Book Review:

*Presence: Human Purpose and the Field of the Future*

Peter Senge, C. Otto Scharmer, Joseph Jaworski, and Betty Sue Flowers
Second edition to be published by Randomhouse in August, 2005

Reviewed By Patricia A. Wilson

Have you experienced that special moment in a group when the bickering and dissension stop and the impasse is broken? Suddenly there is a felt shift in the room, a new shared understanding of what needs to happen; someone articulates the sense of the whole, and everyone is on board. *Presence* aims to find an intentional and sustainable path to those moments.

The book relates an intimate conversation among the four authors that sheds light on collective intelligence: how we think and know together. Prying open the black box of participation, the conversation addresses how wisdom emerges in a group and how a group’s sensing (literally pre-sensing or presencing) of the emerging future can crystallize and manifest through action. The conversation is informed by extensive interviews with selected scientists, business leaders, and spiritual masters about how they create and invent, and how they discern their sense of larger purpose. The common denominator is a shift in the sense of self, from the isolated individual struggling to accomplish, to that of a lightning rod for grounding the energy and wisdom of a larger whole.

Particularly delightful are the theoretical threads woven throughout the book that draw on dynamic systems theory popularized in Peter Senge’s 1990 best-seller, *The Fifth Discipline*, but adding elements of chaos theory, complexity science, field theory, and esoteric philosophy, reflecting Peter’s own journey toward contemplation and his current passion for global environmental awareness.

Beneath the apparent non-linearity of the conversational text lies a logical structure of a model of group knowing, called the U model. Synthesized by one of Peter Senge’s leading protégés, co-author Otto Scharmer, who, like Peter, teaches at MIT’s Sloan School of Management, the model is described in several academic articles on Otto’s website ([www.ottoscharmer.com](http://www.ottoscharmer.com)), along with the introductory chapter of *Presence* and supporting interview transcripts.
The premise of the U model is simple: instead of moving straight across the top of the U from problem identification to solution using mental models based on past experience, we can deepen the conversation, the learning, the sensing, the knowing, through a process of letting go and letting come. As the illustration shows, with each added level of depth new understanding emerges before moving into action. At the turning point of the U—that magical moment of emptiness—comes a profound sense of group knowing.

To get there requires some difficult letting go of our mental models in order to move down the U from discussion (downloading of mental models) to dialogue (building shared understanding), as defined by David Bohm. Accurate sensing of current reality, devoid of pre-judgment, becomes a part of this process. Then when the group has formed a field identity (an energetic field of connection with a larger whole) new wisdom about the emerging future can express itself—the ‘aha’ moment when the group finally sees the way forward. The book uncovers some of the elements that give rise to this moment at the bottom of the U, such as group silence—sitting comfortably together in silence allowing the new wisdom to emerge.

The result is not a new master plan, or even vision, but a sense of direction and purpose that grounds quickly in action, followed by reflection and further action. The group may feel a sense of calling, of larger purpose, that motivates action and learning from action. The group is aligned (with a larger sense of purpose that is unfolding) and entrained (to a shared vibrational or energetic field). Immediate actions bubble forth seamlessly as a series of prototypes until eventually, some are scaled up, perhaps institutionalized.

Those of us in civic engagement or collaborative planning may recognize the steps in the U model from discussion to dialogue and later the learning-from-action of the reflective practitioner. And for those of us already attuned to the mystical or spiritual journey of emptying to the present moment, the bottom of the U is a familiar (and sacred) space. Presence brings these worlds together, offering an engaging and legitimizing integration of left- and right-brain thinking. As a core reading in a graduate seminar called "Deep Democracy: Creating a Culture of Dialogue" that I taught this spring with co-author Betty Sue Flowers, the book sparked a deep whole-person inquiry with the students. It left each of us inspired to deepen the dialogue in ourselves and in the civic arena.

* * *
Dr. Patricia A. Wilson is professor of community and regional planning at the University of Texas, Austin, where she teaches collaborative planning and civic engagement.