

Connecting to Source: The U-Process

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Connecting to Source

By Zaid Hassan

Drawing on ancient wisdom and multiple forms of knowing, the U-Process is a theory, a dialogic process, a practice and a language. In this article I discuss the background of the process and my personal experiences with it.

Dog Visions & Lightening Bolts

As a writer there have been a handful of occasions when I've produced writing that stands far above everything else I've written. This writing has a very special quality to it which can, in part, be explained by *how* it was written. It can be better understood by considering *the place I went to* in order to write, that is, *the source of the writing*. In almost all instances I was doing something very different from sitting in front of an empty page, trying to write. The clearest and most powerful instance occurred one winter evening, sitting on a bus, looking out at passing traffic. In a moment, an entire story came to me. I immediately got off the bus, found a bench, pulled out a notebook and wrote an entire story without really thinking about it. Words and sentences came to me almost fully formed. Afterwards, when I looked at the story, it was beautiful and it glowed. While it was "mine" and people familiar with my writing would recognise the style, in many ways I didn't write it, it simply came to me, whole and complete. I was the vehicle for it to emerge. On the other hand, when I force myself to write, I can often produce something competent, but the work lacks a certain luminosity and wholeness.

Such experiences are, of course, universal. They occur everywhere. The same phenomenon can be seen in forms of art, in science and wherever else innovation occurs. We commonly think of this phenomenon as insight. There are modest insights and there are great insights. There are insights which we forget in a few minutes or hours and there are insights which change the trajectory of our lives and sometimes of all mankind.

When asked how he came up with the theory of relativity, Einstein explained that an image of riding on a bolt of lightning came to him. In thinking about what things would look like from the perspective of the lightning bolt, he started down the path that would lead him to articulate the theory of relativity.

If we examine the histories of many legendary innovators, scientists, artists, writers, entrepreneurs, and revolutionaries, we can see a common pattern of extraordinary insight. Each of them spends many years simply trying to understand their subject. It might take the form of research, or fieldwork or trying out different experiments as a form of investigating their field. This can be seen of as the process of exploring many different paths and of trying to see their subject from as many different angles as possible. This work of exploring

is followed by a moment of insight, be it an image or a thought, an “a-ha” moment where an insight “comes” to an individual. This insight is like a seed which grows into a tree. The individual’s life work then becomes the task of growing this seed to its full potential, into a healthy tree. The work takes on a different quality, characterised by startling clarity as to what to do. While the earlier phase was about exploration, of travelling many paths, the time after the insight is about one path. The innovator sees clearly that their vocation, their purpose, is to travel down this one shining path.

We all have insights into our purpose and our vocation. Unfortunately, modern society creates such noisy conditions, mental pollution, that sometimes we fail to notice our insights, they get drowned out. Modern education further trains us to dismiss visions and insights as something irrational and hence useless. We’re trained in analysis but not in intuition and dreaming. I remember, as a child in London, watching a science programme about dreams. The programme’s conclusion was that the best thing we can do with our dreams is to forget them.

In his youth the legendary Lakota healer and warrior Black Elk had a number of epic and frightening visions. In one vision he receives a call, and in following it he meets the six “Powers of the World” who each give him a gift that he could draw upon. In another, which he called the Dog Vision, it becomes clear to him that he must fight against the “Wasichus” (a term that refers to the European invader) for his people. In the vision he begs the powers to spare him this task. He recalls sharing the vision with his tribe, “I told it all to them and they said I must perform the dog vision on earth to help people...They said they did not know but I would be a great man because not many men were called to see such visions.”¹ Black Elks’ life was dedicated to “perform[ing] the dog vision on earth to help people” and this was the source of both his power and his legend.

Native American Indians believe that a person becomes sick if they fail to live out their vision, insights and dreams on earth. Many of the world’s indigenous cultures possess immensely deep and sophisticated understandings of what we call insight. Vision quests, where an individual travels into the wilderness seeking a vision to guide them, are a good example. Rites of passage, where the individual becomes aware of their vocation, often take the form of vision quests. Such vision quests reflect the respect that indigenous cultures have for what we reduce to the notion of insight. In many cultures dreams are also treated as a form of insight.

