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CULTIVATING PRESENCING AS AN EMERGENT FIELD OF LEARNING AND ACTION

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Abstract: This article is grounded in ongoing work within a graduate-level educational context focused on vertical development through the co-creation of collective spaces where participants feel free to be themselves. Over three years of engaging the U process with students, faculty, administrative staff, and industry professionals, our inquiry required staying with uncertainty for emergence to come forth. Guided by the insight that “the way to do is to be,” we approach presencing as the underlying phenomenon shaping this work—encountered as practice, shared space, moment of emergence, developing capacity, and lived outcome. Drawing on reflexive autobiographical narratives and facilitator journals, we observed participants suspending habitual reactions and orienting toward shared meaning, revealing multiple pathways into presencing and the need for sustained inner work. In dialogue with Theory U, Eastern wisdom traditions (including the Bhagavad Gita and Integral Yoga), and Bohmian–Krishnamurti dialogue, three themes emerged: the nature of the field across intra-personal, intersubjective, and outer environments; the evolution of consciousness as presencing becomes palpable within a collective social field; and the development of knowing–being–doing capacities supporting transformation. Two simultaneous movements were observed: the formation of a conscious ego (personal growth) and the transcendence of ego through surrender and letting go (inner growth). Through these movements, the bottom of the U came to be understood as an ever-present wellspring or Source, giving rise to a presencing knowing in the present through which boundaries soften and emergent possibilities arise.

Key words: Presencing, Collective Leadership, Dialogue, Theory U, Integral learning, Capacity building, Vertical literacy, Transformation, Systems thinking.

I. Introduction

The void sings everything into Being. You are the singing void. Then sing. — Monica Gagliano

What began as an inquiry into the nature of a “safe space” for learning and development gradually evolved into a deeper exploration of the field and ways of knowing involved in transformative experience and growth. For us as researchers, practitioners, and explorers, this articulation of the void closely resembles our experience of being at the bottom of the “U.” Scharmer (2018) describes the bottom of the U as a space of presencing—a silent interval of reflection between observation and action.

The term presencing combines the notions of presence and sensing. At the bottom of the U, “letting go” and “letting come” occupy a shared space. These are not opposites but complementary movements held in dynamic tension. Both must coexist for something new to emerge. Entering this state of consciousness depends upon one's capacity to deepen awareness of these movements and the relationship between them. Scharmer (2018) refers to this depth as Source and suggests that access to it requires an open mind, an open heart, and an open will.

The challenge of articulating Source is not unique to Theory U. Similar questions have occupied contemplative traditions for centuries. One of the most evocative descriptions appears in the Kena Upanishad, which points toward a reality that precedes and exceeds the ordinary operations of mind, perception, and language:

That which is unexpressed by the word, that by which the word is expressed,
know That to be the Brahman and not this which men follow after here.

That which thinks not by the mind, that by which the mind is thought, know That to be
the Brahman and not this which men follow after here.

— *The Upanishads II*

Like the proverbial finger pointing to the moon, such teachings do not define Source so much as orient us toward it. They suggest that beneath habitual thought and action lies a deeper wellspring of knowing and creativity. In moments of presence, one experiences a greater openness of mind, heart, and will through which new possibilities can emerge. To be like water and move in accordance with one's inner nature (dharma). To thine own self be true.

Presencing, in this sense, is the capacity to sense what is wanting to come forth and to act from a deeper source of knowing. In our work cultivating collective social fields, we came to view presencing as a foundation for capacity building. Traditionally, capacity building is understood as the process of developing skills, abilities, and competencies within individuals and organizations. Our experience of holding space and cultivating fields for transformation led us to a complementary view: that many capacities already exist in latent form and require the conditions of presence to become accessible.

Our intent, therefore, was to cultivate a practice field that supports the growth and development of the capacities needed to engage an emerging future. As Scharmer (2018) notes, many of our institutions struggle not only to provide the right answers, but even to ask the right questions. One question that guided our inquiry was: How can we collectively shift from “What is in it for me?” to “What can I contribute?”—moving from I to We, and from a separate sense of self toward self in relation to the larger whole?

