



1.4 Being present as a process

Since this book is inviting you to explore the possibilities of Collective Presencing, it is easy to understand that first of all we need to strengthen our individual capacity to be present. For our purposes here, subtle sensing and embodiment lay the foundations on which we will build further capacities which I will describe throughout the rest of the book. What is important to understand at this stage is that the practice in daily life is not so much a state of being present. Rather, we are really talking about an ongoing process that becomes refined over time and is, seemingly, never ending.

Being present as becoming present

The process of understanding what this book is really about began long before I ever had the faintest notion of writing it. It started in my small Flemish women's circle, called the FiveStar, a training ground for what would eventually lead to the project Women Moving the Edge. We were rather unconscious of the deeper purpose of our joint journey, but we had some guiding questions like: How do we do... (take your pick), so that it is done out of deep respect and love? How can I respond out of love even when I don't like what you said? How to show respect to others even when I am in a hurry? These questions could be applied to hundreds of different situations, and through collective searching and reflecting we found many answers. We also became wiser and more compassionate.

Reflecting on it later, I came to see that we learned an enormous amount about the process of becoming present. Here, I want to draw your attention to the process side of becoming present. In daily life the point is not so much about being present, but about how to become present (again) once we have lapsed back into our default mode of reacting. In other words, how do we widen our perception and become present to

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more of what is going on in life? For now, we will start with the common, every-day understanding of being present: being present to your own thoughts, emotions, sensations and becoming mindful of these. Later, we will expand this process to an ever-widening scope, to include becoming present to relationships, then to groups, then to unmanifested potential. This is about becoming present to life in its totality, not in theory but right down to the bottom of real, messy, daily life.



I have noticed in my own experience that becoming present is not something you learn in an instant, nor is it a skill like riding a bike or swimming - once learned you can do it forever. Rather, it is an ongoing process of alignment that seems to go on and on, spreading out in all directions! First of all, this process shifts my understanding of myself as a thing, a 'something' with

clearly defined boundaries, something that really is separate. Instead, I begin to see and experience myself as a process, an ongoing flow of experiences, in an ongoing exchange with whoever and whatever is around me. Well do I remember my Systemic Constellations teacher, Johannes Schmidt, repeating like a mantra in his workshops: "I am a process!" (and not a thing). This notion resonated with me and over time it wormed its way deep into my inner being. There is a lot of confusion about this 'I'. Although we experience it as consistent throughout the long concatenation of moments that make up our lives, what seems to endure and stay the same is not a thing, nor does it have clear boundaries. Rather, it is a coherence found throughout the throng of our experiences, like a red thread that has great meaning to our selves.

I trust that by now it is clear that being present equates not with sitting still on a cushion - although the practice of meditation can be very helpful in learning to become more present - but with a capacity to be flexible amidst all that arises, including the capacity to sense the impulse or the movement of what comes next... Alignment with 'what is' gives us a power of action, of movement, which is different than 'power over' or control. Think of the Aikido master who uses the energy of his assailant to propel him away in the next move.

The process of inner alignment: unfolding authenticity

Just as we discover that this 'I' is not a thing, so we learn that being present is not a state that, once reached, is forever attained. It is an ongoing process, a movement into ever greater balance and coherence, deeper and wider, inner and outer. Over time, we noticed that we can distinguish a process of inner alignment and a process of outer alignment. In this chapter we focus on the inner alignment - we will turn our attention to outer alignment later on. We see this competence of inner alignment as an unfolding process that leads to ever more authenticity. Authenticity is defined here as your unique way of acting and relating with your self and the world around you, without any residue of emotionally-charged preference or attachment. Authenticity can also be defined as the unique quality of a particular relationship, or the unique flavor of a group or team.

The ongoing process of deepening our authenticity in an embodied way also opens our selves up to the capacity of sourcing: receiving information from an inner well of knowing. When practiced with other people, equally present and authentic, it enhances our capacity for collective wisdom and generative action. More on all this later as the story unfolds.

My whole journey in reflecting about the experiences in our little women's circle started with my enthusiastic discovery of the U-process. (At that time, neither of the books by Otto Scharmer, *Presencing and Theory U*, had yet been written). Failing to fit our experiences into his model got me to thinking more deeply and, step by step, I started developing my own framework. I am well aware that I have not reinvented the wheel; many of these steps, layers or movements are part of existing practices in the field of personal development, group dynamics, etc. The novelty of my approach lies in using this sequence of movements in ever widening spheres of life, building up a coherent framework that can be used to deal with the challenges of our time and the generation and creation of the new.