What exactly is an insight? What is it an in-sight into? Where did Einstein’s image of a lightning bolt, Black Elk’s Dog Vision or for that matter, my modest story, come from? Is it possible to learn the conditions for creating both insights and vision? Is it possible for us to access the kinds of insight that set us on the life path that was so obviously made for us? Is it possible to access the kinds of insight that allow us to be a vehicle for luminous stories as well as breakthrough innovations? Finally, what is the relationship between insight and profound social change?

¹ “Black Elk Speaks” by Neihardt & Black Elk

We all have dreams and we all have images come to us. What makes Einstein or Black Elk unique is the fact that they were somehow open to the possibilities of their dreams and images. I'm sure many people before Einstein had images of lightening bolts come to them but it took an Einstein to turn such an image into the theory of relativity. The phrase "being open" is not as simple as it may seem at first glance. Being open means much more than being open minded, it also means having an open heart and an open will.

The U-Process operates on the belief that insights into many of our most intractable problems, large and small, can be accessed by those willing to cultivate capacities and the right conditions. Taken together these form what can be thought of as *a practice of regeneration and innovation*. These capacities and conditions are not new or unique in any way but in a very real way have been marginalised in the hyper-rational public spaces of the West. The U-Process is an attempt to re-legitimise these capacities, to complement our rationality with non-rational ways of knowing. In accessing these spaces and capacities, *we shift the place from which we act*.

In talking about the U-Process as something "new" we need to bear in mind that this has the same political and cultural complexity as talking about "discovering" a continent. Most continents had indigenous inhabitants long before any so-called "discovery." As individuals we discover things all the time. For example my "discovery" of the U-Process was through the work of Boston-based Generon Consulting² (where I currently work), the founding partners Adam Kahane and Joseph Jaworski and their partner Otto Scharmer³ (MIT), who worked together for many years to arrive at the current formulation of the U-Process (which I make extensive use of here). Since then I've been working with these ideas and practices in many ways and in many contexts.

From Reaction to Regeneration

"We are entering a new land – some of us as intentional immigrants, most of us as refugees."⁴

The world is changing. The challenges we're facing as a human society are changing rapidly and dramatically. Things are becoming more complex and more visibly interconnected. Examining any newspaper today or turning on a television, we are confronted with a diversity of challenges that are overwhelming. Individuals, communities and institutions are all struggling. In many cases, we fail in our responses and our problems grow. On an institutional level there is increasing concern of widespread collapse which indicates deep rooted problems with the very structures of our oldest (and newest) institutions.

All too often, our responses to the challenges of today are to react by deploying those solutions that we're most familiar with. Simplifying somewhat, it's a little bit like being trained to use a hammer and then when confronted with a problem, we see the whole world as a nail. To be fair, this is a very normal