In attempting to facilitate the co-creation of these transformative social fields, we began to observe recurring patterns across different cohorts. At certain moments within a session, a palpable shift could be sensed in the conversation. Indicators of these shifts included a dissolving of boundaries, changes in the atmosphere of the group, moments of creative emergence, and a shared sense of meaning or purpose. These openings often appeared when one or more participants risked bringing their authentic or vulnerable selves into the collective space. As participant-facilitators interested in understanding the conditions that gave rise to such moments, we found ourselves increasingly drawn to the phenomenon of presencing itself. What we observed were patterns that seemed, to varying degrees, reproducible through cultivating the conditions of the field and holding space with intentional awareness.

II. Methodological Orientation

Our preference for qualitative inquiry led us to experiment with phenomenological approaches that drew on first-, second-, and third-person perspectives into the lived experiences of participants and participant-facilitators. This orientation reflects our interest in understanding transformation as it unfolds within individuals, between participants, and across the collective space itself.

Having more than one facilitator in every session afforded us the opportunity to inhabit multiple roles simultaneously: observer, participant, and researcher. This enabled us to remain close to lived experience while also engaging in reflective sensemaking. Each of us kept journal notes of our observations and felt experiences during and following the sessions, which formed the basis of our use of reflexive autobiographical narratives. Rather than treating subjectivity as a source of bias, we approached reflexivity as a way of remaining attentive to inner movements, shifts in awareness, and emergent forms of knowing as they arose in practice.

Over several months, the five authors remained in dialogue with one another through a series of face-to-face and virtual semi-structured meetings. These dialogues functioned as inquiry spaces in their own right, where we shared and mapped our intentions, interests, and experiences. Following each session, we revisited, framed, and reframed our guiding questions in

relation to the process being used, while remaining responsive to what was unfolding within the collective field.

Our ongoing meta-dialogue concerning content, flow, and facilitation, grounded in participant experience, offered insight into whether conditions were supporting or constraining emergence within the transformational learning process. In this inquiry, coherence, resonance, and the felt sense of emergence within the collective field served as primary indicators of validity, rather than external verification or replication. In this way, the inquiry remained iterative, relational, and responsive, shaped by the very phenomena it sought to understand.

III. Beginnings of our journey

Our individual journeys brought us into the collective space of ULab 1x in 2020 and later into ULab 2x, where we developed the Leadership Lab prototype for master's-level students at ITM Business School. The intent of Leadership Lab was to provide an integrated approach to educating future stewards of the earth by helping students see themselves more fully and recognize their place within the larger whole. Beyond the boundaries of traditional curricula, it offered a space for exploring their humanity. While developing this prototype, we received recurring feedback from students who described it as the only class where they felt valued, where they could be themselves without fear of judgment, and where the experience carried a therapeutic quality. It was at this point that we began asking ourselves how such an experience might be made available to a broader group of students.

The effects of creating holding spaces are often encountered as a felt experience that reverberates into both personal and professional life. Our response to this calling was to create the Facilitators module and open this pathway to anyone interested in cultivating such spaces for students, including faculty members, administrative staff, and former Leadership Lab participants. The intention was to reach those who resonated with this work beyond conventional qualifications or selection criteria. In retrospect, we came to recognize that what participants were describing as “holding space” was also an entry into presencing as we understand it in this article: a lived phenomenon encountered as a practice, a shared space, a moment of emergence, a capacity that develops over time, and an outcome that extends beyond the session itself.

III.1 Building the Facilitators Module

“The success of an intervention depends on the interior condition of the intervenor.”

— Bill O’Brien

While co-creating the Facilitators module, we incorporated concepts from systems thinking (Eisler & Fry, 2019; Kantor, 2012; Macy, 2021; Senge, 1990), dialogue (Bohm, 1980, 1996; Isaacs, 1999), mindfulness (Kornfield, 1993; Siegel, 2018), somatic awareness, levels of listening (Krishnamurti, 1991; Scharmer, 2018), humble inquiry (Schein, 2013), shadow work, the power of vulnerability, nonviolent communication (King, 1963/2010), journaling, power and love (Kahane, 2010; Wink, 1998), and presencing emergence (Gunnlaugson, 2005, 2015, 2021, 2023; Jaworski, 2012). Additionally, pearls from various Eastern and Western wisdom traditions were consulted. We worked from the assumption that a holding space is an interactive and dynamically co-created space, enriched by everyone’s presence, and can never be a one-way monologue.

One of the requirements of the Leadership Lab was that each session be facilitated by a pair rather than a single individual. The intention was to model a dynamic exchange between facilitators and the larger group, demonstrating that learning unfolds through interaction. Much like a dance, the process invited participants to build on one another’s contributions in the moment, appreciate diverse perspectives, and remain curious about one another’s experiences and insights.