This process of inner alignment – part of the overall process of becoming present – is about finding the resonance between all the faculties of our self: thinking, experiencing, noticing, feeling and subtle sensing. Using the words of Scharmer, it is "an opening of our mind, our heart and our will". In the practice of Collective Presencing, we give extra attention to the finer, subtler and more internal experiences, which are very much denied or overlooked in our mainstream society. To get to a deeper inner alignment, to become ever more present, we also need to be open to the subtle signals in our lives. These don't normally thump on your door, unless you have already repressed a barrage of weaker signals and life presents you some kind of wall for you to smash into. The alignment of these layers in our self is an ongoing invitation to eliminate our inflexibilities as we discover them; doing so makes us more unique and uniquely creative.

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Four movements in unfolding authenticity

If we look more closely at this process of inner alignment – becoming ever more present to the inner dimension of our experiences - we are able to articulate different steps, levels, layers or movements. In the messiness and complexity of life's unfolding, though, they don't come in nice, clear steps, one after the other. These steps can be distinguished from each other as we reflect on the process, but they are not separate in our daily actions and lives. On occasions, they might happen all at once, while at other times it seems to take ages to integrate one more.

What follows is a description of four levels, or movements in this process of inner alignment that I have found to be present in our daily experiences. You will meet these levels again throughout the book, applied to different contexts and scopes; the narrative will lead to two maps offering an overview of it all. Applied to different areas of life, these four layers



always describe a process of deepening authenticity that reveals itself in a process unfolding over time.

The four movements are: observing, accepting, honoring and living 'what is'. Each calls forth into presence a deeper layer of respect, awareness and love, both for your self and in relationship with others and the wider context. Greater inner alignment always manifests as more authenticity and much greater flexibility of action and thought, greater response-ability. Inner alignment re-establishes relationship and embrace on the inside — either between the different, disowned parts of your self, between your inner self and the inner selves of others, between the different participants in a group or with the inner dimension of the future and the possibilities it holds.

All four movements of unfolding consist of two sub-movements, both of which are needed in this process. One can best be summarised as focusing
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our attention; for the other it is essential that we open ourselves more. We will see that the combination of these two movements, focusing and opening, can better describe the fullness of the experience than either one on its own.

Observing what is - Open Mind

Focus on: here and now

Open to: full experience

The process of becoming present starts with observing or witnessing what is actually happening. This means observing without any judgment of what we are noticing. It means suspending any kind of judgment; a non-engagement, where we take some emotional distance from what is happening. This is the core of the now widely known mindfulness practices:

to experience but not to judge, just observe and witness. No good or bad, just noticing what is.



Wanting or needing change - wherever that might be - always starts with acknowledging what is; which is, at the same time, acknowledging what is not. This action of observing and acknowledging is a big and deep movement of focused, but open attention. In our Western world, we are mostly very far from being in touch with what is. Most often our attention is absorbed in our thinking: the storage place of our ideas, our prejudices, our memories, our beliefs, our hopes, knowledge received from other sources, etc. Simply put, our default attention mode in the Western world resides in the mental space, oblivious to how many emotional and subtle perceptions are behind, underneath, below or next to what is going on in our minds. Our attention is rarely with the totality of what we are actually experiencing, right here and now.

The core purpose of mindfulness training is to coming to grips with the fact that we can guide and direct our attention. It doesn't need to be stuck in

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mental thoughts or in emotional upset; we can decide to place it elsewhere and not attach to what seems so intriguing – and true! People who practice meditation learn to master much of it, although some use it to dissociate from the body and so don't embody it (enough) in their day-to-day life. They sometimes lack the skill of witnessing the bodily side of the here and now.

We can learn to extend observing what is from myself to the other(s) and their internal, subtle reality; further out to their manifest or subtle contribution to the group's purpose and even beyond as we will see later. It is, all in all, an opening to the full experience on all levels of experience.