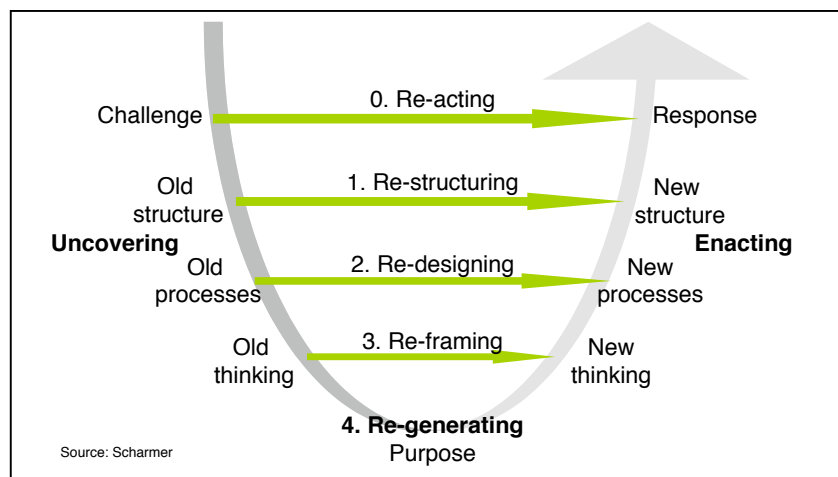
² www.generonconsulting.com

³ www.ottoscharmer.com

⁴ "Ten Things To Do In A Conceptual Emergency" – International Futures Forum

reaction. When confronted by a dangerous animal we will reach for whatever weapon we have at hand, regardless of the fact that there may be better or more effective tools to be found. This is essentially the situation that we find ourselves in. We have come to believe that facing problems, from the most local to the global, is a little bit like being confronted by an unpredictable and wild animal. We lash out, we react as best we can in the hope of subduing or taming the beast and if that fails we want to kill it. We hammer away at the problem almost in desperation, hoping beyond hope that more force is the answer. James C. Scott points out that the basic principle behind this approach, common of many modern solutions (and modern times) is *“If brute force doesn’t work, you’re not using enough of it.”*⁵

When we take a step back, calm our breathing and examine the wild animal threatening us, we realise that both problems and solutions come in all shapes and sizes. We may even have mistaken an animal for an inanimate object. If we pause to look we may realise that the bogeyman is only a scarecrow, designed to scare away birds. In other words, there are many ways of confronting what we perceive of as problems. Reacting is only one way. The diagram below summarises different ways of reacting at increasing levels of depth.

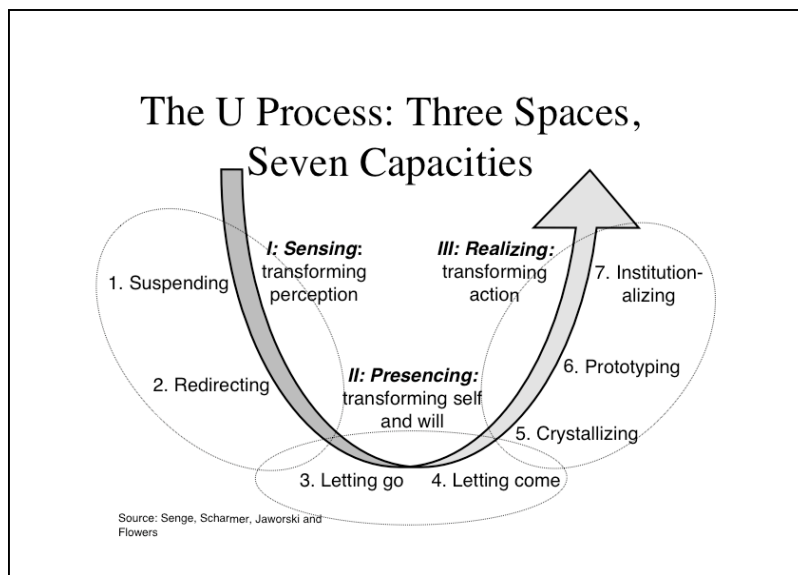


The U-Process is based on a belief that there are multiple ways of coping with highly complex problem situations, which may include re-structuring re-designing and re-framing. When confronted with seemingly intractable problems and collapsing systems however, nothing short of “re-generation” is required. The U as a process, outlines one way of approaching challenges through re-generation. It offers one understanding of what re-generation means and how to get there.

⁵ “Seeing Like A State” by James C. Scott

Three Spaces, Seven Capacities

The U-Process⁶ outlines three “spaces” and seven “capacities” that together constitute a possible practice of regeneration. By “space” what I mean is an environment deliberately created to foster a particular type of learning. So for example, sometimes we require a space of stimulation, where we might be travelling and taking in large amounts of sensory information such as new sights, sounds and smells. At other times, we require a quiet and reflective space, where we’re trying to make sense of our inner thoughts and feelings. The physical spaces required for these two activities are very different. The U-Process is about creating three such spaces, conducive to “sensing,” “presencing” and “realizing”. In the chronology of a U-Process, each space is an overlapping phase, as outlined in the following diagram.