III.2 What we began to notice in the cohorts

Within the Facilitator cohorts, we were often struck by the contrast between the limited amount of reading participants were willing to undertake and the profound moments that emerged when participants—including facilitators, whom we view as active participants rather than static holders of a space—gave themselves permission to open their hearts. In turn, this often created opportunities for others to experience empathy, compassion, and kindness within the group. Many participants had worked together in the same organization for years and appeared to be experiencing this softening of their external armour together for the first time. At the same time, sustaining these experiences required ongoing work beyond the sessions themselves, both at the individual and organizational levels.

We also heard comments from cohort members noting that a particular individual had

attended multiple cohorts and yet appeared largely unchanged outside the sessions. Such observations often made us smile, as they reflected a common tendency to focus on the growth and development of others while overlooking our own ongoing work. They also revealed an assumption that transformation should be immediately visible. Our experience suggested otherwise. Meaningful change often unfolds gradually and requires a sustained commitment to inner work. Recognizing this can be one of the more challenging lessons on the developmental journey.

Another theme that emerged concerned the way the space changed when individuals in positions of authority attended the sessions. A greater degree of restraint could often be sensed within the group. There were also moments when individuals in such roles chose to lower their guard and speak openly about their struggles, particularly the pressure of continually appearing strong or in control. These conversations invited reflection on power, power distance, and the ways in which we can inadvertently strip positions of authority of their humanity. Paradoxically, many participants in leadership roles seemed to long for precisely this recognition—to be seen as human beyond their titles and responsibilities. At the same time, participants in less senior organizational positions often felt sufficiently safe and valued to express themselves openly in the presence of authority.

As some facilitators began leading additional Leadership Lab sessions, a range of experiences emerged. Some found freedom in releasing the expectations they placed upon themselves as educators, while others navigated an awkward yet meaningful dance with their co-facilitator. After four consecutive cohorts, with several participants choosing to attend more than once, we initiated a six-week deeper-dive program for those who had completed the Facilitators cohort. The purpose of this exploration was to use dialogue processes to uncover blind spots and bring inner chatter into greater awareness so that we might become more effective instruments for this work. Much like life itself, our efforts to cultivate social spaces that support the development of inner capacities have remained both messy and beautiful. The constant has been a willingness to show up and continue from where we are.

For us as facilitators, this work also served as a continual reminder to release expectations and allow emergence to unfold. We learned to engage our own vulnerabilities and assumptions with greater openness, at times laughing at ourselves within the session itself. Such moments occasionally surprised participants, as this degree of openness and self-reflection did not always align with conventional images of a teacher. We also struggled to encourage participants to address one another by first names rather than titles, with admittedly mixed success. Along the way, we questioned whether we were overlooking something, what new

material might be introduced, and how best to invite meaningful conversation. Yet despite these concerns, we repeatedly discovered that engaging fully with the present moment and uncovering the learning already contained within it offered the most generative path forward. In this way, the “bottom of the U” became less a conceptual reference and more an ever-present wellspring of Source to which we could continually return, giving rise to a presencing knowing in the present.

It is also important to note that the Facilitator cohorts began during the pandemic, a period marked by significant inner and outer upheaval. ITM as an institution was likewise at a critical threshold, facing the need to transform in order to survive and thrive. These conditions created fertile ground for something new to emerge from possibilities already present within the organizational fabric. The ULab process and the Facilitators program provided a renewed sense of centering from which further creative action could arise.

IV. Creating the Conditions: Practices and Principles that Support Presencing

As we reflected on these experiences, we increasingly came to understand them through the lens of presencing as a lived phenomenon. What follows explores several of the conditions and practices that appeared to support its emergence within the collective field.

IV.1 The Field or Space

We use the terms field and space to refer to a dimension of experience that was repeatedly encountered yet difficult to define conceptually. It was experienced both individually and collectively as a shared atmosphere of awareness, connection, and possibility. While elusive in nature, its presence often became palpable through shifts in attention, relational openness, and the emergence of new insights. From our observations, both intention and emergence appeared to play important roles in shaping this space. Intention provided orientation and coherence, while emergence allowed the unexpected to unfold. Together, these movements created conditions through which participants could encounter presencing more directly.

