



3.5 Opening to the Authentic Group

- It is only wholesome when
in the mirror of the Human Soul
the whole community takes shape
and in the community
lives the strength of the individual soul.
○ - Rudolf Steiner, The motto of Social Ethic¹

You will probably have recognised that we are now moving to a new location on the map of the *Circle of Presence*, into the widening field of complexity and interrelatedness. I have named this area of experience *I and Us*, as it is a logical expansion from *I and Myself* and *I and You*. It is important to realise, though, that it is only logical if we assume that 'I' is at the centre of things, which, of course, it is not - although it is a fairly common starting point in Western mainstream society, and consequently also how I started my journey of growing consciousness and awareness. This is the only reason why I start with 'I' and expand from there. Reality isn't really like that, as we shall see as we journey further.

As we saw in our exploration of *I and You*, a lot is happening unconsciously between us, under the surface, in our relating. It suffices to multiply all that unconscious activity by the number of participants to get a feeling of what is at play in a group of people. In addition to leaving behind our judgments of and projections on each other, *opening to the inner dimension of the collective* also requires us to become conscious of the deeply ingrained, common assumptions and mental models we collectively hold. Because they dwell mostly implicitly in our shared field, they stay underground and are not talked about. These shared assumptions play a powerful role in shaping our common reality and are a core component in our feelings of belonging. Nevertheless, assumptions and mental models also act as invisible boundaries that limit our capacity to see and understand. If a

group can take the step of becoming aware of its limitations, a new way of thinking, acting and creating will emerge.

In the domain of *I and Us* we will discover many dynamics at play in groups, circles and teams; even families can be examined through this lens. It goes without saying that we shall not be able to name all of these dynamics, but we will articulate some important aspects that allow circles to grow in their capacity to attain shared, collective wisdom. The capacity to hold space for each other and for the group as a whole, as explained in [3.1](#), is quite essential here, as is the reverse capacity: to be held by the group.

What is at play in *I and Us* is more than being good team players. There is a subtle group field that is neither about entity nor process, neither about me nor all of the others; neither about the group's purpose nor the process of achieving it. It is neither particle nor wave. It is all of this: a subtle, structuring field beneath the visible reality, a complex mesh comprising all our potentials, a web of invisible strands that holds a collective potential that has never yet seen the light of day.

As in the previous domains, here too we will apply the four movements of inner alignment to the field of *I and Us*.

1. Noticing what is – in the group: notice the group's field and discover common assumptions

Most of what I have described regarding the unfolding of an authentic self (*I and Myself*) and an authentic relationship (*I and You*) is well known in the sphere of training and circles concerned with personal growth. As we focus on *I and Us* we expand our attention to include what is happening in the group at large. This territory is known to most good trainers and facilitators, but often not consciously. As we develop towards collective, shared and rotating leadership and collective wisdom, we are all required to learn this skill and competence, not just so-called leaders.

Noticing what is in the group builds on the capacity to be present to myself and in relationship with the other(s), expanding now to perceive the wider group's field. It might start with noticing when you feel some kind of disturbance or awkwardness in the overall field. At such moments, you could offer some questions in the circle as a way of checking whether your sensing is shared or on track, and to help all participants notice what is happening: What is going on between us? What is at play at a deeper level in the group now?

Noticing what is in the group is more than just sensing moments of disturbance. It is also crucial to become aware of shared assumptions and

beliefs. These are invisible when we participate in a group where we feel we belong. To begin to observe them you need to step back and take some distance. This is really not easy, and very few people have been trained to do this. I first became aware of the power of shared assumptions through the work of Edgar Schein². When it was introduced to our little women's group many years ago, it made a huge impression on me. Schein offers three levels at which to reflect on an organisation's (or group's) culture: the first level concerns observable 'facts', what can be measured and recognised by outsiders; the second level relates to values - the ones that insiders speak about; the third level concerns these assumptions, which are unconscious and implicit – not spoken of, but always about the essentials.

I can still feel the mental stretch it took me to take it in and really start thinking about which specific assumptions we might be implicitly sharing. It is always a good idea to invite outsiders to help you in this regard, but over time, with practice, you can get a sense of the limiting beliefs and how they are at play in the group. Particularly, when all members of the group feel that there is no flow and no balance in the conversation, it can be helpful to raise some questions that inquire into these shared beliefs. It is not easy to give good examples of such shared assumptions, because they are different in every group. Suffice it to think about a total stranger from a different culture visiting your group. What beliefs would he or she have to



adhere to in order to belong? What if you could offer some questions that can open this field of shared assumptions so that all participants could examine them more easily?

