

Reflections

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on Knowledge, Learning, and Change



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Theory U: Learning from the Future as it Emerges

C. Otto Scharmer

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Individual Actions: Learning from a Three-Year-Old

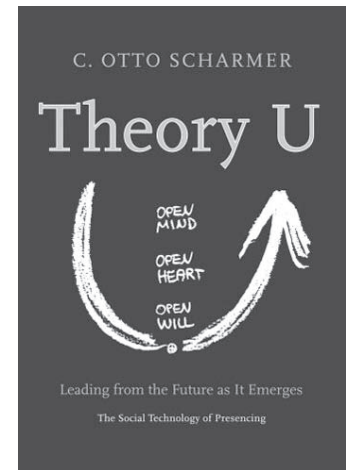


C. Otto Scharmer

Fundamental problems, as Einstein once noted, cannot be solved at the same level of thought that created them. In this ground-breaking book, Otto Scharmer gives us a new way to perceive, think about, and act on our extremely complex world. First introduced in *Presence* (SoL, 2004), the “U” methodology of leading profound change is expanded and deepened in *Theory U*. Using a wide range of stories and examples from his own experience, Scharmer shows us how we can open our mind, emotions, and will to moments of discovery and mutual understanding. In this excerpt, the innocence and openness of a three-year-old strike a sharp contrast to the experience of Traudl Junge, Adolf Hitler’s secretary during World War II.

**Theory U: Leading from
the Future as it Emerges**

C. Otto Scharmer
SoL, 2007



Learning from a Three-Year-Old

One day, as I was filling the dishwasher, I ran out of detergent. I wasn’t sure the box next to it was the right kind of soap, but I thought, what the heck, and used it anyway. A few minutes later, foam began streaming from the machine. Damn! I stopped the machine. Wiped up the foam. Inspected the mess: the machine was filled with water, dishes, and vast amounts of soapy foam. Since it seemed impossible to empty the machine of its water, I decided to forge ahead: to let it run and to simply mop up the foam for as long as it continued to pour out. While preoccupied with my mess, I was joined by our three-year-old, Johan-Caspar, who was fascinated by the show. He began helping me wipe away the endless white stream. As the rate of the

streaming foam began to slow just a little, Johan-Caspar took some short breaks. During these breaks he started talking to the machine in a low, intense voice. “What are you saying?” I asked him. “I am talking to the foam,” he replied. “The foam?” I was surprised. “Because the poor foam hasn’t got eyes to see. That’s why he can’t find the right way. That’s why he keeps coming out the wrong way.”

My three-year-old looked at the same frustrating situation as I did, but instead of wanting to kick the machine, he empathized with the streaming foam, communicating with the foam as if it were a sentient being. He noticed that this being had no eyes and believed that was why it had lost its way. It needed our help. One situation, one set of data, two ways of making sense.

From then on we communicated in silence with the streaming white being. Johan Caspar and I didn’t exchange any more words. We just got into the rhythm and flow of the work, paying attention to what that “white being” needed us to do to help it find its way.

Now let me deconstruct this story using the field model introduced in Chapter 15.

Filling the dishwasher and mindlessly adding the wrong detergent is a perfect example of downloading. Then, once the foaming started, I jumped from Level 1 (downloading) to Level 2: “Damn!” (seeing the mess). Then I tried to fix the problem. The challenge was to get beyond the Voice of Judgment (“Why can’t they build dishwashers that have a simple ‘empty the water’ function?”) and to stay cool and analyze the avail-

able options. If I had continued on the path suggested by my Voice of Judgment, I would have found many more things to be irritated about and probably would have kicked the machine. That course of action would have taken me straight into the space of anti-emergence: the cycle of denial and destruction. First you kick the machine, and then . . . well, we all know the story: the cycle of denial and destruction is filled with feedback loops that reinforce the destructive behavior.

That didn't happen because Johan Caspar entered the plane at a different level, Field 3 (he tuned in to what he saw as an evolving being, and then he started interacting with it). So he taught me to stop kicking and start diving in and feeling from inside. And finally, when we found a rhythm and flow of working together, no more words were needed. We knew what needed to be done and carried it out easily (illustrating, in a nutshell, Level 4).

There are three points about this story that I would like to highlight. One, mindfulness and presence can happen anytime, anywhere, in the midst of our everyday life. It doesn't require us to travel to the moon and back (although for some that has actually been the way into this experience). What it requires is an inward shift of attention.

Two, the greater the pressure of the external challenge (the bigger the mess in front of me), the more natural it feels to enter the dark space of absencing (kicking

the machine), which I will explain in more detail below.

Three, the point of moving into Fields 3 and 4 is to stop interacting with objects and start dealing with everything we work and interact with as if it were a sentient being that we can directly connect to from within (the foam without eyes).

