

Social Presencing Theater

The Art of Making a True Move

A book excerpt by Arawana Hayashi

Arawana Hayashi, along with Mobius Transformational Faculty Member Matthias Müller-Lindenberg, will lead a track at the 2023 Annual Gathering of the Next Practice Institute

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—
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ARAWANA HAYASHI
FOREWORD BY OTTO SCHARMER

“When I first met Arawana Hayashi, I was co-facilitating a workshop in Nova Scotia. The organizers of the conference had structured the event such that each workshop was paired up with a different team of artists each day. Arawana was one of them. On the day she joined our workshop, she introduced a practice called Duet, a type of explorative, meditative dance. In order to demonstrate the practice to the group, she needed a partner. She picked me. I don’t think I had a choice (I probably would have tried to avoid that role).

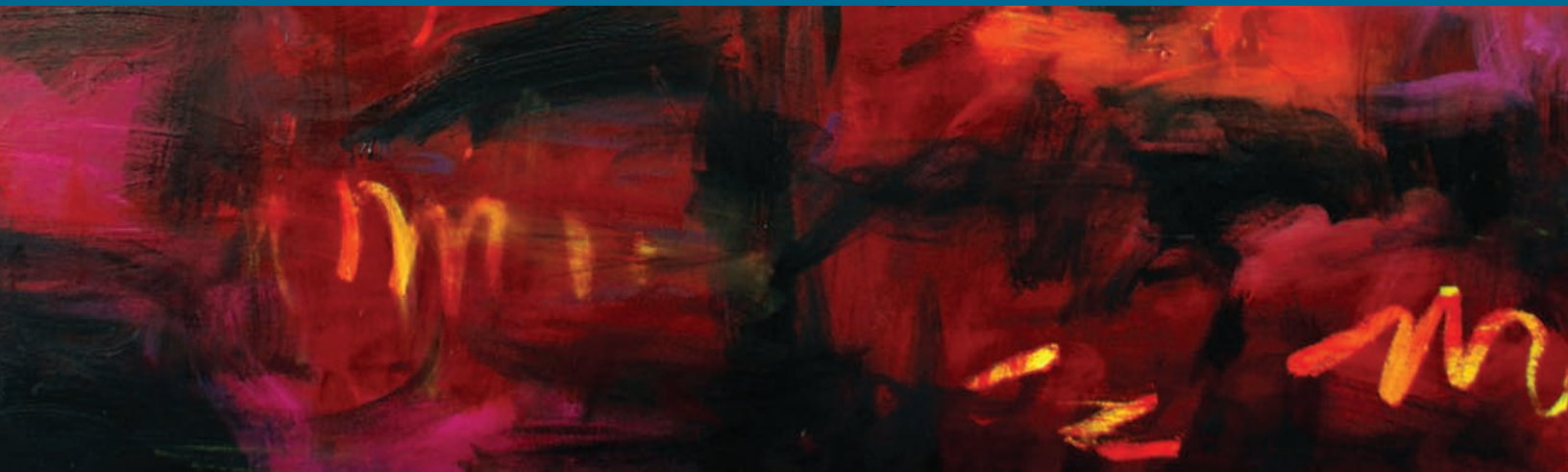
What do I remember from that dance? Not much—except that it changed my life in less than five minutes. Within moments, I was in a different state of awareness and attention to what wanted to emerge from the “social field”—that is, from the quality of relationships that we have with each other, with ourselves, and with the unfolding situation.

In much of our lives our attention tends to be distracted by either the future or the past, by worrying about tomorrow or regretting things we did or didn’t do yesterday. But in reality, there is only one access point for how we as humans actively participate in the unfolding of the universe: the now. Connecting to the now enables us to sense into the resonances of the past and the resonance of the future wanting to emerge.

If we assume that to be true, then the real question on the table is of course: How? How do we do that? How do we lean in to the current moment in a way that lets us sense the resonance of our highest future possibilities? How do we do that as individuals? How do we do that as a group? How do we do that as an organization or as a larger social system?

This book is all about the how. It lays out the foundations of a new discipline, a social art called Social Presencing Theater. Arawana has co-created this new social artform—a set of methods and tools that change-makers worldwide are using to facilitate transformational change in their relationships, in their communities and organizations, in local and national government agencies, and in international institutions like the United Nations. This rapidly growing community of change-makers knows that to really change the outer world we first need to shift the inner place that we operate from, both as individuals and as communities.”