2. Accepting what is – in the group: widen my view on the group's field and see others' full potential

Accepting what is in the group invites us to broaden our own personal perspective, as we now know that *accepting what is* is about opening the heart. Our own personal identities and intentions are now positioned in this larger field – as they have always been, but now we make the conscious effort to keep this relationship constantly in our awareness. This calls for a process of tuning in with the inner dimension of the collective we are part of. It is an inner movement of awareness - an inward, widening embrace, finding balance in a broader field of awareness. The group's field is – of course – not visible. It exists in the subtle realms and can be perceived through our subtle senses. As we open our hearts and minds to this wider field we step more deeply into interconnectedness and complexity. This experience cannot be grasped by the mind only, we need another set of senses to find a point of balance in all this.

Now that I am aware of this group's field, I can understand at a deeper level why it is so important that I bring in my full potential. Once we acknowledge and open ourselves to the group's field, we get a sense of contributing our own unique gifts, our own unique form of leadership, in service of the collective wisdom. At the same time, as we sense into the collective field, we start to see the unique contributions others are making. If there is such a thing as a group's field, then it follows that there can be no such thing as 'wrong' members or participants in that field. In addition to simply observing and acknowledging this fact, comes the inner movement of accepting everyone and seeing that each individual feeds a thread into the collective weave. Sometimes participants are not aware of what they bring to the group, and the others might need to articulate what they see a person's contribution as being. Sometimes people, used to leadership positions, have to come to terms with the fact that their role is limited – one among many - and that each individual has a role to play in service of the whole.

From the experience of our women's gatherings, I can state with confidence that there are many more tasks, gifts, areas of work and attention than just the 'normal', traditional forms of leadership. Here I am thinking of the more 'hidden' forms of leadership: cleaning and tending the environment, bringing in beauty, providing nourishing food, initiating celebrations and rituals, organising trips, holding space and potential, send

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out reminders for the next gathering, making a harvest or artefact of what has happened before, and so on. All these contributions are needed, and all support the group's outcome.

3. Honouring what is - in the group: hold space and be held by the group's field

Part 3.1 unpacked the concept of holding space in some detail. In a nutshell, holding space is about being aware of a potential that is present in the group but that has not yet manifested. This unmanifest potential is in you, in the other participants and in the group as a whole.

Honouring what is in I and us builds on the acceptance that we all have unique gifts and more potential than we realise at first glance. If I truly honour that each person fully participates and contributes their unique gifts to the group's field, my trust in the group as a whole deepens and I can fully relax. Now I can open to the group as the here-and-now community that takes care of me. I can trust and follow the ideas and suggestions of others in areas of life or work that are not where my strengths or preferences lie.

To engage fully in the group, *honouring what is in I and us* also means being conscious of my own needs, big and small, voicing them and acting on them. This, too, is an act of leadership and a contribution to the whole. If you need to move your body to recenter yourself after a long conversation, just do it. Or propose it to the group as a collective exercise, because your need might be shared by others. But even if nobody else joins you, it is your responsibility to be present - not out of egotism, but in service of the group.

Honouring what is in I and us has an important receptive side to it: the ability to be held by the group. In my research, this aspect almost went unnoticed, first and foremost because I am myself a strong woman - at least that is what my personality believes! It failed to show up on my radar at first because my personal survival strategy is to 'do it on my own', to be strong and not to show my needs (remember the example I got from my mom). But then I began to recognise it in many, many others - and this is still ongoing. Because the gatherings of Women Moving the Edge attracted rather strong, developed women - after all, we invited participants to be on the edge! - many shared an implicit assumption that we need to be able to handle it all by ourselves. Our needs and emotions were to be kept out of the circle conversations. In this regard, we lost sight of the interrelatedness of the personal and the collective. As stated in one of our gatherings: "I need you all, and you all need my vulnerability too."

In his interview with the Circle of Seven³, Otto Scharmer articulates it very well: "Ken Wilber makes the distinction between I, we, and it. It strikes me that what you describe is yet another perspective: the second person plural, that is, unconditional witnessing by a collective. What I heard you describe is how unconditional witnessing by a collective works in terms of a nonjudgmental stance and in terms of the open heart. That places the attention toward what's becoming - what's coming into being. It's the evolving self, not what's already there." Sharing our needs, expressing our vulnerability does not mean eliciting an avalanche of advice or calling for rescue. This act of sharing invites the embodied experience of being held by the group. Being witnessed in this way is enough in itself: I feel met as who I really am and I can move beyond any helplessness that might have been part of my story. The quality of attention offered in this witnessing teaches us to look at ourselves, too, without judgment. Even if we goofed, we need to feel no shame and can just take it as a learning experience. It is through the collective work in the circle that we are able to show up with ever less ego-as-habitual-pattern.

