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THE INNER, INTERSUBJECTIVE, AND TRANSPERSONAL EXPERIENCE OF PRESENCING:

Emerging Collective Leadership for Transforming Higher Education

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Abstract: This article explores a collective journey of presencing as an emergent pathway for cultivating collective leadership within higher education. Grounded in a shared inquiry among participants committed to reimagining higher education through more holistic, relational, and presence-based pedagogies, the study examines how presencing functioned as both an ontological and intersubjective process of transformation. Participants engaged in practices aimed at deepening their own capacities for presence across the domains of being, relating, and acting, thereby creating conditions for new forms of collective awareness, relational coherence, and shared vision to emerge. Building upon Theory U while extending beyond its predominantly epistemological orientation, this article draws on dynamic presencing perspectives to investigate the embodied, relational, and transpersonal dimensions of transformative learning and leadership. Particular attention is given to the way deeper attunement to the lived body, heightened intersubjective resonance, and moments of connection to a larger transpersonal source contributed to the emergence of collective leadership capacities. These capacities included expanded self-awareness, a strengthened sense of shared purpose, heart-centred relational engagement, and the co-emergence of actionable vision for transforming pedagogical and leadership practices within higher education. The article suggests that presencing, when engaged as a lived relational and ontological process, offers a powerful developmental pathway for cultivating forms of leadership capable of responding to the complexity, fragmentation, and transitional challenges facing contemporary educational institutions.

Key words: presencing, intersubjective, collective leadership, holistic, ontological, relational, transpersonal, source

I. Introduction

This article examines presencing in the context of Theory U, highlighting the importance of a shift from cognitive, individual centered, transactional approaches to whole-person, collective, transformative approaches in learning and leadership development. This shift facilitates expanded awareness, deeper connection, and collective leadership. While we situate our analysis within the

presencing methodology present in Theory U, we are also expanding the potential of presencing in two theoretical directions outlined by Gunnlaugson (2023) as emerging presencing approaches: its ontological potential to strengthen a dynamic being presence (p. 109), and the depth of the intersubjective experience that connects a group to the source, facilitating the gesture of letting come as co-creation through collective leadership. This paper examines the role of presencing as a process of Open Mind, Open Heart and Open Will (Scharmer & Kaufer, 2013), an expansion of awareness of Being, deep connection, and emerging action rooted in a spiritual source. We frame presencing as a process that defies the inner-outer dualism, cultivating mastery *within* and *between* participants in order to access the transpersonal domain (Bockler, 2024, p. 9). This paper focuses in particular on the embodied and intersubjective potential of presencing to contribute to inner-outer dynamics of integration and connection for co-emergent knowing and collective leadership.

We explore the collective journey of a group of nine educators, graduate students, and coaches to co-create whole-person, relational approaches for transformative academic education through a presencing process. The journey began in January 2021 as the project Activating the Heart in Higher Education in collaboration with The Presencing Institute's u.lab-2X Accelerator for Systems Transformation and continues at present with the Education for Flourishing collaborative action research that creates transformative communities of practice for students, professors and leaders at our university. The group members each had varying degrees of knowledge and experience of Theory U and they gathered to explore the generative, relational and holistic potential of higher education to contribute to leadership development. They were all involved with teaching, learning or coaching based on the framework of transformative leadership. The purpose of the group was to challenge "the privilege of intellectual/rational knowing" (Rendón, 2014, p. 26), the transactional model of education (Riddell, 2024) and the focus on individual learning and achievement (Gunnlaugson et al., 2014). We intended to explore whole-person transformative methods that involved emotions, the body and spirituality, that cultivated relational connection and an ethic of care through a self-reflexive collective process of presencing that involved our own transformation as educators.

II. Collective Leadership and Intersubjectivity

The framework of collective leadership shows that leadership is not simply the heroic action of individuals in socially recognized positions of power, but a relational, emergent practice guided by

shared meaning (Guenther, 2023). Collective leadership is the emergent relational process of group engagement (Hiller et al., 2006). It is seen as an alternative to the person-centered, hierarchy based traditional leadership models that contributes to more positive work environments, more inclusion, and more effectiveness in complex situations (De Brun & McAuliffe, 2023). This framework shifts attention from leaders as individuals with authority, to leadership as a collective practice that emerges from shared meaning and it manifests through social interactions (Foldy & Ospina, 2021).

While the more general definition of collective leadership is about individual members of a team assuming and sharing leadership roles, one important and less explored dimension is the emergence of collective intelligence that is more than the sum of individual leaders' intelligence. This is the intersubjective dimension of leadership, an ontological "mutual co-arising and engagement of interdependent subjects" (Guenther, 2023, p. 9) that contributes to collective leadership. This includes not only first and second person perspective, but also the third perspective that emerges in the "intersubjective field" through the quality of interactions (Gunnlaugson, 2014, p. 306). Leadership as an intersubjective phenomenon pays attention to the interdependence between the development of leaders' consciousness and the quality of connections that build collective leadership (Guenther, 2023). It recognizes the interdependent dynamic between the individuating and participatory modes of being, the need for personal agency and collaboration with others (Heron, 1992). In other words, this perspective transcends the duality between theories of individual and collective leadership, focusing on the relational process of leadership as a co-emergent phenomenon of meaning and action based on "human social constructions that emanate from the rich connections and interdependencies of organizations and their members" (Uhl-Bien, 2006, p. 655).