Accepting what is - Open Heart

Focus on: widening

Open to: trusting subtle experience

Next comes the inner movement of *accepting what is*, really embracing what is, right here, before our eyes or inside us. *Accepting what is* is one small movement beyond observing and acknowledging. It is a widening of our identity, because accepting means integrating something we had left outside us before. It is an action of embracing more of who we are, widening our range of what we define as reality or what is possible. Accepting is a movement in the heart that follows once our minds have been opened and judgment has been suspended; although it can also be the other way round. The widening of our metaphorical boxes can go on and on. As far as I can tell from my own experience, there seems to be no end to it. Real acceptance is an opening of the heart space — an aspect of what we call love.

Accepting what is is being open to becoming more flexible in what we are able to and allow ourselves perceive. It takes account of the subtler layers of our experience. Sometimes we have to dig a little deeper in ourselves to be able to notice these layers, or need to come to a stand-still for a while. Oftentimes it is a movement of embracing what had previously been filtered out as meaningless or unimportant.

Accepting what is, is a movement of the heart. It is (re-)connecting with the true wholeness of our self, others, groups and the whole world in which we live and function. This re-connection is intrinsically healing, because it brings us back into connection with more of who we are. We move beyond the fragmentation and remove the blockages preventing life from really happening. *Accepting what is*, we start to feel more of the web of interconnectedness, and to experience more deeply our intimate implication in a greater whole that holds us.

Honouring what is - Open Heart

Focus on: deepening

Open to: moving beyond



Honoring what is calls us to drop even deeper into the movement of our hearts. It goes further than accepting — not only do we accept, but we open up to respect what is. We understand in our hearts and minds what our experience means for the fullness (and mystery) of life and honour it in this way. If there is real acceptance in our hearts - of myself, of the other, of the group as a whole, of life in its fullness – then we are ready to honour it fully. *Honouring what is*, is a deep integration of our physical, mental and emotional layers. You could see it as a deepening of the accepting movement; not just in our minds, but also into the fullness of our hearts and our being.

Honouring what is asks for an engagement or commitment: to show oneself fully, to learn to let the other be fully him or herself. It is an embodiment of the acceptance, which shows through in our deeds.

Honouring what is requires us to engage more deeply in communication than is our usual habit. This deepening is a devotion to connecting with these deeper, more vulnerable layers of myself, and extending out to connect with the deeper layers of the other(s) and of the greater whole in which we work and/or live together. This devotion, this honouring, this bowing to what is brings us to a constantly unfolding authenticity in how we are relating.

If I acknowledge and accept that what I feel and think is only 'my' truth or 'a' perspective, and that what the other person thinks or feels is 'his or her' truth or just 'another' perspective on reality, and if I can accept both as really and equally valid in the face of the overall reality, then we are challenged to suspend our default frames of feeling, thinking, and willing. Our hearts are asked to expand and embrace more than before. If we can do that, we have more freedom at our disposal and something greater

seems to be possible; we come closer to some collective sense or shared meaning.

Living what is - Open Will

Focus on: sharing and expressing

Open to: living authenticity

The three former movements culminate naturally in living and celebrating what is. This means giving form and shape to the deeper inner alignment in our way of being and doing right here and now. It means sharing and expressing all layers of our experience: the physical, the mind, the emotions and the subtle experiences. One form of expression that we – in the western middle class – know very well, is speech. But talking, even when done respectfully and carefully, is just one aspect of life and cannot express all of it. Conversation alone does not constitute authentic living. Imagine being in an intimate partnership where our only form of engagement was talking...

The Open Will, as named by Otto Scharmer, points in the direction of 'beyond our own, small will'. In the beginning it can feel like sharing and expressing beyond our comfort zone. Sharing what feels like the vulnerable stuff: the inner knowing, the little hunches that might or might not be valuable, that might be judged; offering my poem in a context that normally doesn't invite this; bringing flowers to the office because I like them and they help me to be who I am. Fully participating with all we have and are is not our default way of behaving, and yet it is these different acts that truly show our unique ways of being. We have received these small (or great) gifts from nature, from birth; now it becomes a conscious choice to share and express them, bring them to the table where we sit. It is not through our own small will that we have created these unique gifts, rather, it is an act of surrender to recognise that life gave them to us and it is an act of choice to show and share them.

Wherever you look in the world: real communities eat together, they sing and they dance together, they share in rituals to mark important moments in life, they work together, they talk; in short, they create their own culture. Every group that wishes to come to its own authentic, collective wisdom will, gradually, create its own culture. In this living what is, where every individual participates fully through his or her own expression, what this group or community is about becomes visible to others, through what people do and don't do.