

## Presence

By Peter Senge, Joseph Jaworski, C. Otto Sharmer, Betty Sue Flowers  
Society for Organizational Learning, Cambridge Massachusetts

## A Book Review

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By  
**Mark Gerzon**

What are we to make of a conversational book that discusses Ford Motor Company and Mahayana Buddhism, careens from management theory to meditation practice, tells stories about the Bank of America and ancient Chinese sages, chronicles corporate board retreats and shamanic vision quests and alludes to infrastructure and the infinite - and everything in between?

What will give most readers the incentive to read this book is knowing that it is a series of conversations between four thoughtful, experienced intellectuals who are daring to do the impossible: *to introduce a theory of individual and organization change that bridges the material and spiritual planes.*

Do not read *Presence* because you think it succeeds at this awesome task, because it doesn't. But do read it. It will allow you to enter a conversation that is at the cutting-edge of human thought about change, both personal and organizational. It will introduce you to the fullest possible range of ways of thinking about this crucial subject. And it will catalyze your own thinking as you react - sometimes with admiration, others times with impatience - to the conversation swirling around you.

The challenge facing breakthrough syntheses like this one is that readers who approach it from their own specialized angle will tend to find it superficial. Those who are deeply immersed in Buddhism will find the spiritual dimension rather skimpy. Those who are well-versed in organizational change literature may find the business applications not worth the book's hefty price. But neither of these lenses is useful for appreciating the real value of this remarkable book.

Calling their approach "more Buddhist than Western," Peter Senge comes closest to summarizing the book's vision when he addresses the fact that "the human exists in two interdependent orders:" first, the "manifest" domain and second, the "infinite, the absolute, the transcendent, the universal beyond form, beyond thought, beyond any 'thing'- typically referred to as 'Suchness.' And the human exists, literally, where these two orders intersect, what's called the '*Tathagata-garbha*' in the oldest texts."

He explains the title of the book when he says: "I think a Buddhist would say that presencing can arise to the extent that we develop the capacity, individually and collectively, to extend our conscious awareness in both domains."

Senge et.al. have conducted a panel discussion, not a lecture, which has all the strengths and weaknesses of that format. If you listen closely, it can change your worldview. But it is the reader's own responsibility to make sense of it and decide what the implications are for our work - and for our lives.

For me, reading *Presence* was spiritual and intellectual nourishment. As someone who walks between these two worlds, I was grateful beyond words to find a book in which the authors had the courage to acknowledge the two planes as interdependent and equally important. I was touched deeply by their personal sharing, particularly by Joseph Jaworski's soulful account of his wilderness experience of Oneness. What a pleasure to hear an author speak from his own experience of his deepest truths, not jump from footnote to footnote doing the usual publish-or-perish jig.

Every time I conduct a leadership training, or encourage policymakers somewhere in the world to dialogue more authentically, I will be encouraged by this book to stand more firmly and proudly in "both domains," the temporal and the timeless. In a world that has been torn asunder, divided into matter and spirit by a fragmented philosophy, *Presence* is healing. One can feel that it was such an experience for the authors as they spoke it, just as it can be for us, too, as we read their words.

Jaworski's story of his 14-day vision quest in Baja California, which is almost an entire chapter in the book, captures the power of this book - as well as its limitation. The power resides in this man's honest account of how he broke through the wall of separation between him and the world and experienced the timeless oneness with the universe that sages and mystics have written about for centuries. The limitation is that the implications of his journey are not explored.

His guide on the vision quest was John Milton, who is convinced that "political, legal and economic approaches don't go deep enough." Like other spiritual teachers, Milton believes that the "penetrating changes in human culture that we need for people to live in true harmony and balance with one another and the earth" requires an internal change. There is no question that Joseph Jaworski experienced that profound inner shift. What remains unclear is exactly how the authors think that can be translated into the "non-vision quest" world.

That doing so is their goal becomes clear from their "U" theory of systemic change, in which the heart of the change process (equivalent to the bottom of the "U") occurs when groups experience this transformative moment of "presence" collectively. This appears to be the brainchild of co-author Otto Sharmar, who intends to publish another book entitled *Theory U*. How the authors intend to make this transformation happen on organizational retreats or policy dialogues, however, is not adequately explained. Perhaps it will be in Sharmar's next book, but it is not in this one, as the following excerpt illustrates:

The state at the bottom of the U is presencing - seeing from the deepest source and becoming a vehicle for that source. When we suspend and redirect our attention, perception starts to arise for within the living process of the whole. When we are presencing, it moves further, to arise from the highest future possibility that connects self and whole. The real change in understanding presencing lies not in its abstractness but in the subtlety of the experience.

Mystics and seekers have been writing about this "subtle experience" for millennia, and circular, awkward passages such as this one do not add much to the literature.

Part of my confusion about their theory may stem from the conversational style of the book, which ambles through thickets of ideas the way that four good friends would traverse the English countryside. Clearly their conversations, which took place at Sharmar's Cambridge apartment on several weekends spanning many months, were taped and transcribed, and then carefully edited. Betty Sue Flowers, a particularly gifted writer who worked closely with Bill Moyers on his

Joseph Campbell interviews captured in The Power of Myth, does a valiant job trying to bring order and rhythm to the currents of conversation.

**But a conversation is not an essay. If you want a clear, cogent essay on the subject, there are other far more succinct introductions to this subject. One of countless examples is the work of Peter and Penny Fenner, who "blend the best of leading-edge management science with the contemplative psychology of Asia's timeless wisdom traditions." In their essay "Leadership and Wellbeing," they describe the elusive East-West synergy in less than a dozen pages. In fact, their eight-word summary (left column, Western; right column, Eastern) reads like a Zen koan:**

**ACTION-STILLNESS  
COMMITMENT-DETACHMENT  
LEADING-FOLLOWING  
KNOWLEDGE-SEEING**

**In a single essay, which is shorter than the introduction alone in *Presence*, the Fenners crystallize many of the key ideas of this field and communicate them without jargon or neologisms.**

So do not read *Presence* for simplicity or clarity. Read it for complexity and richness. Since it is a dialogue between four gifted thinkers and authors each of whom could have written their own book, it is brainstorm, not a still pond.

If they hadn't published it themselves, they would have had to label their book "spirituality" or "business" or some other ridiculous category, which book store clerks love but which infuriate the rest of us. Thanks to their independence, the authors could cross back and forth between the different planes of existence within one volume, something that the publishing conglomerates would never have allowed.

The irony of our age is that the mega companies who churn out most books today do have categories for "Business" and "Spirituality." But that, alas, is how they read. They are about one or the other, this or that, as if the "domains" of which this foursome speak so tenderly had somehow drifted irrevocably onto different planets.

As a result of their courage and their wisdom, *Presence* comes into our hands just as it left theirs: as a gift of the spirit, bridging the worlds of spirit and matter, and inviting us to cross the divide with them. Both as leaders in communities and organizations, and as citizens of democracies, it is urgent that we accept their invitation. The split between the "world of work" and the "world of spirit," which has led to the productive, political and military power of the secular West, has reached a dead-end. Symbolized, respectively, by the ethical bankruptcy of Enron, the current attack/counterattack presidential campaign in the US, and the misguided Iraq War, this dead-end is spawning a search for alternative models of leadership and organization. If you, like these four authors, are searching for such alternatives, there is no more important conversation to join than the one in these pages.

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