Although the facilitators determined the overall structure and content of the program, the process itself was intentionally left open to emergence so that participants could feel heard and respond from their own experience. Rather than treating learning as the transmission of predetermined knowledge, we increasingly came to view it as a participatory process of discovery. In retrospect, we came to recognize that we were implicitly following several learning principles articulated by Sri Aurobindo. The first, *that nothing can be taught*, invited a stance of humility toward learning and development. The second, *that the mind must be consulted in its own*

growth, encouraged us to honour the pace and needs of participants as they unfolded. When a particular pedagogy did not resonate, we experimented with alternatives and willingly set aside predetermined agendas in order to remain responsive to what was emerging.

The third principle, *from near to far*, suggests that learning begins from where individuals are and gradually unfolds toward what they may become. This orientation created space for different levels of consciousness and development. For some participants, the emphasis was on personal growth and individuation. For others, it involved inner growth through letting go of ego and cultivating a deeper connection with Source. The essence of this movement is perhaps best captured in the Buddhist teaching: “we begin where we are.”

These principles shaped our facilitation as well as our broader approach to learning and development. Experiential learning formed the foundation of our approach, allowing participants to embody insights within their personal, professional, and social lives. The modules were designed with an awareness of the complex and rapidly changing business, ecological, and societal realities participants were navigating, while remaining responsive to what emerged within the field itself.

IV.2 Beginning with Mindfulness and Prayer

We began each session with ten minutes of guided mindfulness followed by a prayer of intention. Participants then engaged in a check-in process related to the learning materials and themes being explored. These opening practices created an opportunity for individuals to transition from the demands of work, commuting, and daily life into the collective space. Over time, participants consistently reported that these practices helped them become more grounded, present, and receptive to the learning process.

IV.3 Suspension of outer layers of self and letting go/come into the present moment

Through our experiences both within and beyond the sessions, we came to recognize the importance of sustained inner work for facilitators and participants alike. Such work took many forms, including meditation, mindfulness, communion with nature, reflection, and acts of service. As Jaworski (2012) observes, “the conscious development of facilitators is paramount” (p. 43). Our experience suggests that transformative learning depends upon this ongoing inner work and cannot be delegated solely to facilitators or participants. Rather, it calls for a shared commitment to self-awareness, reflection, and growth.

As individuals engaged in these practices, we often observed a gradual softening of

habitual identities, assumptions, and defences. This created greater openness to the present moment and increased receptivity to what was emerging within both the individual and the collective field. In this sense, the movement of letting go and letting come was not experienced as a technique, but as an ongoing process of becoming available to the deeper possibilities present within oneself and the larger whole.

IV.4 What Emerged in the Field

Overall, the practices described above appeared to create conditions in which certain phenomena became more likely to arise. Across multiple cohorts, we began noticing recurring patterns that participants and facilitators alike experienced as indicators of a deeper shift within the collective field. These phenomena were often difficult to predict and could not be intentionally manufactured. Yet when they occurred, they carried distinctive qualities of coherence, connection, and heightened awareness that appeared to reorganize how individuals related to themselves, one another, and the larger whole. What follows are several of the most consistent patterns we observed as presencing became increasingly palpable within the field.

IV.4.1 Sudden Insight and Illumination

These moments were unpredictable. Even in cohorts where individuating aspects of being appeared more prominent, there were occasions when defences softened and a sudden shift occurred in the nature and depth of conversation. Wilber's (2000) observation that the witness-self is available to everyone, regardless of their stage of consciousness, surfaced repeatedly in the sessions. The container appeared capable of holding participants from diverse stages of consciousness while supporting a movement from more individuated expressions of being toward more participatory ways of relating. At such moments, insights often emerged with a quality of illumination, accompanied by a felt sense that something larger than the individual perspective had entered the conversation.

IV.4.2 Dissolving of Boundaries

Examples of boundaries that appeared to dissolve, albeit momentarily, through these sessions included those based on geographical distance (participants joined from India, the United States, and multiple cities across India), time zones, societal and organizational roles, gender, age (ranging from 21 to over 60 years), language (not everyone spoke English, or spoke it fluently), educational attainment, and other external markers of success that often create separation and division.

The key to this experience was often the opening of the heart space when someone chose to share a personal story, struggle, or vulnerability. In doing so, others seemed to melt into a larger collective heart space, feeling for another as they would for themselves. Through the depth of this shared feeling, something appeared to shift and transform—not only for the individual who had spoken, but also for those who had remained silent. In such moments, differences that ordinarily seemed important receded into the background, giving way to a deeper sense of connection, shared humanity, and belonging.