The Western focus on the individual as the locus of both learning and leadership (Guenther, 2023), combined with academic learning based on cognitive processing of information (Kass 2017; Rendón, 2009, Briciu, 2024), have diminished the capacity for intersubjective experience, and made difficult the emergence of collective intelligence. At an individual level, the educational emphasis on cognitive capacities and technical skills to the detriment of somatic, emotional, spiritual and other forms of intelligence have created a damaging dualism between the mind and the heart, reducing the complexity of consciousness to the intellect (Hocking et al., 2001; Gardner, 1993; Ferrer et al., 2005; Rendón, 2009). At a collective level, the focus on leaders as separate individuals with particular character traits and the transactional, hierarchy-based work culture have overlooked the importance of collective creativity and intelligence (Guenther, 2023; Scharmer & Kaufer, 2013). These two paradigms have contributed to limited self and systems awareness and a dualistic perspective that

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separates the mind from the body and the self from the system (Scharmer, 2018). Leadership development needs to transcend this dualism in order to support the quality of the intersubjective experience conducive to collective creativity. This implies a paradigm shift not only in definitions of leadership, but also in learning and development methods that would enhance a shared experience of awareness of the self through others, a sense that “I am who I am because of my relations and experiences with other people” (Guenther, 2023, p. 10). Some scholars talk about the importance of making space for practical wisdom and accessing forms of knowledge that have been excluded (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 2021), while others argue for pedagogies that nurture complex, generative, collective learning (Gunnlaugson, 2011).

Presencing is a practice that defies the inner-outer, mind, body and heart separation, contributing to deeper connection to self, others, and world that enhances meaning, creativity and shared leadership. In her analysis of presencing as being in care, Southern (2014) refers to its potential for what she calls shared leadership, rather than collective leadership, as a form of leadership where power comes from reciprocal processes of “holding and granting authority while Being in Care” (p. 71). Presencing offers both an epistemological and ontological frame (Gunnlaugson, 2024) for collective leadership development as an innovative approach to the traditional focus on individual leadership development. A well-known presencing methodology that fosters personal and collective transformation through deepening of awareness, cultivation of the intersubjective experience and learning from the future that wants to emerge, is Otto Scharmer’s (2018) Theory U.

Participants in this study engaged collectively in the Theory U presencing process that contributed to their personal transformation and the emergence of collective leadership. Gunnlaugson (2024) expands the epistemological focus of Scharmer’s concept of presencing to an exploration of its ontological dimensions, while Bockler (2024) highlights its relational potential. Our analysis includes both perspectives, exploring in detail the dynamic interdependence between the quality of deep, intersubjective connections and the shifts in identity that opened the self of participants to new embodied possibilities of being and doing. This positive dynamic facilitated a few experiences of accessing the source as a form of spiritual connection to a transpersonal field that nurtured collective leadership.

III. Presencing and Spirituality: The Intersubjective Experience

Scharmer's (2000) concept of presencing makes Theory U a unique transformative process that uses contemplative, arts-based, and embodied participatory methods. Presencing combines deep presence and sensing the emerging future, a holistic, contemplative and intuitive mode of knowing. It relies on a process of group receptivity and intersubjective engagement that envisions and actualizes future possibilities (Scharmer, 2000). There are two radically different aspects in this approach. The first one is the learning from the future, rather than the traditional learning from the past. As Gunnlaugson (2007) suggested, "presencing involves learning from attention to what is emerging—knowledge that is sensed but not yet embodied in our experience" (p. 141). The second aspect is the invitation for individuals to tap into their intersubjective experience and to expand their consciousness by accessing their Higher Self. The individual 'self' (using lowercase s) represents who we are due to our history (i.e. our childhood, education, social and cultural community). The second 'Self' (using capital S) concerns our highest future possibility (Scharmer, 2018). Scharmer (2013) argues that the histories of violence inherent in our social systems keep these two aspects of the self separated, leaving many people disconnected from the deep source of their humanity and creating a spiritual gap (p. 110).

An individualistic ethos sees the small self as separate from others, anchored in personal experience and an individually situated worldview. Presencing enhances participants' connection with themselves and others through the intersubjective experience, creating awareness of self as interconnected with others and the world. It is a process that reconnects the small self with the Higher Self (intrasubjective), self with others (intersubjective), and with the source (transpersonal) (Bockler, 2024, p.9). Scharmer (2013) articulates presencing as a method for transformation and leadership development, while more recent theories of dynamic presencing nuance and deepen its contribution to ontological and relational shifts through an increasing mastery of embodying presence and a presenced way of relating (Gunnlaugson, 2024, p. 177). Embodying presence involves a deeper connection to the self in an expanded awareness of one's inner world as an open, shared field of consciousness. "From that place (of presencing), you are not looking out at the interconnected whole around you. You are seeing it from the inside as you experience it. In other words, you become the social field" (Wilson, Scharmer interview, 2019, p. 190).