The Theater Stage and the Collective Field

I still remember the amazing feeling of performing my first major role in a stage play at the age of about fourteen. You do everything you can to prepare, and you've memorized all your lines and stage cues. Then it's time for the opening scene. The curtain is about to rise. The voices of the audience grow softer. Suddenly you feel as if the earth stops turning. Everything, all the months of preparation, shrinks into a little heap of desperation and nothingness. It all vanishes. You forget everything you ever learned. You are frightened. You are alone. Driven more by desperation than aspiration, you hang in there. Not because you are courageous, more because it's now too late to run away (a thought that briefly crosses your mind). Then, before you fully realize it, you see the curtain rising. Too late. No more escape. Time stops.

The colored theater lights blind you and wrap you in an unfamiliar sphere of hot attention and energy. As if in slow motion, you stumble into the first movements,

words, sentences, and gestures. You are just getting into it when you suddenly notice that you are not alone. Another "being" seems to be communicating intimately with you. It is the audience. Their attention creates a holding space for you – a place that guides you. You feel it with every fiber of your body. You're now in a place that is watching and communicating with you. And it nourishes you with an energy you have never tasted before. A place that connects your source and being. Your place.

In this example, I, as the actor, approach the stage in the mode of downloading, having memorized all 820 of the lines that Shakespeare's Prospero had to speak. Then on stage, as the curtain rises, the resistance shows up as fear: fear of failure, fear of getting stuck, fear of not being able to remember a single line in front of three hundred people. In a mixture of desperation and courage, I stumble across a threshold and simply start moving. After the first few habitual moves my carefully prepared actions move from Fields 1 and 2 to Fields 3 and 4 – that is, I enter a flow of deepening/deepened presence and emergence.

What makes that possible? A collective holding space: an audience of three hundred loving parents and friends, sitting there with their minds and hearts wide open, fully present to and in awe of their children's performance.

In this example, the resistance (fear) appears right at the begin-

ning. It is followed by dropping into a deeper flow through the collective holding space provided by the loving audience. The collective holding space makes the shadow space of antiemergence disappear. Collective forces can free us or, as in the following story, keep us locked into the social space of antiemergence.

Hitler's Secretary

Traudl Junge was a simple, humble woman from rural Germany who lost her father early and whose difficult financial situation prevented her from pursuing the artistic career she longed for. More by accident than not, she went to Berlin, got a job through an uncle, and soon stumbled into a typing contest, which she won. Before long she was interviewing with a soft-spoken, friendly uncle type who was looking for a new private secretary. His name was Adolf Hitler, and he hired her to take occasional dictation.

At the end of the war, when Hitler committed suicide in his Führerbunker, she returned to the outside, to the real world – a world that lay in ashes and ruins.

She tried to flee to southern Germany but was captured by the Russians in Berlin. Because she had never been a member of the German Nazi Party, she was released and settled in Munich. Soon thereafter she came across the gravestone of Die Weisse Rose (The White Rose), a small Munich-based group of German resisters who had all been killed by the

Nazis. She looked at the inscription and was shocked to see that all the main figures of Die Weisse Rose had been born in the same year she was: 1920. At that moment of seeing she realized that for her and for her generation there was no hiding behind excuses. The Weisse Rose figures were the same age she was, and the difference between them was that each of them had made a conscious choice in their lives, a choice that she had never made. She realized that whatever she had done and participated in was ultimately her full personal responsibility – there was no hiding behind the collective fate of her generation. She gave no interviews until shortly before her death, when she spoke to André Heller, a well-known Austrian artist. A few days before the interview was aired, she told him that only now, fifty years later, could she finally begin to forgive herself. On the day after the interview aired, she passed away.¹ What makes her account of the final weeks in Hitler's bunker so intriguing is the preciseness and clarity of her descriptions. Her mind and memory seemed to work like a supersharp camera. She remembered countless events in great detail. At the same time she was also a gifted second-order observer: she was cognizant of gaps in her memory when she couldn't retrieve exact images or experiences.

Here is how Traudl Junge describes the bizarre company inside Hitler's bunker. They were

deep down inside the eleven-meter-thick walls of the bunker, with bombs dropping to the left and right and on top of them. The Red Army was only a few roadblocks away. Hitler's army had collapsed, gone from occupying nearly all of Europe to total defeat. Yet, despite all the "disconfirming data" around them, all the bombs that were being dropped right on top of them, some people inside the bunker were holding on to their hopes and fantasies. They were clinging to their old mental models, unable to let reality sink in. The bombs being dropped onto them were not powerful enough to get the message to penetrate through the thick walls of their minds. Pondering why she didn't simply leave after even Hitler had suggested that she do so, she said, "I was afraid to leave the security of the bunker."