IV.4.3 Experiences of Synchronicity

“When we take right action at the proper moment in time, those with similar intention and purpose are drawn to us, creating the phenomenon of “hidden doors” and “doors opening” (Jaworski, 2012). Experiences of synchronicity emerged as a recurring theme across many of the sessions. Participants frequently spoke of meaningful coincidences, unexpected connections, and timely insights that seemed to arrive precisely when they were needed. As participants became more attentive to these experiences, many began noticing synchronicities not only within the sessions themselves but also in their lives beyond them. Such moments often reinforced trust in the process and contributed to a growing sense that something larger was participating in the unfolding journey.

IV.5 From Presencing to Right Action

As awareness becomes increasingly centred in presence, aspects of ourselves that are ordinarily experienced as fragmented or separate begin to find greater coherence and integration. In such moments, what many traditions describe as the higher self or soul is able to participate more fully in our lives. Action no longer arises solely from habit, reaction, or personal preference, but begins to emerge from a deeper source of knowing. It is this movement that we associate with right action.

Throughout our inquiry, we observed that moments of presencing were often accompanied by subtle yet noticeable shifts in how participants responded to themselves, to others, and to the situations they faced. Rather than reacting automatically, participants appeared more capable of pausing, listening, discerning, and responding from a broader awareness of the whole. Action seemed to arise from a deeper coherence between intention, attention, and awareness. In this sense, right action emerged less as a technique to be learned and more as a consequence of presence itself.

The Bhagavad Gita (Ravindra, 2017) offers a useful lens for understanding this

movement through the relationship between the field (kshetra) and the knower of the field (kshetragna). From this perspective, growth involves becoming increasingly aware of the forces, habits, emotions, and assumptions that shape our experience. Such awareness creates the possibility of responding rather than reacting. The journey begins with silence and self-observation, yet also calls for aspiration, discernment, and a willingness to surrender what no longer serves.

Viewed in this way, right action is not simply about making better decisions. It arises from an ongoing relationship with the field of our own experience and from an increasing capacity to remain present to what is emerging. As participants deepened their ability to attend to themselves, others, and the collective field, new possibilities for action often became visible. Presencing in turn appeared as a pathway through which more coherent, responsive, and life-giving action could emerge.

V. Presencing Across Difference: Age, Roles, and Developmental Readiness

Younger students were, in general, more receptive to many of the practices and concepts introduced in the sessions than some faculty members and organizational leaders. While this observation may not be surprising, it felt worth noting given that the Facilitators program brought together students, faculty, administrative staff, and senior leaders within the same collective space. We observed that practices such as deep listening, coaching circles, presencing, systems thinking, and orienting from the whole were often more readily embraced by students. Perhaps they carried fewer assumptions about how learning ought to occur, or less armour that needed to be set aside before entering the experience.

Several students brought a lightness of presence that quietly anchored the space. Their openness, curiosity, and willingness to participate often invited others into the conversation. At the same time, when they spoke, it was evident that many had grasped the deeper significance of the work and the importance of creating holding spaces within a rapidly changing world. One of the gifts of these sessions was that students who might otherwise remain silent in more traditional classroom environments often felt free to speak from the heart. In doing so, they contributed to the depth and vitality of the collective field.

VI. Evolution and Growth of Consciousness

As we reflected on these differences in receptivity and engagement, the evolution and growth of consciousness emerged as a central theme in our inquiry. Drawing on the work of Sri Aurobindo and his long-time disciple A. S. Dalal, we found it helpful to distinguish between

personal growth and inner growth, two dimensions that frequently unfolded simultaneously within the cohorts.

VI.1 Personal Growth

Dr. A. S. Dalal emphasizes the importance of distinguishing between personal growth and inner growth. He notes that, until an individuality has been formed, the human being remains an amorphous entity, more or less fused with the unconscious totality of existence. It is through the development of a conscious ego—an “individualization of being in becoming”—that a person gradually becomes an individual.

Through the ego, a particular formation of physical, vital, and mental experience is distinguished from the rest of the being and comes to be regarded as the self. In this sense, the ego serves an important developmental function, enabling emergence from unconsciousness through a progressively greater awareness of the physical, vital, and mental dimensions of one’s being. Contemporary approaches that focus on the development of ego and individuality, ranging from psychotherapeutic work to the human potential movement, can therefore be understood as supporting personal growth (Dalal, 1992). This development of consciousness depends upon the aspiration and effort of the individual. As Sri Aurobindo writes, “A psychic fire must be lit...” (Sri Aurobindo, 2000, p. 155).

