Chapter 3
Presencing Our Absencing:
A Collective Reflective Practice
Using Scharmer’s “U” Model

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ABSTRACT
This chapter raises awareness of the persistent need in the majority of group participants to avoid publicly exposing in their conversations the vulnerability generated by their profound human need for each other’s acceptance and approval. A willingness to risk this exposure is required for successfully creating the open interpersonal field critical to the effectiveness of Scharmer’s Theory U methodology. Scharmer recognizes this resistance in his description of the “Voices of Judgment, Cynicism, and Fear,” and in participants’ avoidance of exposing their vulnerability to each other. However, he does not offer an adequate methodological remedy. In this chapter, the group participants’ egos are identified as the source of all forms of avoidance of the interpersonal risks required if conversations are to be open, creative, and transformative. A collective method is presented which a group can use to diminish the negative impact of their egos on their conversations, increase interpersonal safety, and strengthen the group’s capacity to sustain “presencing conversations.” This method, called “Presencing Our Absencing” follows the format of Scharmer’s U model for group conversations.

INTRODUCTION
Otto Scharmer, in describing his roadmap for organizational and social evolution, Theory U (2008), points to what he calls a ‘blind spot’ in our collective awareness. The objective of his theory, as he puts it, is: “illuminating this blind spot” (p. 46). His notion of this blind spot includes a specific collective capacity that is always present in potential (the ‘spot’), and a recognition of our ‘blindness’ to it. It is not that the ‘spot’ is hiding from us. We don’t see the ‘spot’. It is our lack of awareness that creates our ‘blindness’ to the spot.

Scharmer’s theory and methodology seeks to create conversations that move our collective evolution toward the realization of “our best
selves and our highest future” (p. 57) by creating the interpersonal conditions necessary for our conversations to open our eyes to what we are not currently seeing. He believes the expansion of our awareness and our access to the critical resources of collective intelligence, creativity, will, and wisdom that are contained within the ‘spot’ are vital to the realization of this collective evolution.

Scharmer is clear about what is contained within the ‘spot’ that he wishes to illuminate. The goal of this paper is to shine more light on the blindness itself in the ‘blind spot’. The nature, purpose, and dynamics of this ‘blindness’ itself will be explored. One of the central understandings put forth within this paper is that our ‘blindness’, or resistance to awareness, is not strictly passive…. that most often it is, in fact, powerfully active and purposeful. This resistance is not designed to directly suppress the emergence of our best selves or our highest future. Rather, this resistance is designed to avoid consciously experiencing and sharing the interpersonal risks inherent in creating a necessary condition for this emergence to occur, i.e. creating a conversational field in which our emotional vulnerability to each other is both acknowledged and felt.

It is this dynamic and purposeful quality of our resistance to experiencing this shared vulnerability that accounts for the difficulty of both initiating wise and compassionate systemic change, and even more so for our frustrating inability to sustain it beyond a ‘breakthrough’ experience. Scharmer, in my assessment, does not sufficiently illuminate this dynamic quality of our blindness, nor its source and purpose, and as a result limits the power of his methodology to deal with the blindness effectively.

This paper will describe the source, purpose, and dynamics of our active blindness. The source of this blindness is the ego. The ego, as defined in this paper, is the ‘mastermind’ of all the personal psychological strategies designed to help us avoid experiencing (i.e. feeling) the reality of our need for each other’s approval and acceptance and the vulnerability to each other that results from this need. This paper will provide a collective method, called ‘presencing our absencing’, designed to help a group release their conversational process from the limiting, and often destructive, grip of their egos. This method is grounded in the format and conversational processes of Theory U.

**WHAT IS SCHARMER’S ‘SPOT’?**

The ‘spot’ in Scharmer’s evolutionary system of organizational development is what he calls the inner “source” dimension (p.57). This inner resource, which is a combination of both creativity and wisdom, exists in potential in every individual and, collectively, in every group. This source is the outcome of combining two different but inter-related human dimensions. Theory U recognizes the first of these: our need to access the dimensions of collective intelligence, creativity, and will. It also recognizes, however, that this alone is not sufficient. Indeed, we have seen too often in the course of human history that intelligence, creativity, and will can be used by individuals and groups for the realization of horrifyingly destructive purposes, as well as for the realization of our highest aspirations.

Scharmer’s system is both evolutionary and revolutionary because he adds a second critical dimension to our awareness regarding the ingredients of the ‘inner source dimension’: that is the understanding that it is only when the capacities of collective intelligence, creativity, and will are accessed within a group whose minds, hearts, and wills are open that they will then be used with collective caring, compassion, and wisdom. It is this combination of our collective capacities being accessed within an interpersonal space, filled