That's what the power of blinding (not seeing) and entrenching (desensing) is about: it keeps us inside the thick walls of our own bunkers so that we are unable to connect with what's really going on outside. Still, her staying is somewhat incomprehensible. What was the real mechanism that kept her locked inside the bunker?

One way to make sense of this puzzle is to imagine that she got stuck in the shadowspace of antiemergence, which froze her deeper resources of intelligence (open mind, heart, will). She lost the connection to her authentic self and ended up participating in the practices of antiemergence (see figure).

Downloading: Traudl Junge described in great detail how life inside the bunker continued, as if the people were automatons. As daily and even special rituals such as the tea ceremony or the wedding between Hitler and Eva Braun (two days before his suicide) continued, they grew into hollow procedures of an absurd disconnect.

Blinding, or not seeing: “I was walled in and separated from the information that I needed to understand what was going on,” said Traudl Junge. “First when I got there, I thought that I had arrived at the source of information. But later I realized that I had been in the [system’s] blind spot.”

Entrenching and desensing: During the final years of the war, Hitler always traveled on a special train with curtains closed so he wouldn’t see the war’s destruction. When he arrived back at the main train station in Berlin, his driver was instructed to take a route that would expose Hitler to the least destruction. He didn’t want any flowers in the bunker because he “didn’t want to be around corpses.” How ironic. The man whose acts caused the deaths of 55 million people didn’t want to be near flowers that were dying.

Absencing: Traudl Junge had the most trouble recalling those final days in the bunker. Her otherwise supersharp camera memory appeared to have black holes when it came to remembering her feelings and emotions during those last days. It is as if these emotions were erased – or deeply frozen inside her experiential body. She

described acting like a mindless automaton in her day-to-day routine – disconnected not only from the catastrophic events unfolding outside but also from her real self: “We functioned like automatons, I cannot remember any feelings, it was like an in-between state where I was no longer myself.”

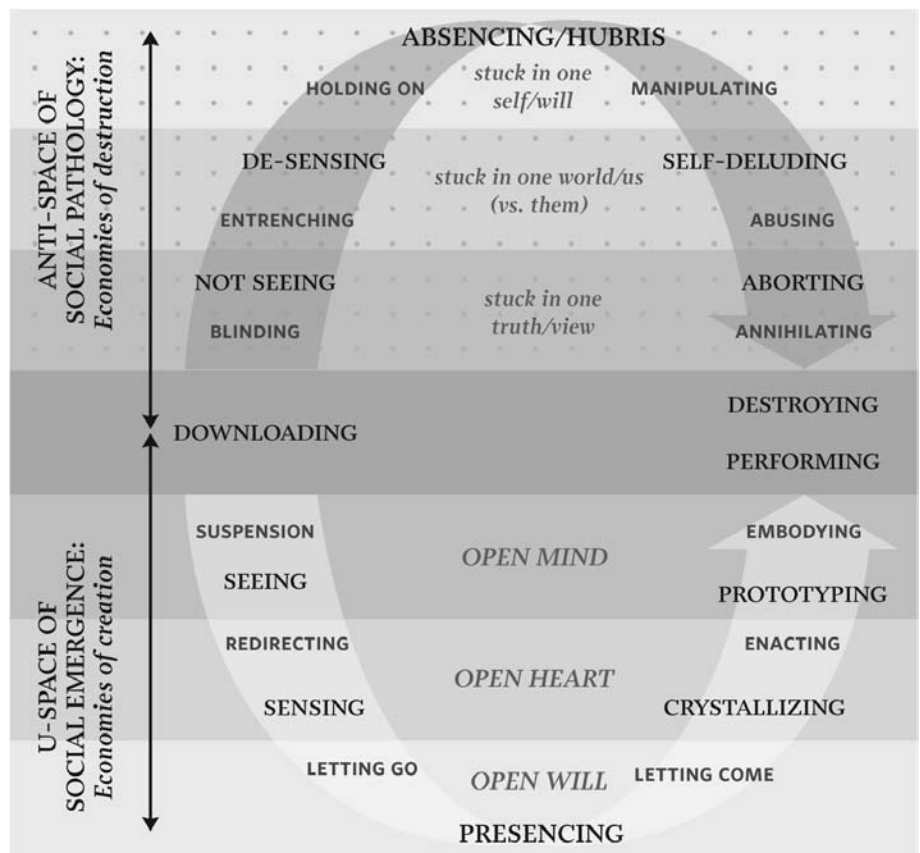
Self-deluding: This is a total disconnect between one’s images of the unfolding future and reality. Traudl Junge described many meetings and turnaround strategies that all went nowhere because they were grounded in such illusory assumptions. They only deepened the abyss between the world inside the bunker and the course of events outside. “We were so separated from what was really

going on outside,” reflected Junge, “that we had no idea how the world would continue to unfold.”