Although it might seem contradictory that we cannot experience the full holding of the group until we have learned to participate fully from our unique, authentic place (*I and Myself*), but that is not so. This kind of holding comes from a different level ('trans') than the holding that is needed by the baby or child ('pre'). It is a deeper connection with mutual interdependence as the next stage in development, beyond dependence and independence. Sharing our needs, showing our vulnerability, trusting this group right here and right now, can feel like taking a risk - at least to our habitual survival patterns, by that part of us that was hurt so long ago. The Circle of Seven confirms: "There often has to be a risk in order for the collective to show up. The risk can be one person's, two people's, or all of ours, but there has to be some kind of risk or vulnerability for crossing the threshold that you're talking about. I felt the whole space



shift. Because you took a risk, it shifted the space for all of us. Maybe there are a lot of different thresholds."

Honouring what is in the group's field is more than trusting the members of your team; this is what the above quote points to. I well remember a situation in the very first Moving the Edge gathering. Most of us were searching for what to say and do in order to reach this Magic in the Middle. Faced with so much uncertainty, most participants fell back into downloading - their default way of thinking and acting. So we heard many different proposals of what we could or should do, but none gelled to the level of actual action. None engaged the whole group. After some hours of talking, somebody got up and went over to the trolley laden with tea, coffee and Danish pastries. Everybody got up and followed, without anybody having made the suggestion, or the group having reached consensus. The break just happened. The group's field had taken care of all of us and we listened to the emergence that unfolded and of which we were part.

4. Living what is – in the group: full participation in the (subtle) group field

After some time in an ongoing circle, we begin to see clearly the special and unique flavour of this specific group. When everybody brings in his or her unique contribution, we get a splendid blend of qualities, a cornucopia of different ingredients that can lead to a totally new stew. In such groups, there is no boss, simply people who take on certain necessary roles. These are minimal and can rotate if the group so decides. Everybody participates fully, takes responsibility when needed or when his or her competencies, skills or gifts are called for.

On one occasion, our Flemish women's group was together for a four-day retreat. We were learning to rely on what was unfolding instead of planning it all ahead by the hour. On our final morning, we all got up at different times and didn't come together until almost noon. It turned out that all of us had actually wanted to start earlier, but none of us had spoken up. We had each seen the activities of the others and interpreted them incorrectly. We had all been waiting - our habitual response of being separated - instead of making our wishes and sensing clear. That was a big lesson!

If we are ever to behave as an authentic collective, each of us needs to learn to check our assumptions with the others and bring in all the available information - otherwise we are holding back, not recognising that what we, individually, have to offer might be crucial for the life of the group as a whole. Checking assumptions is often needed to restore trust and flow, when the connection and awareness of our interrelatedness has dropped

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out. This is a deeply systemic insight: if you hold back, the whole system is holding back. If you are not fully, consciously present, then the whole system cannot be fully, consciously present. We are all completely immersed, wanted, needed... Embodying this systemic view on life means that we are *always* invited to participate fully: sharing our unique gifts, contributing our subtle intelligence as well as our mental capacities.

In addition to speaking, there are a multitude of ways in which a group will express its unique character. This point is worth dwelling on: in Western society we are so used to 'the talking culture' that we no longer recognise that it is just that: 'a culture' - and therefore something we can create differently if we want to. The unique culture of a group expresses itself in many different ways: how things are done, where we meet, whether we break bread together, time spent on having fun or informal talk, and so on. The different kinds of expression can be examined very intentionally and just as intentionally changed to best fit this group or organisation. Then we see the birth of an Authentic Group – *the living of what is*.

The energetic awareness (the 'holding') of the group, its members and its intentions does not cease when we leave the face-to-face meetings. If the group has an intention to meet again, the holding continues. This holding means keeping the lines of connection present in your awareness. The Circle of Seven articulates it this way: "We sustain the intention and the energy of that person's intention by the practice of holding during the time that we're apart, after the circle breaks up. This is a practice of continuing to hold the field that I think we're not fully aware of. It's been developing since we began the circle."

In my little women's group we did a lot of rituals during which we connected all the levels of our being: physical, emotional, mental, spiritual. We took the time to invent and create these rituals together and we all experienced them as extremely important. In retrospect, I can see our rituals honoured the different phases in the group's process, although this was not planned as such. We were sensitive to how life unfolded in and as our circle, and we experimented with what we sensed was right to do at different times. This collective subtle sensing, honouring and living the life of the group is a crucial capacity for the times we are living in.

In the next chapter, we build further on this subtle sensing, but now in relation to the potential of what is present. In the movement of ever-growing awareness of complexity and interrelatedness, we will shift our focus to emergence, opening to surrender to what the subtle field of potential is showing us.

¹ <http://ascadministrator.blogspot.be/.../the-motto-of...>

² Schein, Edgar H. *Organizational Culture and Leadership*. John Wiley and Sons, 2010.

³ Scharmer, O., Cecil, B., Gillespie, G., *The Presence of the Circle Being. Conversation with the Circle of Seven*; Ashland, Or; September 15-16, 2003 (pdf)