



## 4.6 Opening to Authentic Collective Wisdom

○ Silence is not a blank. It is a possibility about to be born.  
- Deepak Chopra

This chapter ends, like the previous ones, with a piece of the *Circle of Presence* map and a deeper dive into the column called *I and Potential*.

A potential is something that can become manifest (or not), but that has not yet taken form. Focusing our attention on this possibility means sensing what has some *present energy* intimating that it can come into manifestation quickly and easily. What is waiting to be born? Which seed is about to germinate?

The ability to sense immanent manifestation potential builds on the capacity to be consciously present in all the previous domains: being present to what is going on inside myself, inside the others in the group, within the group's field (regarding its intention and purpose) - all at the same time. Thanks to this careful extending of our attention, we are able to recognise what is ready to come to the surface and we can build on this sensing when taking our next steps.

There is a special kind of trust involved in this process, as we extend our balance out into the world. In complex situations, it is not straightforward to know what best to say or do – for sure there is no right or wrong in such situations. The key is to stay centred and open, trusting that sooner or later the next shard of insight will crystallise and become accessible. In short, this means trusting that you are able to connect with the subtle in a conscious way. Otto Scharmer refers to this in his *Circle of Seven* interview: "The second condition is clearing the horizontal space by unconditional love. When I interviewed Peter Senge a couple of years ago, he talked about love in terms of "showing up and being present." That was his definition of love. Showing up and being present. Fully present with. And the third

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condition maybe has to do with having the trust that the presence, or whatever you name it, is going to show up and do the work.”

As we explore *I and Potential*, we focus our attention on the emergence of new and collectively shared meaning and deeper patterns, looking out for the truly novel insight that has not existed before, that springs up only at the centre of our joint effort and attention. It is through witnessing all input and all perspectives, connecting and cross-fertilising, weaving back and forth, that collective knowing-as-experience can emerge. This practice asks us to perceive all phenomena - everything that is happening in the room, within and around us and in the wider field – as they are. It requires us to refrain from sifting through these phenomena, judging them with our habitual mind as not valid or meaningful and discarding them; when we do this we miss the weak signals.

We need a deep inner stillness to be able to listen to the subtle that is knocking on the door. Most often it is soft and has a poetic quality. It appears to us in images and dreams. It speaks in the uneasiness of our hearts, is present as an undercurrent in our stories and becomes evident in signs from nature.

How can we let go into something that is emerging? As we focus our attention on something new that might show up, the inner movement is one of deep surrender. What comes through will have an unknown and fresh quality and will most likely be quite different than anything we might have had in mind. Proceeding in this way gives a very different twist to change processes. It is no longer we who decide what the future will look like. Rather, we are sensing what wants to develop once we set the initial parameters, namely our conscious intention through a guiding question and our shared attention through the circle practice.

Once you have attained a dedicated field like this that is sustained over time, you can experience the effect of sustained collective attention on things. Trust springs from trustworthy action that you experience repeatedly, time and again. This trust develops from the consistent lived experience of how life, or the field, works on things that have been held in this way. We have many stories to tell about how this has worked. Now we laugh about it. We are no longer so tempted to manipulate. We are no longer seeking to fix things.

..... My view is that people can do this on purpose. If they practice doing it and get good at it as a group, if they can sustain it for long enough to see results, they can influence the outer world.  
- Interview by Otto Scharmer with Circle of Seven

Most people do not yet have much (if any) experience of reaching novel wisdom in a group in this way, and yet somehow we can imagine what it must be like. It seems possible to get there, all we need is practice.

## **1. Noticing what is – in I and Potential: listen from a connected stillness**

What does it mean to focus on the here and now, to be open to the full experience of potential? What kind of observation does it take?

Above all, *noticing what is, in relation to potential* calls for truly deep listening. Deeper than being sensitive to what is happening in the group, we are listening for hints or intimations of what is *not present yet*. By definition, such signs are subtle, not existent in the manifest realm. Indeed, this is the art not of actively listening for something specific, but of listening from the stillness inside yourself. Once you are there, you reach out to connect, in the same field of stillness, with the others who are in the shared inquiry with you.

In this connected stillness, we open ourselves up to a subtle collective shared space. Fascinatingly, when this space is present, it is palpable. It has a kind of consistency to it, as if the air between us has some substance. At the same time, we open the common field of our shared attention to receive what wants to be known. In other words, there is an active aspect to this movement, as we seek and find this inner experience of deep silence, and intentionally reach out to connect with the others in this realm of stillness. There is also a passive aspect, that resides in the receiving: we acknowledge that we can hear, see, sketch, know things from the subtle realm - even when we do not yet see or understand their relation to anything that could materialise as a novel insight or new collective wisdom. What we receive can be a subtle feeling or an image of the energetic blueprint, waiting for us to see it, co-create and manifest it.

## **2. Accepting what is – in I and Potential: perceive the phenomena in the subtle field of potential**

Acknowledging that we can somehow communicate with 'that-which-is-not-yet' stretches not only my own, default vision but also our shared vision. In general, our vision is constructed of former experiences, memories and gleaned knowledge, then projected along a linear trajectory into the future. In other words, our visions are projections of the past into the future. *Accepting what is in I and potential* means acknowledging a different

source of knowledge that is not memory, and accepting that other things are possible besides what we have experienced so far.

*Accepting what is in I and potential* is the gateway into synchronicity. Synchronicity can be seen as small, or not-so-small, signs – proofs, even – of the validity of this kind of subtle or inner knowing. Working with synchronicity means accepting such signs and signals as valid information. We need some kind of training to perceive these phenomena without immediately categorising them as invalid, not functional or not useful, instead validating them as meaningful to the tasks at hand or the focus question in our midst. As LaChapelle says so beautifully: “Humbly recognise the presence of wisdom...”