Aborting: Just as prototyping is about creating microcosms of a future life, aborting is about terminating and killing future life. In the bunker this involved killing first the dog, on whom the cyanide was tested, then all the children, as well as many others, who committed suicide prior to the final victory of the Red Army.

Annihilating: After Hitler killed himself, Traudl Junge said that the remaining characters sat together like a group of lifeless puppets that had just lost their puppeteer.

The group around Hitler was trapped in a space of social anti-emergence that revolves around



downloading, blinding, desensing, absencing, self-deluding, aborting, and destruction. The figure depicts how this shadow space represents the antithesis of the U space of presencing.

Just as the U space of presencing spells out the economics of creation, the shadow space of absencing features the economics of destruction. Each cycle is based on self-reinforcing dynamics. The U space of social emergence is based on the power of activating the instruments of the open mind, open heart, and open will. By contrast, the shadow space of social pathology is based on the dynamics of being stuck in one Truth (rigid ideology), one center or collective (arrogance, hate), and one will (fanaticism and violence) – in short, the space of absencing exhibits all the key features of fundamentalism.

For Traudl Junge, one puzzling question remained: Why didn't I leave?

She didn't leave the bunker because she was caught in a deadly pattern of absencing. The dynamics she was wrestling with are now back in business. Because these destructive dynamics are alive and well, we need a clearer understanding of the process and practices through which the pathological space of social destruction comes into being. That space appears to manifest when human systems face high-stakes situations in which the relationship to their open mind, heart, and will is cut off and frozen out.

The figure sums up the individual dimensions of the U:

- Most people on Earth have plenty of experiences across all four levels. When first confronted with the U, many people say: Yes, I do know Level 1 and 2, I do know downloading and seeing, but I am not sure that I know Level 3 and 4, sensing and presencing. But then, on consideration and after going deeper into their life's and work's journey, most people find the hidden gold of their various threshold experiences relatively quickly.

- The movement from Level 1, downloading to the bottom or the deeper levels of the U, can happen in any situation: when doing a four-week meditation retreat or when messing up the dishwasher in your home kitchen.

- Being in the presence of people who operate from the deeper levels can help a lot. In some cases, that can be a three-year-old. In other cases, this wisdom awareness happens some other way, through someone else. Sometimes we call that leadership.

- If you happen to connect to a source once, it isn't good enough. Most people did that already (often without fully noticing). The issue is how to stay connected, how to sustain that connection. Because if you do not, you may be in danger of freezing that single experience into something rigid that catapults you into the anti-space of social pathology (one Truth, one Us, one Will). Which brings us to our next point.

- We can flip or revert from the social space of deep emergence into the dark space of anti-emergence anytime, anywhere. It can happen whenever we lose our full attention and wakefulness and our firm grounding in a selfless or serving intent. It's easy to see how Hitler's secretary got sucked into a system that finally had her holding on to the informational blind spot behind eleven-meter-thick walls. That's easy to recognize. But isn't that same thing happening to each of us day to day, moment to moment? Aren't we also seduced by situations and systems that take advantage of our not being fully awake, not being fully intentional? As with Traudl Junge, the system hits us right in our blind spot.

So how can we sustain the connection to source? By being and staying awake.

Thinking is an enormously powerful process – one that usually remains untapped, unused and unrecognized. Our thinking creates the world! But instead of discovering the creative power of real thinking, we are socialized into patterns of downloading that relate to real thinking like the shadows inside Plato's cave relate to the actual reality and the sun outside.

The power of this metaprocess of thinking is frozen into fixed forms and shadows in Field 1 (downloading); begins to wake up when we begin to connect with what is really going on outside (Field 2: seeing); begins to get

wings that take us out of the prisons of our own mental models when we begin to connect with the others around us and with what the situation looks and feels like to them (Field 3: sensing); and finally turns into the source of fire. In its essence, real thinking is pure fire. The fire of creation. The fire we can tap into when we begin to connect with the fourth field.

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Dr. C. Otto Scharmer is a Senior Lecturer at MIT and the founding chair of ELIAS (Emerging Leaders for Innovation Across Sectors), a program linking twenty leading global institutions from business, government, and civil society in order to prototype profound system innovations for a more sustainable world. He is also a visiting professor at the Center for Innovation and Knowledge Research, Helsinki School of Economics, and the founding chair of the Presencing Institute. Scharmer has consulted with global companies, international institutions, and cross-sector change initiatives in North America, Europe, Asia, and Africa. He has co-designed and delivered award-winning leadership programs for client organizations including DaimlerChrysler, PricewaterhouseCoopers, and Fujitsu. He is the author of numerous articles and books, including *Presence: An Exploration of Profound Change in People, Organizations and Society*, co-authored with Peter Senge, Joseph Jaworski, and Betty Sue Flowers. More information about Scharmer and his work can be found at www.solonline.org/theoryu or www.ottoscharmer.com.
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