In order to engage in the act of presencing, learners need radical openness: "Receptivity to the emerging future requires an open mind, open heart and open will, as the individual's perception opens to the social field" (Scharmer, 2018, p. 31). Scharmer (2000) refers to the process of presencing as an opening of the self through stillness and receptivity, in order to enter a generative

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relationship with others and with the social field. The ontological dimension of presencing leads to the experience of an embodied, interconnected self with an identity that is not reduced to one's personal history. Gunnlaugson (2024) refers to this as “the subtle, interior-mediated forms of embodiment that await contact from deeper levels of one's presencing practice” (p. 177). This is an essential aspect of being presence through moments of stillness, contemplation, awareness of one's embodied sensing, extending the gesture of “letting be” that Gunnlaugson (2024, p. 218) articulates as an important stage between letting go and letting come. This ontological dimension of presencing deepens awareness of one's immediate, embodied experience, a stage that tends to be downplayed in epistemological orientations of presencing (Gunnlaugson, 2025a). The relational aspect of presencing creates “an intersubjective space” through the invitation to empathic dialogue, increased receptivity to the collective field, expanding awareness from the self to others and enhancing the quality of co-presencing (Gunnlaugson & Walker, 2014, p. 130-1).

An increased mastery of the ontological and relational dimensions of presencing through regular personal mindfulness practice and collective engagement in contemplation, reflection, dialogue and arts-based approaches leads to deeper levels of presence and generative experience of collective access to the transpersonal domain of the source. The opening of perception to the social field or the source is predicated on opening the mind, the heart, and the will to a transpersonal experience. This transformation of perception parallels the process of spiritual development defined as an unfolding process of differentiation and integration of different stages of consciousness, moving towards expansion of perspective and unitive complexity (Kegan & Lahey, 2009; Cook-Greuter, 2005; Wilber, 2000; Kass, 2017; Irwin, 2002; Beck & Cowan, 2005). Kass (2017) sees spiritual development as “an expansion of self-awareness beyond the restrictions and limiting isolation of ego consciousness” (p. 111). The process of transcendence starts with opening the mind to the presence of being, continues to deepen with the open-hearted engagement with others, and reaches the depth of access to the source of the social field.

If we rely on Koss & Holder's (2015, p. 207) definition of spirituality as “a feeling of Connectedness to something greater experienced by cultivating a relationship with oneself, one's community, one's environment, and one's perception of the transcendent,” we can argue that the sensing of a future that wants to emerge is a spiritual perception of a greater field that fosters collective leadership. This marks presencing as a method for spiritual development through deeper connection to one's embodied experience, intersubjectivity, and access to the transcendent. Spiritual development is the result of inner integration as connection between the individual and the Higher

Self (ontological), with more receptivity and presence to others (relational) and entry into a deeper intersubjective and interconnected reality (transpersonal) (Wilber, 2000).

While spiritual development is represented as a spiral of ascendent growth, Theory U represents the transformation through presencing as a descent to the bottom of the source through the gestures of letting go, letting be and letting come. Both spiritual development and the connection to the source expand consciousness to a more holistic, systemic and inclusive awareness, but they do it from two different perspectives. While the ascending movement of developmental theories is rooted in an epistemological perspective, the descent into the ground of presence is an ontological experience of “embodied re-subjectification,” a “mesa-turn” Gunnlaugson (2025b, p. 106) examines in detail in his theory of dynamic presencing. This theory shows the importance of a deeper sensing of the body as the ground of being to sustain and bring to life the meta-awareness of presencing (Gunnlaugson, 2025b). It highlights the possibilities of a more integrated, immanent spirituality (Wilber, 2000) that includes the body through a journey to its depth (mesa-turn) rather than attempting to transcend it. This connects the self not only to its future version of possibility, but to the depth and the richness of direct embodied experience, as another form of inner integration and coherence (Gunnlaugson, 2025c.). While individual practices of contemplation and reflection are essential for the embodiment of presence, experiences of intersubjectivity as deep communion with others keep expanding its possibilities.

Intersubjectivity is possible when the self is open enough to enter the world of others through attunement, empathic dialogue, and group coherence that facilitates collective access to the transpersonal domain of the source. Intersubjectivity is the sharing of a collective meaning (Cipolletta et al., 2022) accessed through experiences of connection, resonance and co-regulation that lead to transformation. It is the aliveness between us. Rosa (2019) defined resonance as a mutually balancing act of interaction with others and the world, in which the subject is touched or “affected” by others, responding with interest, emotion, and a sense of self-efficacy. Resonance presupposes a fluid, vibrating and mutually transformative relationship that balances receptivity and action, but it is a way of relating to the world made increasingly difficult by modernity (Rosa, 2019, p. 167). Resonance is an intersubjective experience that cannot be controlled, forced, or used for instrumental means, opening us up to exploration of the mystery and complexity of life (Rosa, 2019).