— From the Foreword written by Otto Scharmer, Mobius Senior Expert, Senior Lecturer at MIT, co-founder of the Presencing Institute, and author of *Theory U: Leading from the Future as it Emerges*



Deep Water by Jim McManus, Mobius featured artist

Introducing Social Presencing Theater

From Chapter One

Social Presencing Theater got its name from Otto Scharmer, and the words describe what it is. *Social* refers to both the social body, the physical arrangement of a group of people in a space, and to the social field, the quality of the relationships between the people. *Presencing* relates to awareness and a larger sense of environment. *Theater* refers to the visible choices we make (what we do) and the relationships created from those choices (what we sense). Those choices are determined by our level of collective awareness, or *social presencing*.

The practice is social because it is engaged in by groups and teams—social bodies. It invites us into an experience of social awareness—knowing that is shared by a group. Individuals engage in a process wherein they are present and able to collectively “sense into” both their limiting patterns and their wellspring of creative potential. Individual insights and transformations have great value; however, many of us realize the need for others as co-creators, partners, supporters, and challengers. We need others to listen to and hold us, both in our stumblings and in pursuit of our highest aspirations. There is wisdom in groups. Often it is hidden under discord and confusion; but it is there. Social Presencing Theater accesses and makes visible the deeper wisdom that informs our engagement with complex and demanding issues.

In the book *Theory U*, Otto posits that when we can attend to the present moment fully, not only do we connect with a vivid sense of being, but we can also experience a sense of possibility—an emerging future. Collectively we can sense into what has not

happened yet, a future in which we have a role to play. He calls this experience *presencing*—a blend of *presence* and *sensing*. When I asked Otto to remind me where the word presencing came from, he wrote in a text message, “I saw the word first in the English translation of a Heidegger text by a French translator. I liked it. I was looking for a word like that. Then I googled it. No hits. Nothing came up (it was in the 1990s), except that some nurses talked about presencing when they described their experience with end-of-life care. Then I knew. *That’s* the perfect word I was looking for. Later I found it in one of my interviews with Henri Bortoft. He didn’t use it in the interview, but later, in one of his books he said, ‘the whole presences itself within the parts.’”

Presencing is defined as “to sense, tune in, and act from one’s highest future potential—the future that depends on us to bring it into being. Presencing works through ‘seeing from our deepest source.’” In other words, we can collectively perceive and experience the present moment without the limitation of our habitual concepts, opinions, or projections. In doing so, we contact our innate intelligence, tender caring, and courage—three qualities that manifest as the true moves we make as we co-create with each other the systems in which we live and work.

The root of the word *theater* comes from the Greek *theatron*—literally, “a place for viewing”—from *theasthal*, meaning “to behold.” We use the word theater not in reference to drama or theatrical performance. We use the word in this original meaning—as a place where things become visible. In ancient times and in many cultures, the theater was a place where people enacted ceremonies and rituals

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for connecting to gods, for healing, for amusement, for good harvests, for mourning, and for making visible the rich stories of what it is to be a human being with other human beings. From times long past until now, theater has been a social form of collective seeing and sensing. People gather to be moved, informed, uplifted, challenged, amused, transformed, and connected. Theater makes visible the fullness of humanity; it is a mirror in which we can see ourselves in all our difficulties and glories in order to experience a transformation and a deeper understanding of what it is to be human.

The practices are called theater not because we are acting or pretending, but because we are embodied physical beings who are visible. Unlike thoughts and words, bodies are visible. We are visible to one another. I am not referring to “body language,” the psychological implications of postures and gestures. Instead, our interest lies in movement choices. As we move about with others, we create visible patterns and structures. Because Social Presencing Theater is primarily nonverbal and without goal orientation, it opens our awareness to the subtle ways we communicate through the movement choices we make. Relationships arise and dissolve, creating an ever-changing landscape of possibilities. We make visible the social fields of relationships that we create moment by moment.

The Ground We Stand On

We hold some grounding principles that establish the integrity of the work. They are the foundation on which Social Presencing Theater was created,

and they express a view that is essential if the work is to continue in its truthfulness. They represent an attitude with which to approach the work. They shape not only the form of the practices, but also how we engage in and facilitate the practices with others.

Basic goodness is our innate nature

Social Presencing Theater is based on the premise that basic goodness is the fundamental nature of ourselves, others, and society itself. I am not using the word goodness in a moral sense—good as opposed to bad—but more in the sense of wholeness. I first heard the words *basic goodness* from Tibetan meditation master Chögyam Trungpa, who described it as an innate healthiness and wakefulness inherent in all humanity. There is a lot of evidence that this might not be true. Terrible, terrible things happen every day to people, to animals, to the natural world. However, the teachings on basic goodness invite us to see and sense what is underneath fear, aggression, and stupidity. Social Presencing Theater invites us to contact the unconditional wholesomeness that lives in us all.

