodiment practice

Our habitual thinking, our downloading mental models (Scharmer, 2016), is not just an isolated mental activity, it affects our entire body system. We are particularly prone to downloading default mental models in times of pressure or challenge – ironically often precisely the time when new ways of thinking and perceiving would be needed. If we don’t pause to become present and embodied, we then tend to find ourselves in a state where all the energy is accumulated in our heads, our minds spinning with thoughts, concerns, anticipations, and strategies. We often lose contact to our lower bodies, feeling as if we were floating in the air, susceptible to whatever way the proverbial wind is blowing. This is neither a state that gives us the resources to *be with* challenge, nor one that allows for deeper knowing to arise. Having experienced the effect of embodied grounding practices on my ability to step out of habitual thinking patterns and become more deeply present, I opened each of our inquiry group meetings with a simple grounding ritual: preferably barefoot, consciously connecting our feet to the ground and feeling our physical rootedness in the earth. Once we sense the contact of our feet with the earth, we can release our body weight into that contact and breathe into the quiet holding and solidity from below. With every outbreath, any tension in mind or body can be released into the holding ground; with every inbreath fresh energy can arise from the center

of the earth through our feet into our body. Gradually we become more at ease, more present, notice more space in our mind. Our leaders experienced this micro-practice as a catalyst for arriving in the present moment, relaxing body and mind and becoming clearer and more focused on their intentions. This inspired them to experiment with individual variations of grounding in their daily lives.

Peter<sup>15</sup>, a busy strategy executive, implemented a daily grounding practice of standing barefoot on the grass of his backyard for a couple of minutes each morning, finding the freshness of the damp grass to awaken his senses in a profound way. At the dawn of one day which held a make-or-break business conversation he experienced how his awakened embodied presence through grounding allowed him to tap into a way of knowing that transformed his view on reality. Up to this moment his concerns had pulled him into an internal world of fears, hopes and plans about the critical conversation. Allowing the freshness of the cold grass to enter his system, sensing the earth below and the soft movement of a myriad of leaves above, catapulted him out of his mental world and he suddenly found himself in an intimate encounter with the aesthetic power of the moment. His whole system relaxed into a realisation of being re-plugged into the real world where the mental distractions gave way to a profound sense of aliveness and unity with the world. This intimate encounter with the underlying wholeness brought forward new resources to make the upcoming conversation a generative one. And so he did, leading to a result that he hadn't even thought possible.

Just the simple act of physically connecting to the earth and opening up the senses had the potential not just to calm Peter's mind but also to gain a new perspective and way of knowing. Seeing this through the lens of dynamic presencing (Gunnlaugson, 2020), the shift towards an embodied awareness (being real) enabled him to have a fresh, pre-conceptual look at reality (being witness). This openness invited an epiphanic moment of being deeply touched by the quiet beauty of here-and-now (being essence). The fresh sense of embodied reality filled him with a lively stillness (being source), which yielded resources beyond the scope of the immediate challenge. His embodied presence, together with his visceral receptivity of the aesthetics surrounding him, seems to have functioned like a catalyst for contacting the generative realm of source in a short period of time. It appears to have unlocked the ontological ground of a participative experience of reality and, through that resource, a more relaxed and confident response to challenge. As Peter reflected, "For me

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<sup>15</sup> The identity of group members has been disguised and names have been changed.

embodiment has become important because it's a new way of knowing yourself and where you are in the world. It takes me out of these unconscious beliefs around what I must do or be." To make these new ways of knowing yourself and reality a second nature in our presencing leadership, an ongoing practice attuning to our embodied senses is needed.