Two conditions make possible the spiritual aspects of connection to the source in the process of presencing. The first condition is self-awareness, attention re-directed to the source of

our experience, “bending the beam of observation back into its source” (Scharmer & Kaufer, 2013, p. 114). This means awareness not only of thoughts but also sensing of the body, emotions, values, beliefs and unconscious impulses. Whole-person development that integrates cognitive, emotional, spiritual, embodied intelligence contributes to the capacity for self-awareness and embodiment of presence as an awakening to the already intersubjective nature of personhood.

The second condition is creating a collective holding space for experiences of deeper connection to others that help the individual let go of pre-formed worldviews, step into the unknown and engage in the world of others (Scharmer & Kaufer, 2013, p. 115-116). The letting go process leads to the opening of the self to a larger meaning that may contradict or challenge a pre-established self-concept. It is a process that implies a gradual movement to higher complexity and flexibility, where awareness is not individually centered but intersubjective and even transpersonal. The letting go process is a more difficult process of transformation that requires a high level of integration, trust in others and spiritual openness. Between the small self and the Higher Self there is a threshold, a liminal space that must be crossed, a leaning into the unknown that can be terrifying as it implies losing temporarily one’s sense of meaningful orientation in the world (Briciu, 2024). The process of letting go of the ego-based perspective and entering the intersubjective experience can be threatening since it requires a de-centering of individuality and a high level of vulnerability (Guenther, 2023). A collective holding space based on mutual trust, vulnerability and empathic dialogue is an essential aspect of the intersubjective experience. The quality of listening and participants’ previous engagement in contemplative practice influences their level of openness to the presencing process (Gunnlaugson, 2023, p. 310).

Presencing involves a process of conscientization by reducing and overcoming the rigid split between the conscious and the unconscious (head and heart), which also reduces the rigid boundaries between the individual self and others (Ladkin et al., 2018). Accessing a deeper source of one’s humanity and learning to witness the deeper source of others expands perception to future possibilities that are activated by the intersubjective experience. Presencing relies on whole person, relational approaches that use mindfulness, dialogue, reflection and meta-reflection to facilitate personal and collective transformation. As Scharmer (2004) points out, “the outcomes of this process include a heightened level of individual energy and commitment; a heightened field quality of collective presence and energy, and profound long-term changes” (p. 13).

These two forms of ontological and relational mastery facilitate access to the transpersonal experience of a larger field of creativity.

Building a safe container in the Theory U process through the quality of intention, attention, and empathic listening is crucial for supporting participants to let go of the resistance created by fear and lack of trust (Carillo, 2023). The purpose of presencing is connection with the source as a property of the social field, a place of meaning and emergence of new possibilities. The connection to the source contributes to the emergence of collective meaning and nourishes collective creativity. Access to the source depends on deep levels of embodied self-awareness, open consciousness, and mastery of the intersubjective experience. The source is the originator of leadership action, the deep inner place as the originator of will and action (Scharmer, 2018). Accessing the source through presencing means accessing the deepest part of one's will that connects to transpersonal wisdom. When individuals experience their ego-based self, their will may be guided by needs for power, control, social standing, etc., but in their access of the source they become guided by higher order values and principles, such as altruism, care, serving the common good, etc. (Karp & Laegreid, 2014, p. 24).

The source mediates between sensing of the emerging future and leading, it is an activator of an interconnected Will, a space where intention turns into action not as an expression of individual desire but as a mysterious emergence of the Will of the social field. Gunnlaugson (2025a) takes further this process of emergence in contact with the source from a passive-receptive orientation in Theory U to an active-receptive orientation where momentary glimpses of emergence turn into actionable expression and new ways of being and relating (p. 223). The inner attunement to the body as the ground of Being creates more presence from within and capacity for generative emergence in alignment with a transpersonal field as access to “subtle layers of reality often obscured in ordinary awareness (Gunnlaugson, 2025c, p. 201).

The following section will analyze the experiences of presencing in our collective learning journey and the emergence of collective leadership from our intersubjective engagement and access to the source. We will examine both the *how*, the process of emergence through our group experience of presencing, and the *what*, the actionable expression of a transformative vision of higher education. Our analysis will focus on the ontological, intersubjective (relational) and transpersonal dimensions of the process of presencing that supported the emergence of collective leadership. What emerged in our presencing process was the vision of a whole-person (integral), relational, spirituality centric transformative higher education meant to contribute to the

development of transformative leadership. We experienced this vision ourselves in our presencing learning journey through a dynamic process of embodied sensing, heart-based intersubjective connection, and moments of access to the source.

