Chapter 11
Aligning with the Emergent Future

Sue Guttenstein
ADIWA Centre, Canada

Jane Lindsay
ADIWA Centre, Canada

Charles Baron
Université Laval, Canada

ABSTRACT

In Theory U, Otto Scharmer suggests that by working at the bottom of the U we can align with a positive future, which can then manifest through us. It requires our transcending our individual perspectives and analytic approaches. Instead, we access the implicit, intuitive wisdom of the larger Consciousness Field. This chapter examines two issues unaddressed by Scharmer, suggesting first that there is evidence that such a consciousness field exists through which we can access the emergent future and, secondly, that there are innovative practices that help us experience and function at the bottom of the U, in time on a reliable basis.

INTRODUCTION

Theory U is Otto Scharmer’s invitation to groups and organizations not just to change but to transform how they work in order to deal with the challenges of the 21st century. At its center is the truly remarkable idea that by “presencing” or by working from the “bottom of the U,” we can access the highest potential future – one that is seeking to emerge through us.

For Scharmer, presencing is a self-transcending experience in which we open to the essence of who we are and our work as part of the whole. It involves letting go of the mental habits and pre-conceptions rooted in our personal experiences, as well as letting go of our conventional, analytic ways of understanding reality. Instead, we are invited to stand at the edge of our knowing - vulnerable and uncertain, with an “open mind,” an “open heart” and an “open will” - and
from here to surrender to what is emerging for the highest good. Scharmer believes that if we do this collectively, together crossing a threshold into a more expanded state of consciousness, and become present to what wants to emerge, we will co-create a more positive future.

In doing this we enter what Eleanor Rosch calls “primary knowing” (Scharmer, 2009 p. 167). Primary knowing involves being one with the whole, enabling us to access a wisdom that cannot be found when we work with fragmented parts. For Scharmer, the actions that result enable the whole to know itself. Presencing then is a way of accessing what Daoism calls the Source and giving it life or self-knowing through manifestation. It requires what Martin Buber describes as surrendering our will to the larger Will.

While this territory is most often traversed by spiritual traditions, Scharmer is inviting us to open to these possibilities as an underlying reality without expecting that we adopt spiritual beliefs or practices. He does, however, implicitly ask us to be open to the possibility that reality is quite different than we have traditionally thought and to trust that we can make a positive difference in what unfolds in the future by working from this framework.

Scharmer has come to this way of thinking through his own action research and through his extensive conversations with influential individuals who have had, and reflected upon, their experience in this domain. Our experiences reflect a similar set of discoveries. Still we are aware that people who have not had such experiences may be skeptical of what Scharmer describes. On behalf of those who are interested in a more elaborate context for presencing than what Scharmer provides, we offer a number of preliminary questions.

Taking up a scientific viewpoint in the next section, we consider evidence that might provide grounds for supporting Scharmer’s way of working. For example, what might this “whole” be that he speaks of, of which we are an integral part? Is it reasonable to assume that there is information in this whole and that it is accessible by us through non-rational/non-cognitive means and, if so, under what conditions? Could it be that this information is not time sensitive (i.e. past, present and future being equally accessible), opening the door to an emerging future influencing the present – more specifically to a future wanting to manifest through us?

Given the constraints of space, our review of evidence will only present highlights of the scientific data and observations available. As understanding of the data is still emerging, there will naturally be skepticism, particularly in the face of non-conventional interpretations that may not align with our experience. However, we invite readers to consider these propositions with an open mind, because we believe that they can contribute to a much richer experience of Theory U.

Also, Scharmer does not address in concrete or experiential terms how to move into a state of presence at the bottom of the U, a state which is not accessible through conventional ways of thinking and behaving. Joseph Jaworski, an early colleague of Scharmer’s in the articulation of Theory U, remarks in his new book Source (2012) that the bottom of the U is not well understood, that writing to date “misses something vital” (p.45). He cites the concern held by Robert Rabbin, an authority on personal development and self-awareness, that there needs to be an acknowledgement that there is:

...a little doorway at the bottom of the U that is like a rabbit hole into non-being. ... When people fall into the rabbit hole of non-being, the nature of their being is changed. The nature of their will is changed. The nature of their speaking is changed. We come to words like ‘surrender’ and ‘devotion.’ We come to the intersection of time and timelessness, of effort and grace, of doing and non-doing – of living beyond defining dualities ... (pp 43-44)

Scharmer acknowledges that “social technologies” are needed to enable us to access presence at