Across all of our cohorts, personal growth often manifested as participants becoming more willing to suspend judgment, slow their pace, and engage with greater openness. We observed increasing capacities for reflection, empathy, and more expansive ways of thinking, feeling, and expressing oneself. Those who attended consistently and continued seeking opportunities for further engagement were often the individuals who felt called to work more consciously on both their outer and inner development.

VI.2 Inner Growth

We also learned that the evolution of consciousness can unfold through a different movement that involves the transcendence of the ego, liberation from exclusive identification with one’s surface nature, and the discovery of a deeper Self. As Dalal (1992) notes, this movement becomes possible only after the separative ego has been sufficiently developed.

Inner growth involves “a transformation of the normal state of consciousness, a progressive awakening of inner and higher states of being, culminating in a total reversal of consciousness, a new birth” (Dalal, 1992). Reflections from participants did not suggest a transcendence of ego in this fuller sense. However, many spoke of a heightened awareness and

an increased ability to step outside themselves and observe their thoughts, emotions, defences, habits, and motivations.

This growing awareness, together with the capacity to let go, appeared to create a greater inner spaciousness. At times, this was experienced as an illumination. At other times, it appeared as a new idea-force or insight arising intuitively rather than through deliberate mental effort. While such experiences varied across participants, they often pointed toward the possibility of a deeper movement of consciousness beginning to awaken within the individual.

VII. Presencing as Practice: Attending, Embodying, Becoming

This brings us back to the practice dimension, where the first and foremost requirement is consciousness itself. In our experience, the only way to move through a crisis is to attend to it, and presencing appears to be one of the most practical and powerful ways of doing so.

We refer to presencing as a practice rather than a tool. A tool often carries the connotation of a quick solution or something that can be applied to resolve a problem. Presencing, as a practice, points instead to a way of being that requires conscious embodiment, sustained attention, and ongoing cultivation over time.

Conventional theories often describe “fight or flight” as primary responses to challenge, suggesting that one either retreats from difficulty or confronts it directly. Presencing appears to offer a different possibility: to remain with and attend to what is unfolding, allowing understanding and action to emerge from a deeper engagement with the situation itself. This may involve surrendering to, or fully accepting, what is present, thereby allowing the situation to reveal its own movement toward resolution. Such attending can give rise to heightened awareness and, at times, a significant shift in how individuals, relationships, and even collectives think, act, and become.

In moments of presencing, a more holistic awareness of past, present, and future can emerge simultaneously. In such moments of clarity, both the nature of the challenge and a possible course of action may reveal themselves. While the mind can support this process, it is often limited by its tendency to fragment experience into separate and competing parts. Presencing therefore frequently requires letting go of mental projections in order to meet more directly what is unfolding in the present moment. As Gunnlaugson (2015, p. 22) observes, “Engaging our experience as essence and source requires a deeper letting go of our resistance to meeting what is taking place in the present moment and more fully implicating us in the emergence”

Ultimately, presencing is best understood through experience. The term itself points

toward a movement from knowing, to doing, to becoming—a shift in which understanding becomes embodied and a natural flow begins to emerge through the simultaneous engagement of head, heart, and hand. This raises a recurring question in our work: How do we cultivate conditions in which students and facilitators can experience presencing directly, such that it becomes part of their tacit knowing and can be accessed naturally in moments of uncertainty, challenge, and crisis?

VIII. Development of the Knowing–Being–Doing Capacities

Throughout our inquiry, we repeatedly encountered the relationship between knowing, being, and doing as a central developmental challenge. Participants often demonstrated considerable knowledge and understanding of the concepts being explored, yet translating this knowing into embodied ways of being and acting proved to be a more gradual process. Presencing appeared to support this movement by creating conditions in which knowing could become embodied, and being could increasingly inform action. The following reflections explore several dimensions of this developmental journey.

VIII.1 Knowing and Developmental Learning

“The actions of men are the best interpreters of their thoughts.” — John Locke

Age, in our experience, is not the determining factor in understanding this insight. Our work in holding space for students has shown that theoretical knowing does not automatically translate into being, and that for knowing to become embodied, practices of inner work are often required.