Basic goodness is a view or an attitude that sees an underlying sanity in everyone and in systems. An opposite view would be to believe that individuals, including oneself, are basically “messed up,” or that organizations of individuals are toxic to the core. The view of fundamental healthiness is not ignorant of neurosis and dysfunction. It is not blind to the fact that people treat each other badly. However, having positive regard for others prevents us from buying into a narrative that people and systems are at their core corrupt and unworkable. It invites us

to turn toward our and others' shadows and "stuck" places with clarity of mind and gentleness of spirit. It tempers a tendency to think that it is our job to fix, change, or save everyone around us. It loosens the habit of thinking that we know better, that we occupy the higher moral ground, that we have the solution to other people's problems. In Social Presencing Theater we begin by acknowledging that wisdom lives in all systems, individual and collective, and that change is a naturally unfolding process. We have the privilege of accompanying, out of genuine care, the journey of our fellow humans as we collectively discover our way forward.

Awareness opens and transforms experience

The mind has a fantastic ability to simply notice. The practices invite us to notice the moment-by-moment unfolding of experience. Noticing experience is, of course, not the same as thinking about experience. Awareness is a direct knowing, a felt noticing. Awareness is knowing where we are, what we are doing, how we feel, and what we think. It is also knowing presence and the social atmosphere in which we live. Awareness is always available. However, when our mind is occupied with memories, opinions, assumptions, and imaginings, open awareness can be obscured. When thoughts about what we want or don't want occupy all of our mind space, we lose touch both with our sensing body and with the felt awareness.

Given today's speed and pressures and the amount of time we spend in front of our computer screens and devices, many of us notice a disconnect and imbalance between our thinking mind, feeling heart, and active body. We can feel pulled in multiple and opposite directions. Without taking deliberate time to settle into a sense of wholeness, we can live in a mental world of projections. With hindsight, I notice that frequently I do not actually sense "in" to my body or sense "out" into the environment with much accuracy. I am often not settled enough to really listen to what a colleague is saying, let alone feel the full resonance of what is said. I am on to the next online

meeting, throwing what was said into some category or opinion in my mind without really considering or feeling it. I wonder, where was my awareness?

A workshop attendee told me that he had recently received professional feedback that he had become a "talking head." He resonated with the expression, "My body is just a transportation system that carries my brain from meeting to meeting." He became aware of a disconnect between his body, his mind, and the environment. His awareness noticed physical and mental stress. It noticed that people were not actually listening to him; that he was less effective than he knew he could be. He noticed a growing

distance from family members. His innate intelligence told him that things were out of balance. The awareness that noticed this disconnect was not in itself disconnected.

Awareness is the leverage point for change. When we suddenly become aware that we are lost in thought and disconnected from our body

and the environment, that noticing immediately shifts us into a moment of connection. We experience being fully present, even if just for a second. My colleague Antoinette says that gardening, feeling her body engaged with the activity of planting and weeding, is her therapy. Some of us feel our body and mind naturally synchronize when we are doing yoga, walking in the woods, or sitting on the porch doing nothing. When our mind is less active and our feeling body is more grounded, we appreciate that awareness is naturally present. Most of us yearn to experience this more regularly or consistently, even in the midst of the speed, uncertainty, and demands of life.

The intensity of the world situation, work, and daily pressures can cause us to contract. We try to hold all the pieces together, try to get control of our schedules, multiple projects, kids, work teams, eating habits, finances. We try to do the right thing, be available, keep all the balls in the air, manage. But maybe trying harder, focusing more, and doubling down are not the answer. My meditation teacher, Trungpa Rinpoche says in the book *True Perception*, "In the case of

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awareness experience, there is simply appreciation. Nothing is hassling us or demanding anything from us. Instead by means of awareness practice, we could simply tune in to the phenomenal world both inwardly and outwardly.”

Open mind, open heart, and open will are essential leadership qualities in these challenging times

Presencing work is grounded in the recognition that all beings can cultivate a mind of curiosity and sanity, a heart of wisdom and compassion, and a will of courage and strength. These inherent human qualities can be deepened and strengthened. We can actually practice being more open-minded and open-hearted when habit inclines us to enclose ourselves in narrow behaviors and ideas. “Presencing work” assumes that human beings care about one another and do not want to destroy the planet and themselves. It recognizes the “three divides” that challenge our times—the disconnects we experience from the natural world, from each other, and from our own true nature.

However, we can think, speak, and act from our deepest resources of kindness and creativity. We can engage in work and life from a place of appreciation and also hold a sadness of heart when we experience the “absencing” that we and others engage in. Absencing refers to the ways in which we fail to acknowledge our own basic goodness. Social Presencing Theater practices reveal our blind spots and also our natural insightfulness. They are an invitation to touch our collective tenderheartedness and the clarity, kindness, and bravery that we need to create a good society today.