In this connection, I am not talking about some naïve belief that everything, every situation (including the bad ones) has (to have) a meaning. The phenomena I am pointing to here are born out of the deeper silence, the shared field of stillness. There is no place here for an egoic need for meaning. Rather, we focus on what emerges, with no active search for ‘the’ meaning. It is an active receiving and perceiving of whatever is present in the conversation, in and around us, even outside this group and the space we are in.



The quality of witnessing or holding that we're talking about here is personal identification with source in the circle. Something like: the eyes through which you see, the heart through which you feel, the ears with which you listen are not personal. What I'm picturing right now is that, when something starts to happen, when something is coming to focus in the room, then I feel that the circle knows how to back into the power of the field. So there is very little projection onto the situation. There is little intent other than opening to what life wants to have happen right then. There's sensitivity without manipulation. A spirit of blessing. And a deep trust in the quality of that presence.

- Interview by Otto Scharmer with the Circle of Seven

An important skill in this regard, as a member of a *Circle of Presence*, has to do with timing. This means becoming so aware of the group's field that you know when is the right moment to bring in your own contribution in service of the group and in support of this field. After some time, you might even start to sense who needs next to bring in their gift into the circle. You can then invite them in if they do not sense it themselves. This is an ongoing process of learning and there are few rules or practices to offer. When all participants are attending to this, however, you can feel the flow in the conversation, in the meeting, throughout the whole day. Even suggestions for a change in agenda are welcomed and easily agreed on, because everyone can sense that they fit in the collective process.

### 3. Honouring what is – in I and Potential: open to the courage to share my impulses

Phenomena are not only 'out there'. In the shared stillness, images, stories and impulses come to the surface in our inner landscapes. We need to learn to see these as part of the collective wisdom. *Honouring what is in I and potential* means recognising that I do receive parts of the collective wisdom and, on a deeper level, realising that I am always connected with it. This corresponds to the phase of 'letting come' described by Scharmer in the U-process. These impulses come from our Authentic Self, free of emotional attachments. But they also come from and through our unique collective field of attention.

Back in the days of our earliest experiments, we needed a lot of practice and a great deal of courage and willingness to voice our own sparks of wisdom, which might have been prompted by a personal memory, an old fairy tale or a recent scientific theory. Sharing our inner knowing, our unique perspective, our subtle impulses regarding the issue and the question at hand is central to reaching Authentic Collective Wisdom: if one of us holds

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back, we will miss one piece of the puzzle. This is often hard enough to do for ourselves, let alone recognising the stories and information shared by others as wisdom too. Nevertheless, this is just as important.

The emergence of collective wisdom has a lot to do with 'connecting the dots'. If you do not value your own dot, or if you disregard the dots that others have brought to the table, you will not see the patterns nor stumble upon some new meaning, and so emergence will not happen. All the words, images and information from the deeper and inner levels are available to everyone. They are accessible to us as we sit together in this meditative state of shared stillness at the same time as we focus on the question in the middle.

All this is not to say that *all* impulses shared in the circle have equal value or relevance for the shared purpose. We all have to learn to discern where our impulses are coming from and we can only learn this by doing it, by trying it out. But as we focus on emergence, we dare not reject any piece of the puzzle before we have a shared understanding of what is coming through. We must hold all the pieces in our view, without judgment, until something finally clicks and we all know we have reached something truly innovative.

#### **4. Living what is – in I and Potential: act on new insights**

As recounted in an earlier chapter, I reworked William Isaacs' concept of a container into what we came to call the 'container meditation', which was actually a collective contemplation. Out of the collective stillness, alignment and balance that arose in the shared silence, we would focus on a question or issue that was important to us at that time. We learned to give voice to the wisdom we would receive in this way. Indeed, truths would surface that had a deep personal and transformative meaning for all of us.

Later, we used this method to seek very practical guidance in our lives. With practice, seeking and receiving information in this way becomes very easy. While answers might present themselves if you learn to listen, actually acting on the received information presents another challenge. Sometimes it calls for major or minor decisions that don't necessarily fit our default schedules. *Really* honouring the information we receive opens us up to the courage to live by it: firstly to voice it in this circle, later to act on it, including in other situations and in the wider world.

Connecting with information received inside, without prior processing by the analytical and cognitive faculties of the mind, requires a strong belief and trust in a greater field of wisdom. In reality, though, there is no field 'out

there' - we are part of life, and wisdom and innovation are part of it also. I used to see this as a reciprocal movement: noticing that there is real wisdom to be gained though this practice will amplify our trust in this way of seeking knowledge and information. However, the connection is really deeper and more interwoven than a simple back and forth reciprocity. Truly, this is a co-creation.

The container we have built together, by going through all the stages and expanding to embrace all the domains, is now ready to receive the fullness of our collective wisdom, and we are ready to act on it. All of a sudden, we now see the puzzle we have been trying to solve, and it resembles nothing we had ever imagined. We never know what it will look like when we start, but there comes a point when we all see it and know it. In the metaphor of the puzzle, what is crucial is seeing and recognising the connections and patterns. Patterns are of a different order than the items of information we first gathered. The patterns are what will bring everyone to a new level of understanding. From this deepened, embodied collective insight, the first steps of action become obvious without effort and can easily be put into practice.

Once you and your group or team get used to this way of working, you will wonder how you could ever have survived on a diet of strict planning, discussion or debate. The quality of listening and sensing, together with a sharply defined and conscious intention, make for a relaxed atmosphere that still brings us into action. It can be recognised from the outside that the action you come up with is not merely a repetition of the old, but is truly innovative. That is reward enough in itself for adopting this new practice.