As Madame de Salzmann observed, “There is an intimate spiral of knowing, doing and being—three threads woven together. One of these cannot make sense apart from the other two.” Paraphrasing her reflections in *Heart Without Measure*, she describes three forces—body, mind, and feeling—that must be developed and harmonized in order to establish a steady connection with a deeper source of knowing. This involves cultivating the capacity for self-observation: discovering a sensitive place within oneself from which impressions can be received and things allowed to be as they are. Over time, the act of seeing itself begins to take on a sacred quality, becoming as important as what is seen. Many wisdom traditions equate this quality of seeing with knowing (Ravindra, 2017).

Often, individuals know what needs to be done yet struggle to act upon it. This is where embodiment becomes central. By embodying the practices and principles of presencing,

transformation can occur—not through the accumulation of additional information, but through a movement from knowing toward being.

Drawing on Sri Aurobindo's work, we found it useful to distinguish between objective forms of knowing and deeper forms of experiential and identity-based knowing (Cornelissen, 2011). Much of contemporary education emphasizes knowledge acquired through indirect contact with the external world. While valuable, such knowledge alone rarely produces transformation. Our observations suggested that transformative learning often emerged when participants moved beyond conceptual understanding into direct experience, self-observation, and embodied engagement. In this sense, being appeared to function as a bridge between knowing and doing.

Here, Bill O'Brien's oft-quoted insight resonates strongly: “The success of any intervention depends on the interior condition of the intervenor.” Lasting behavioural change requires a shift in the inner field, one supported by deeper forms of knowing. This may involve creating experiential learning opportunities, encouraging reflection, and cultivating intuition and self-awareness as integral dimensions of learning and leadership.

Across both the Facilitators and student cohorts, we repeatedly observed that intellectual understanding often preceded embodied understanding. Participants frequently grasped concepts long before they became integrated into their actions and relationships. Lasting change appeared to occur when insight moved beyond conceptual knowing and became embodied as a way of being.

Viewed through the lens of Theory U, knowing, doing, and being can be associated with the head, the hand, and the heart, respectively. At the level of being, there appears to be a deeper integration of knowing and doing, reducing the distance between intention and action. As Mahatma Gandhi observed, “Happiness is when what you think, what you say, and what you do are in harmony.”

VIII.2 Presencing in Lived Practice

To offer readers a glimpse into how presencing unfolds in lived contexts, we share a few experiences from our sessions. These narratives are not presented as best practices or replicable designs, but rather as illustrations of how learning and transformation can emerge when conditions supportive of presencing are present.

One such experience occurred during a Personal Effectiveness session—an ungraded make-up class scheduled on Friday, December 23rd 2022, when many students had already shifted into holiday mode. Of a class of approximately sixty-five students, only nine attended.

The original plan for the session quickly became irrelevant.

We began with light conversation, waiting to see whether others would join, and then chose to sit in a circle and create space for genuine sharing. The session began with a difficult situation I had encountered with students in another class, and I invited their perspectives. As students offered reflections and advice, different facets of themselves began to emerge. Slowly, differing perspectives became as welcome as similar ones. Emergence was already underway.

After a short break, further uncertainty arose. A group of students scheduled to present during the second half of the session requested cancellation due to the low attendance. Another plan fell away. As I wondered how to proceed, students from a previous semester dropped by to say hello. They shared that their own Personal Effectiveness sessions, though often challenging, had been deeply meaningful: “Everyone shares, we smile together, we cry together.” This was precisely the kind of human experience I hoped to create.

When the break ended, we returned to the circle—now sixteen people. Many were students who rarely attended sessions, were generally reserved, or with whom I had had little interaction. We posed a simple question: “What is one thing we can share?” Someone suggested, “Something I have overcome.” What followed was one of the most heart-warming sessions I have ever witnessed.

What began with lighter responses gradually deepened. Students spoke of feeling like an option in the lives of others, struggling with depression in the shadow of academically gifted siblings, longing to heal strained relationships with parents, and learning to navigate conflict and disrespect. Tears were shared, silences were held, and a collective heart space opened.

The session was scheduled to end at 5:00 p.m. When the last student finished sharing, it was already 5:30. When another student asked to speak again, the decision was left to the group. Everyone chose to stay. She shared her experience of being bullied, how it had shaped her care for others, and her commitment to ensuring that no one feels alone. We finally ended at 6:15 p.m., with students requesting photographs to remember the moment. Later, one student shared that although he lived far away, he had felt compelled to attend that day and only understood why after experiencing the session.