IV. Insights from the Collective Presencing Journey: Ontological, Intersubjective and Spiritual Shifts

IV.1 The Seeds of Collective Leadership

The group included four professors, three students, one administrator and one coach. All of the participants had both personal and professional experiences in reflective practice, spirituality, mindfulness and psychospiritual development. In terms of their engagement with Theory U, three of the professors had participated in the Basic Presencing Training individually prior to the group engagement, while students had learned about it in their courses. All participants were familiar with the principles of Theory U and presencing. What brought them together was a discontent with the reductive, instrumental, individual-based education (Rendón, 2014), and a passion for transformative, whole person participatory approaches in education and leadership development. The purpose of the group was not only to explore these approaches but also to experience them at an ontological and relational level, reconnecting in an embodied way to their meaning and vocation as educators and coaches. We called the group *Activating the Heart in Higher Education* and we engaged in 2021 in the U. Lab 2X Accelerator for Systems Transformation program offered by the Presencing Institute. We met for 2 hours every two weeks for the six months duration of the program, and once a month or every two months after the end of the program for more than three years. This collective experience of presencing contributed to personal and relational transformation that nurtured collective leadership as new initiatives that continue to evolve at present.

In the seeding phase, we shared images that reflected what we perceived as the current state of the higher education system. The images shared were plants in need of watering, big heads, pyramid shapes, disconnection between mind and heart, rows of learners, authority figures, and Plato's cave (See Fig. 1). These images suggested metaphorically the cognitive bias in higher education, its hierarchical structures based on authority and conformity, fragmentation and disconnection, lack of vitality, the separation between theory and practice (Briciu, 2024). While these were more general perspectives on higher education, they also showed the limitations of traditional

leadership development approaches. As we were involved in teaching transformative leadership as an embodied, relational practice, we wanted to find ways to develop transformative leaders through diverse approaches that defied the separation between epistemology and ontology, the self and others, knowledge and spirituality.

Participants in our group reflected together on their shared longing for an integral, transformative vision of education and leadership formation: integration of intellect with emotion, spirituality and embodiment, the classroom as an experience of a learning community, the contribution of education to life, well-being and flourishing, the circle structure, re-igniting the passion for learning and teaching, the inclusion of nature and the cultivation of meaning, joy and creativity (Briciu, 2024).

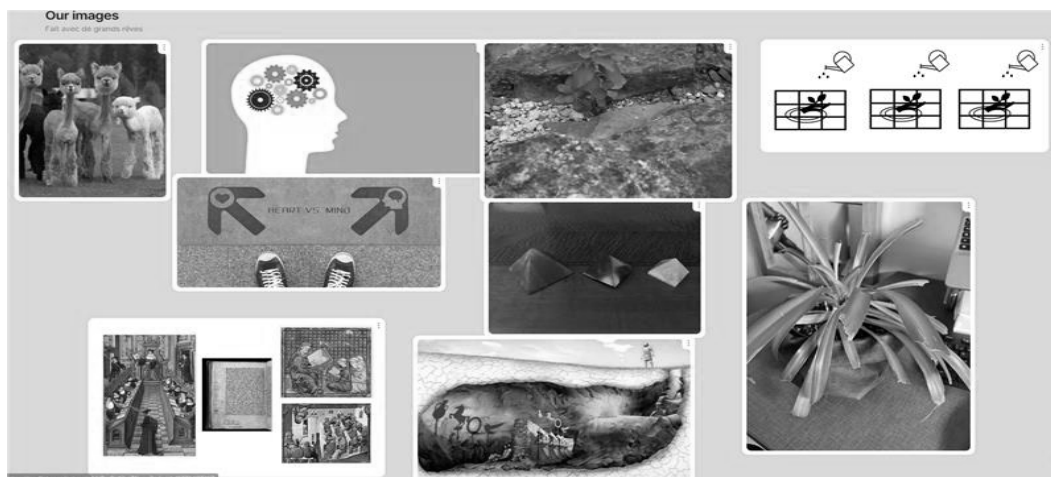


Fig. 1 Images of the Perceived Current Education System

We also explored with the Miro platform a comparison between what we saw as the current state and the ideal of higher education (See Fig. 2). The current state showed fragmentation and boundaries, the financial focus, learning as cognitive processing of information, the exclusion of health, art and nature, represented in the symbol of the broken-heart as the absence of deep connection. What we envisioned as a desired emerging future of higher education was integration, intersubjectivity, inclusion of nature, art and emotions (Briciu, 2024).