Dora, a CEO in the healthcare sector, had insightful experiences with an ongoing grounding practice. Whilst going through a period of significant distress and uncertainty in her life, she became aware of how disembodied she had become. "All the energy was around my headspace, and it was just all going very crazy (...) And so, every time I went back into the head and got all panicky, I stopped and brought the attention to my legs, just being aware of any sensations in my legs. And I felt a lot calmer, something had definitely shifted." Dora's experiences with her grounding practice speak to its calming effect on the mind, which is affirmed by conventional science (Chevalier, 2015) and helps us redirect our attention to bring us into a presencing disposition. In her case, the effect of grounding did not even require any active exercise; bringing her attention to the legs and observing the sensations was enough for her to tap into the benefits of grounding and reach a calmer state. Peter Levine's work on body therapy and somatic experiencing (Levine, 2012) highlights the role of somatic practices in healing trauma and restoring emotional wellbeing. But more than that, the grounding practice appears to have facilitated further outcomes.

After several weeks of increased embodied awareness, Dora discovered in herself a pattern of running away from situations of emotional discomfort. Feeling more grounded enabled her to not give in to that impulse but to stand back and reflect on what alternative responses might look like. This led to her conscious choice of staying with ambiguity and discomfort as long as a deeper knowing from inside would emerge. Being present in her body had given her the resources to dim down anxiety and embrace the unknown. "That's what's changed, this innate sense that I've got the resources." Even more than being able to stay with discomfort, Dora discovered how her continuous embodied presence in a period of challenge held unexpected potential. Without her embodied way of being, she realised, "I don't think I would be able to show up in my leadership in the way I do." Reflecting on this period of embodied apprenticeship, she realises that "If we can see discomfort as a source of creativity, then it becomes very generative."

A simple, regular grounding practice appears to assist us in several ways to incorporate presencing more deeply in our leadership: Embodiment takes us out of mental overactivity and anxiety; it enables us to stop downloading mental models and instead make contact with the deeper levels of our inner reality. In that ontological realm, not knowing ceases to be a problem but can be understood as the necessary ground to eventually presence generative realisations and insights. A regular embodiment practice appears to make us more relaxed and confident in the unknown and

moreover, bring us closer to contacting a generative reality that we can co-create with amid mundane challenges.

### III. Navigating with the embodied felt sense of primary knowing, not with the conceptualized abstraction of it.

Embodying presencing leadership isn't just a question of accessing primary knowing in a given leadership context. Making sustainable impact with this knowing in our leadership often requires us to navigate with a presencing insight as long as it will take to have the new manifest. This can be a tricky period to navigate. As our leaders became aware of, there is a potential conflict between the nature of primary knowing and the nature of conventional approaches to decision-making and action in leadership. Primary knowing comes as an all-encompassing embodied sense, an expanded awareness that connects us to reality in a fresh and intimate way and points us into a generative direction (Rosch, 1999). This knowing is not intellectual capital that can be owned and transferred, but rather an encounter with an aspect of the underlying wholeness which we can sense in its meaning, but which cannot be nailed down to a conceptual thing or actionable step. As we participate in a dynamic and evolving complex reality, action researcher Coleman says, “[o]ur knowledge of it will always be partial because we are part of the unfolding process we are seeking to understand” (2015, p. 396). This suggests that navigating with a presencing insight over time is fundamentally different to implementing or applying a piece of knowledge. And here is where embodiment comes in: If presencing is not embodied *as a way of being* and we remain loyal to the belief that robust decisions need to be backed by facts and figures, we are likely to lose contact with the power of the original insight - even though we might have had a deep encounter with that presencing insight in the first place. To keep presencing knowing alive as a guiding quality, our embodiment plays a key role.

In a collective presencing session, Andrew, a founding partner of a sustainable business, experienced an epiphanic discovery of an explorative, emerging approach to run his new business, co-created by the subtle movements of all parts of the system in a state of utmost presence. This insight pointed to the critical “how” of navigating the current uncertainty in service of a most generative development – but not to a direct solution, tangible instruction, or outer manifestation. Three months after the presencing session, despite his deep inspiration and excitement at the time, Andrew reported how he had fallen back in the trap of his habitual analytic approach of trying to control and predict things, suffering from the pressure and frustration of being stuck. If we keep operating with the conventional rational-analytic mental models and haven't found a way to stay connected to primary knowing over time, we risk losing touch from or discounting the knowing. How can we keep a profound presencing insight alive over time, so it can keep serving as a guiding

quality, a compass in times of uncertainty and challenge?