Creativity arises from nowness

Nowness is a word used by Chögyam Trungpa to describe the true nature of our experience—that every moment is open, spacious, and vividly present. I remember once hearing him say that nowness is a state without struggle. We do not deny the depth of suffering and trauma that we individually and collectively carry from the past into the present. We are not bypassing the complexity or power that the past holds. Social Presencing Theater practices invite us to experience whatever we experience, without denial, and also to suspend and let go of our thoughts

FOUNDATIONAL PRINCIPLES

- Basic goodness is our innate nature
- Awareness opens and transforms experience
- Open mind, open heart, and open will are essential leadership qualities in these challenging times
- Creativity arises from nowness
- Making a true move is powerful engagement
- Appreciating daily details is art in everyday life

and conceptual interpretation about that experience. We let those go in order to stay with the rawness of the feeling and allow the present moment to be as it is. True creativity arises from the very moment of nowness. It does not depend on our cleverness. Nor does it depend on our training (although engaging in discipline is, of course, important). Nowness enables us to face forward and take the next step in our work of creating a good society.

Making a true move is powerful engagement

Basic goodness, awareness, openness, nowness—all well and good—but how do these qualities show up in everyday life? These are intangible values, and we live in a difficult and pragmatic world that needs skillful action. I refer earlier in the book to the true move. The true move is the enactment of these non-material qualities. Social Presencing Theater, like many art practices, joins intangible qualities with materiality. The inseparability of the invisible and the visible lives in each moment. When the limited, self-conscious self is not thinking and planning, our movements and words arise naturally as the true move.

False moves in gesture or speech express a disconnect between the thinking mind, the genuine heart, and the engaged body. They lack resonance with their exterior surroundings. They are an expression of speed or anxiety. The true move is fresh. It is powerful in its directness and simplicity. It cuts through staleness and confusion. Social Presencing Theater is the practice of making true moves, and it is, indeed, a practice—something we do

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over and over again. It is not something we try once, put in our arsenal of trendy change methodologies, and turn to when we need something a little different. By practicing we begin to discern when the true move appears and what the conditions for its appearance are. When we engage with subtlety, we begin to notice spontaneous genuineness. We gain confidence in the true move as the full expression of this moment of life.

When I first met the world of systems change, I called my work *The Art of Making a True Move*. It was a series of improvisation and performance practices that were expressions of meditation in action or art in everyday life. If I remember correctly, the title came from looking at a book of photographs of the Russian ballet dancer Vaslav Nijinsky, who danced in the early twentieth century. The photos captured images of him dancing. A friend looking at the photos with me remarked that there were no images in which Nijinsky was making a false move. To me, this meant that his body and mind were completely engaged, unselfconscious, and present in every photo. I reflected on this idea of a true move. Can I access the one genuine gesture of this present moment?

Appreciating daily details is art in everyday life

I love this observation by Trungpa Rinpoche: “Everyday life is a work of art if you see it from a point of view of nonaggression.” The Social Presencing Theater practices do not force or manipulate experience. They invite us to appreciate what is. This is an expression of nonaggression that can inform our everyday life. We engage genuinely in the moment-to-moment unfolding of our movements. This habit continuously draws our attention to the present moment and begins to permeate our ordinary, everyday lives—how we carry ourselves, how we regard challenges, how we relate with others. We appreciate the tasks and conversations that constitute our daily routines. Our gestures and words arise from awareness. These true moves, full of presence and appreciation, express the unique moments of our daily lives.

In every moment we co-create our experiences and the social bodies that we inhabit. We face challenges, conflicts, and uncertainty daily. The core concepts and practices of Social Presencing Theater provide a foundation for engaging creatively with the vicissitudes of life. They help us align with our deeper values and commitments in order to create what is most important. We can strengthen and celebrate our collective will to enact the true moves that will bring benefit to our world. ■



Arawana Hayashi is a dancer, choreographer, and teacher, trained in both Japanese and Western art forms. She is also an Acharya (a senior teacher of meditation) in the Shambhala Buddhist lineage. From her career's inception, her work as an artist and meditation practitioner has been intertwined with innovations in community building and education. Since the 1970s her focus has been on using non-verbal collaborative improvisation methods to increase personal presence and group performance.

Arawana is a founding member of the Presencing Institute and is currently on the faculty of the ALIA Institute in Halifax, Nova Scotia. She teaches embodiment, collaboration and leadership performance to educational institutions, corporations, arts organizations and meditation centers internationally. She also teaches meditation and embodiment in the capacity building programs of the Presencing Institute, and together with Otto Scharmer and others, created the co-sensing method called Social Presencing Theater.

We look forward to the opportunity to study Social Presencing Theater with Arawana at the 2023 gathering of the Next Practice Institute.