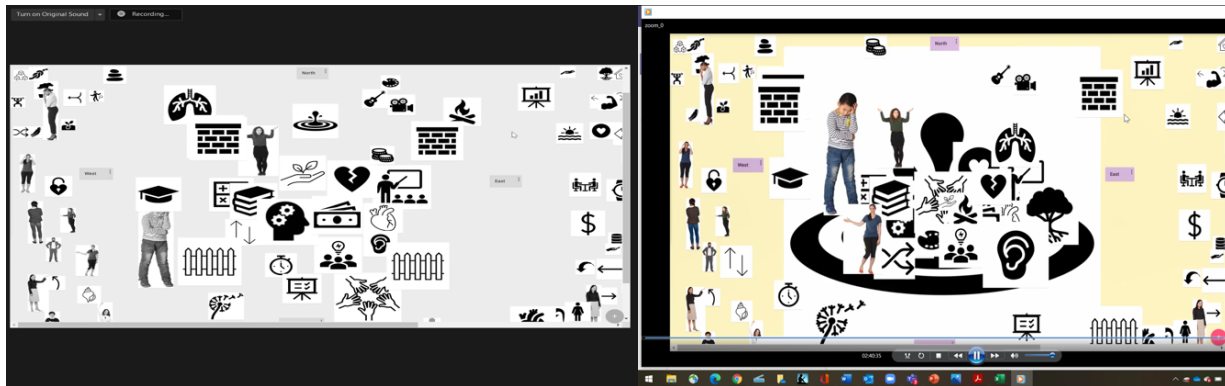


Fig. 2 Current and Emerging Higher Education System

This co-initiating experience of the presencing process through images that represented symbolically the critical and the desired vision of education engaged each person in the group at an ontological, emotional level, reminding us that these were not merely ideas but expressions of our deeper Being, our sense of meaning and purpose.

One method we experienced in the presencing process that led to deep and lasting insights by connecting the ontological, intersubjective, and transpersonal dimensions was the Social Presencing Theater (SPT). We interviewed other colleagues, students and staff in higher education about their experiences, and we used our bodies to represent the deeper meaning of what we heard. Developed by Arawana Hayashi and Otto Scharmer at the Presencing Institute, SPT engages participants in becoming aware of the invisible dynamics between individuals and the systems they inhabit. Through embodied practices, SPT fosters mindfulness, deepens awareness of intention, and supports the experience of oneself as part of an interconnected social field. This process surfaces patterns of resistance, fragmentation, and disconnection, while enabling access to deeper sources of insight (Hayashi, 2021). In doing so, SPT supports participants in recognizing leadership as a relational, intersubjective practice that links the present to the future.

The practice relies on the inherent wisdom of the body and its relational sensitivity to activate deeper meaning, gentleness, and attunement to other people (Hayashi, 2021). Each one of us represented a certain body shape that would express how those we interviewed experienced higher education. In other words, we embodied other people’s perspectives, connecting deeply to our Being presence to others, while also entering through empathy an intersubjective field where their stories were transposed in our bodies. This led to “inter-bodily resonance” (Bockler, 2024, p. 18) as a way to express hidden patterns of the higher education system. As we witnessed our

embodied shapes we all had a moment of realization of the deeper, transpersonal dimension of the social field. We realized that all our body shapes represented some form of suffering, stress, pressure, and disconnection (Briciu, 2024). We felt the collective pain of an alienating system in and through our bodies. We also felt the longing of our embodied shapes to shift away from suffering into expansion, freedom and connection. This realization strengthened our commitment to a transformative vision of higher education that was life-giving, meaningful and hopeful. This was a moment of presence to our individual and collective pain and longing, realizing that both were collectively shared in the social field. We felt that we were part of something bigger than our individual concerns and desires. This was the moment of planting the seeds of our collective leadership.

IV.2 The Soil: The Open-Hearted Quality of Intersubjective Experience

One important phase in our presencing process was the creation of a cohesive group container of safety, inclusion, open-heartedness and connection around a shared purpose. While the reflection on higher education was more outward focused, the participatory, reflexive, contemplative and dialogical processes contributed to a quality of intersubjective experience that nourished the soil of collective leadership.

First, the contemplative exercises and the translation of knowledge into images, body shapes, sculptures and other forms of representation engaged all our senses. We made our emotions themselves objects of inquiry, seeing them as sources of a “feminine” intelligence, intentionally aiming for more integration between mind, heart and body (Briciu, 2024). The witnessing and caring presence of others created more openness to vulnerability and deeper sharing, while also nurturing an intersubjective field of presence. As Bockler (2024) suggests, the balance of masculine and feminine principles through presencing mastery contributes to more integration, while intersubjective experiences of Being in Care (Southern, 2014) enhance safety and regulation of the nervous system that facilitates a more open and connected engagement with the world. In that sense, the intersubjective presence enhanced our individual Being presence through more self-awareness, confidence and connection, defying the inner-outer separation inherent in Western education and leadership development. There were multiple moments in our meetings when participants felt that one of the speakers was expressing their own thoughts. This was an experience both of relational presence and collective access to the source that was transformative, energizing and hopeful, like a river that was carrying us effortlessly to a common destination. We also sensed

the emergence of a deeper meaning and perspective through our dialogue that was speaking through us but was also the manifestation of a transpersonal wisdom. Our ideas were flowing from a generative source, that of a future wanting to be born, expressing what Bohm (1996) named the deeper levels of shared meaning.