In cycles of action and reflection, we realised that the act of keeping primary knowing alive is not a mental one; it is an embodied one. The power of primary knowing, we found, is not in our interpretation of it but in its *felt sense*, the specific nature of sensual qualities that arise from it and change our inner reality. As part of our apprenticeship in deepening our embodiment of presencing, we developed a routine of *repeatedly re-connecting to the felt sense* of the presencing insight (e.g., the sense of utter aliveness, possibility and expansion that Andrew had experienced) and taming our mental desire to pin it down to an abstract or actionable thing. The mental abstraction of the insight (e.g., “you just need to stay open to what possibilities arise”) is vulnerable to attacks from our analytical mind (e.g., “isn’t that just fatalistic waiting and doing nothing?”), but the aliveness of our embodied reality in the moment is beyond rationality and able to grasp holistic meaning and generative potential. When Andrew started to repeatedly re-connect to the felt sense of playful, emergent exploration and to allow for unplanned co-creation with the wider system, his presencing insight became more than a one-off revelation and turned into a crucial guiding quality for his professional future.

If presencing remains a situational practice where we connect with primary knowing only momentarily and subsequently return to our habitual patterns of sense-making and acting, we are not likely to live and breathe the generative potential that a presencing disposition holds. The gift of presencing in our leadership and life appears to be less about providing us with tangible, actionable knowledge, but rather about *pointing us to some form of truth* - personal or perhaps interpersonal. Our body, more than our mind, is able to recognize this form of truth. As Lakoff & Johnson (1999, p. 6) state, “truth is mediated by embodied understanding and imagination.” Heidegger (1999) saw truth as a process of un-concealing, a progress towards something which is in sight, but never fully seen. We can experience an intimate contact with this ontological realm through our embodied senses but by nature this world is never fully graspable for our mind. As we participate in a dynamic and evolving complex reality, we have to renounce the idea of having or needing absolute knowledge of this reality to navigate life. Incorporating presencing in our way of navigating leadership choices asks us to deeply ground the experiential qualities of truth in our body, so that they become an ongoing guiding quality in our leadership and life.

#### IV. Conclusion

Presencing can be more than a practice to momentarily connect us to wider ways of knowing. It can be a generative way of being and navigating amidst complex and uncertain leadership environments. In the apprenticeship of presencing leadership as a way of being, an ongoing connection with our embodiment appears to be key, for once because it brings us into the

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necessary presencing disposition in our way of being and keeps the contact to our wider senses alive on a day-to-day basis. Moreover, an embodied apprenticeship of presencing leadership appears to ground us in experiencing reality through a participative ontological paradigm, which allows us to access resources and ways of knowing that exceed the rational-analytic realm. To facilitate this embodied apprenticeship of presencing as a way of being, integrating micro practices into our day-to-day leadership appears to make a difference. In particular, our research found a regular grounding practice to be able to help unlock a participative experience of reality and, through that, new resources and responses to challenge. Another micro practice has a key role in bringing a presencing insight to life over time – particularly relevant in a more long-term, strategic leadership context: The practice of navigating with the embodied felt sense of an insight appears to be essential, as it carries with it our connection to a more profound truth that is beyond rational-analytic grasp and that needs to be kept alive in our embodiment. As we commit ourselves to the apprenticeship of presencing leadership, we may find ourselves more and more grounded in an ontological paradigm of participating in an interconnected, source-inspired reality that offers new resources in navigating a complex, ambiguous and uncertain world. Embodying a participative paradigm enables ways of being and leading through generative co-creation that are guided by embodied truth and that hold profound levels of meaning in service of human flourishing.



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