The session enveloped everyone in a circle of shared human experience. New facets of individuals emerged, misunderstandings softened, and shared tears appeared to lighten burdens. Noticeable shifts occurred at the individual, interpersonal, and collective levels. Experiences such as these reinforced our sense that presencing cannot be generated through planning alone. They arise through a combination of openness, participation, and a willingness to remain with what is emerging. Even when only a few participants are able to access presencing, it often creates a

ripple effect that gradually draws the wider group into a more transformative flow.

We observed similar dynamics in other sessions. In one class where students appeared distracted and disengaged, they spoke candidly about stress, deadlines, internships, personal challenges, and exhaustion. A brief mindfulness exercise was introduced. Although some students resisted initially, the atmosphere gradually shifted. Laughter gave way to stillness, attention deepened, and students became noticeably more engaged, curious, and connected. Once again, the shift did not feel facilitator-driven. Rather, it emerged through a collective readiness and intention that appeared to be present beneath the surface all along.

VIII.3 Enablers of Presencing

While acknowledging that presencing cannot be engineered, we are nevertheless able to observe certain conditions that appear to support its emergence. What we share here arises primarily from lived experience rather than from prescribed models, techniques, or formulas.

At the level of consciousness, we observed three interrelated enablers of presencing: intention, attention, and action. When these three are aligned, they appear to support the integration of knowing, doing, and being, allowing action to arise with greater coherence and ease.

Intention, as we experienced it, is more than willingness. It resembles a deeper aspiration that provides direction and meaning, both individually and collectively. As intention becomes clearer, attention is naturally drawn toward what matters most. In contrast, when intention is diffuse or absent, attention often becomes scattered and action loses coherence. We also observed a paradox: while an intention toward presencing often appeared to support the emergence of presencing, experiences of presencing themselves frequently deepened and clarified intention.

Attention refers to what we are aware of and what we choose to attend to in the moment. As the familiar saying suggests, “Where attention goes, energy flows.” Self-awareness requires sustained attention to where attention itself is placed. In this sense, attention becomes one of the primary instruments of growth. Many of the practices used throughout the program, including mindfulness and reflection, helped participants become more aware of their patterns of attention and gently return to direct experience in the present moment.

Action completes the movement. As intention becomes clearer and attention more focused, action often arises with less effort and greater alignment. Rather than being driven primarily by habit or reaction, action begins to emerge from a deeper coherence between knowing, being, and doing. In this way, intention, attention, and action appeared to function as

reinforcing conditions that support presencing within both individuals and the collective field.

IX. Concluding Remarks

This inquiry has explored what becomes possible when leadership, learning, and facilitation are approached through the lens of presencing, understood as an underlying phenomenon that can be cultivated through practice, relational space, inner work, and sustained attention. Across student, faculty, administrative, and leadership cohorts, we observed that when conditions support presencing, learning begins to shift from transmission toward transformation, and action increasingly arises from a deeper coherence between knowing, being, and doing.

The time and space we collectively inhabit today can be understood as profoundly liminal. Amid ecological, social, and organizational disruption, approaches rooted in awareness-based systems change, generative dialogue, and presencing-oriented leadership point toward forms of action that emerge from a deeper sense of connection, meaning, and belonging. What we have referred to as right action appears less as a technique and more as a quality of response shaped by alignment rather than fear, fragmentation, or egoic striving.

Throughout this article, we have drawn upon Sri Aurobindo's integral vision to illuminate a developmental movement that holds both ascent and descent: the development of a conscious and individuated self alongside the gradual loosening of egoic identification in service of a more expansive awareness. This movement is reflected in the knowing–being–doing triad, where embodied presence functions as the bridge through which insight becomes action. In this sense, presencing may be understood as the lived integration of knowledge, work, and love—an integration that allows action to arise with greater integrity, care, and responsiveness.

Our experience working with presencing-oriented social fields suggests that individual development and collective transformation are deeply interconnected. By cultivating spaces that invite reflective dialogue, inner work, and embodied awareness, individuals begin to experience themselves as participants in a larger unfolding. This shift in awareness often brings a deeper appreciation of interdependence, shared humanity, and responsibility for the whole. In our experience, such capacities are increasingly essential for leadership in a complex and rapidly changing world.

What is asked of us, individually and collectively, is a willingness to remain present: a willingness to attend to what is emerging and to respond from a place grounded in care, responsibility, and deeper awareness. Through such participation, presencing becomes more than an individual capacity; it becomes a collective field through which new possibilities for harmony, responsibility, and creative action can take root.

X. References

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