The deep and vulnerable sharing of our inner lives, our Being, including personal struggles and dreams, created a strong sense of connection, an attunement and resonance with each other that enhanced openness and flow as traits of presencing, creating what Bockler (2024) refers to as “integrative we-spaces” (p. 11) The conversations took place in a circle structure, using the principles of generative listening and dialogue, involving moments of mindfulness and contemplation of images. Scharmer (2018) defines generative dialogue as a co-creative exploration of new meaning that transcends habitual ways of engaging in dialogue: conventional (talking nice), debate (talking tough) and empathetic (reflective inquiry). We engaged in reflective, participatory inquiry into the deeper meaning of our work using images, storytelling, questions and metaphors. Empathic dialogue was the starting ground of dialogue in our meetings, and we created moments of reflection on the quality of our intersubjective experience itself, using the heart as a central metaphor. Open-heartedness is a pre-requisite to the intersubjective experience, a way to “transcend our relational boundaries” (Scharmer & Kaufer, 2013, p. 172) through deepening of connection, empathy, and authentic expression.

The metaphor of the open heart is central in Scharmer’s (2013, 2018) work as a pre-requisite to engage in transformation as access to our relational self, a decentered ego that can also “look at a situation through the eyes of somebody else” (Scharmer, 2018, p. 25). Open heartedness is a state of vulnerability, authenticity and empathy for other people’s experiences that creates an intersubjective way of being. The depth and extent of this openness leads to the spiritual experience of accessing the source, a feeling of interconnectedness that enhances the ability to inhabit the perspective of others and of the transpersonal field. There were a few experiences throughout our presencing journey when we moved from the intersubjective experience of open-hearted engagement and empathic dialogue to the fourth level of generative dialogue, although that was a rarer occurrence. In the process of presencing, generative dialogue involves access to collective creativity, a sense of stillness and witnessing (Scharmer, 2007) that emerged in our group in privileged moments of grace. We experienced that through the Social Presencing Theatre, the storytelling with symbols and metaphors, the contemplation of images, the deep reflection on our meaning and vocation, the dialogue about our collective leadership. We felt through these experiences the emergence of a

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higher wisdom, a transpersonal presence that created a deep sense of meaning, purpose, and clarity about what we needed to do. It also felt like a resource of well-being and hope fueled by a sense that we were part of something larger than us. The deep connection among the members of the group was created by five important aspects: authenticity, a shared purpose, a safe space of open, trusting and caring attitude for each other and for the group as a whole, a centering of the heart as a guiding principle. The intersubjective experience of presencing served as an important source of self-awareness, well-being, meaning and connection during the pandemic period and continues to evolve through new articulations of the group and its collective leadership.

IV.3 The Growing Tree: The Emergence of Collective Leadership

If the seeds of our presencing were the embodied sense of the suffering in the system and a collective sense of shared longing, the quality of the intersubjective experience was the soil for growing interconnected roots that nurtured both our well-being and our collective leadership. This section will outline two examples of the emergence of our group agency and the transfer of ideas and longings into concrete actions as branches of a growing tree. One such experience of emergence was the collective decision to offer a series of transformative workshops at our university that would invite students, academic staff, and community members. The decision emerged collectively and was voiced joyfully by multiple participants with the full agreement of everyone. Each person was to take leadership of offering and facilitating a half day workshop. We saw our group as an organic process of collective emergence for the purpose of transforming higher education, the growth of a tree that would support life. As one group participant commented, “We came together to experiment, we then invited other people. My heart is still activated. We are visible at the university. It is integrated into my courses. We have created a space...”

Another such moment showed up when we realized collectively the important contribution of whole-person, relational approaches such as presencing to mental health, well-being and flourishing. That generative connection to the source fed the inspiration to apply collectively for a research grant that aimed to create communities of practice for students, professors and leaders, with the purpose of building an academic ecosystem of flourishing. These actions show an activation of our collective will from the source, the larger social field through the alignment of Open Mind, Open Heart, Open Will.

Gunnlaugson (2011) highlights the importance of creating conditions where ideas can emerge “in the conversational field of dialogue and presencing” (p. 4). While he speaks about these

conditions as necessary for the classroom, we first created them in our own presencing experience as educators. This led to collective reflection about how to create these conditions for presencing in our own classrooms and how to advocate for their importance in the academia. One participant shared the impact of the presencing process and the desire to engage in action: “I see echoes of this in everything that I do. I want to hold on to this project and not let it fizzle out. There is something here that we want to share with others. We need something concrete that we move towards.” Another participant expressed more clearly the emergence of collective leadership “ I think it was a good thing we had this project funded. This has also become an accountability. It took the project out to the public, we talked about it during Faculty Council. It’s good to be back together to rekindle a flame.”

The presencing process created special experiences of intersubjectivity that contributed to self-awareness, authenticity, open-hearted connection, shared purpose and well-being. Through generative dialogue and the emergence of a higher wisdom of the social field we began to see glimpses of possibility, the emerging future of a higher education centered on transformation, relationality, holistic development, inclusion and integration. We were presencing the emerging future of an integral, spirituality-centric and relational higher education. The presencing learning journey engaged us in embodying collectively the very conditions we aspired to generate for our students: integration, access to the intersubjective/spiritual dimension of learning, and collective creativity grounded in the source.

In their exploration of the source of leadership, Karp & Laegreid (2014) address the inner conditions that lead to the act of taking leadership, assuming one’s willpower. The presencing process supports a collective assuming of leadership, assuming a willpower that is not based on one individual’s agency but the desire of a future that wants to emerge. This collective willpower is an energy that arises in the intersubjective experience like a breath of life that inspires individuals to take leadership together. It is a different form of power as an engine of action based on the mobilization of a group of people to achieve a shared purpose as expression of a transpersonal field. “Leadership is hence a process that includes energy transfer between people, and one such transfer is the willpower exhibited by those assuming leadership in situations where they are tested...” (Karp & Laegreid, 2014, p. 24). For our group, these special moments of connection to the source reflect what Bockler (2024) names “participation in the deepest taproots of being” (p. 14) that strengthened both our agency and our coherence as a group. The emerging collective vision of a different higher education crystalized in a specific set of actions, such as a series of eight transformative workshops,

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the co-creation of an action research project called Education for Human Flourishing, that builds communities of practice for students, professors and leaders with the purpose of flourishing; mentoring students to lead connection circles for mental health, and finally, an ongoing reflection and dialogue in various committees regarding presencing approaches that contribute to inner development, relational care, and ecosystem flourishing. Three of our members joined the well-being committee at our university. We are currently partnering with colleagues in other universities with the intention to build a network of small scale Canadian universities centered on transformative principles of ecosystems flourishing.

While we were all energized and moved by this shared vision in our presencing journey, our collective leadership required a shared level of commitment and engagement from all members of a group that was difficult to sustain over time as we got busy with life and work. Even though our group was successful in creating a sense of safety, equal participation without power relationships, intersubjective experience and collective creativity, it did encounter issues in the quality of involvement over time, action coordination, and the fact that one member was acting as a steward of the group thus taking more of a leading role than other participants. Two of the participants took their retirement after 2 years of involvement, one started a family, one experienced health issues and one moved out of the group based on an institutional disagreement. A new professor joined the group in 2022. In that sense, the coaching process analyzed by Gunnlaugson (2025a) is better suited for sustaining dynamic presence over time than the more contained Theory U process. The growing tree of our collective presencing had moments of stagnation, breaking apart, and changing shape. This shows the fragility of emerging collective leadership in alignment with the source. It requires integration of the self as more attunement to one's body, emotions and spirituality (holistic development) and relational experiences of open-hearted connection in groups that need to be sustained over time as iterative, resourcing processes of generative dialogue. While these two aspects represent the basic conditions for emergence of collective leadership, the collective actions need coherence, coordination, and structural enabling conditions, such as a research project, a new course, or an academic initiative in our case. Our greatest difficulty was to maintain the engagement of the group over time and to add new members with similar presencing mastery.

V. Conclusion

The presencing learning journey created opportunities to shift from our individual small self into the intersubjective experience, creating positive inner-outer dynamics that opened portals to the source as a way to bring to life the future that wanted to emerge. The ontological quality of embodiment, of being presence, and the intersubjective experience of generative dialogue fostered spiritual experiences of connection to the source, as a field that unified self, others, and the transpersonal, leading to collective creativity and leadership. This meant on one hand the emergence of certain actions that supported a vision of higher education based on integration, transformation, spiritual development and connectedness. On the other hand, it also meant the transformation of our own engagement: feeling more whole, self-aware and open to others, more attuned to the alignment of our intuitions with a larger social field, more compassionate and empowered to build “power with” others through collective leadership based on shared meaning (Berger, 2005). The presencing journey created the conditions for the group to integrate deeper and more diverse ways of knowing, access intersubjectivity as a resource for collective creativity, and connect to the source. This led to the emergence of collective leadership as shared meaning, open-hearted connection, and alignment with a transpersonal field.

This paper examined the contribution of presencing to ontological, relational and transpersonal shifts in the way we embody and live our vocation as educators and facilitators of leadership development. It fostered more integration of our Being, a deeper experience of connectedness to each other and the world, and a clearer alignment with a greater purpose. One participant expressed this as “the need to claim our full humanity, to free the whole person to realize their own potential: both individual and collective.” The contemplative, arts-based, embodied and relational methods of the Theory U journey created the conditions for accessing the source, conditions that were also made possible by the group participants’ preexisting experience with spiritual practice and generative dialogue. This article described the inner and intersubjective experiences of presencing as a deeper connection to the self and others, creating access to the source, as a transpersonal field supporting collective leadership. Our process of presencing was not only epistemological, but also ontological and relational, creating shifts at the level of our inner world, the quality of relationships, and our actions. This analysis highlights the importance of presencing to foster collective leadership as more than the sum of individual actions, a leadership that connects individuals with the ground of their Being, with each other, and with a transpersonal

wisdom that fosters creativity, hope, and the common good. It holds potential as a holistic, relational and transformative method for academic education and collective leadership development to bring to life a more hopeful and interconnected future.

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