In addition to these three spaces, the U-Process outlines seven “capacities”. A capacity can be thought of as a skill or simply as an ability to do something. So for example, we may be skilled at listening, or we may be skilled at photography. Listening and taking photos can be thought of as personal capacities. As with all skills, the more you practice, the better you get. The seven skills which the U-Process outlines, can be thought of as the *practical skills of regeneration*.

While these capacities are most commonly thought of as individual capacities, that is, something that we as individuals can learn and practice, they can also be group practices. This requires a bit of a shift in perception to grasp clearly. A group can have certain characteristics. So for example, a rioting mob has very different characteristics to a wedding party. A group can act as a co-ordinated single, entity and a group can be fragmented and un-coordinated. The U-Process is exciting because, at a bare minimum, it offers us some interesting

⁶ See “Presence: Human Purpose and The Field of the Future” by Senge, Scharmer, Jaworski & Flowers (“Presence”) for more details.

ideas to try with groups for how they might work together. It offers us insights into *group practices for re-generation*. Most of my experience with the U has been in applying it to groups and trying to work with a group on building the spaces and the capacities that the U-Process articulates.

Sensing

“Learning to see – habituating the eye to repose, to patience, to letting things come to it; learning to defer judgment, to investigate and comprehend the individual case in all its aspects. This is the first preliminary schooling in spirituality.” - Friedrich Nietzsche⁷

Otto Scharmer, one of the architects of the current U-Process, often says that a *failure to see* is the biggest barrier towards tackling our challenges. The dilemma we’re faced with in coping with the modern world is that things are so complex and so fast moving that it’s very difficult to get a picture of the whole: it’s very difficult to *see*. When we don’t have a picture of the whole, when we’re not even questioning what part of the picture we’re seeing, we end up arguing strenuously from our position of “truth.” We’re willing to invest massive amounts of time and energy on solutions based on the assumption that what we’re “seeing” is a whole, when in fact it may well be a very small part of the whole. We stand in these positions and fight from them, typically unable to understand why other people are not seeing what we are. The essence of this problem is one of perception. The purpose of the Sensing phase is to open ourselves up to reality, to uncover reality and to try and see the whole system we’re a part of.

While this might sound relatively simple, it’s in fact a very difficult thing to do. The difficulty arises, in part, from the fact that what we see is all too often coloured by a lifetime of beliefs and biases. As the twelfth century Sufi Maulana Majdud put it, “In the distorting mirror of your mind, an angel can seem to have a devil’s face.”⁸ In the book *Presence*⁹ the authors tell a story about a group of US business executives from the car industry travelling to Japan in order to learn how the Japanese manufacturers were keeping their production costs so low. On their return, a professor asked them what they had learnt. They told him that they hadn’t learnt anything. He asked them why? They replied that the Japanese hadn’t shown them the real factories because when they went there was no stock in any of them. The Japanese, as is now commonly known, had created “Just in Time” production where parts were only bought in as they were needed. The US executives, despite being shown an innovation, could not recognise it because their own notions of what manufacturing means stopped them from seeing what was in front of their eyes.

Different cultures have different stories about the difficulties and rewards of seeing reality. In the West the Sherlock Holmes stories are based almost entirely on the legendary detectives’ ability and training in noticing those details which others see but do not pick up on. In one story Holmes asks his

⁷ Quoted in “Making Social Science Matter” by Bent Flyvbjerg

⁸ “Tales of Dervishes” by Idries Shah

⁹ “Presence”

companion Watson to examine a hat for clues. Watson looks at it and says "I can see nothing." Holmes' telling response is that "On the contrary, Watson, you can see everything. You fail, however, to reason from what you see. You are too timid in drawing your inferences."¹⁰ He then proceeds to accurately elaborate on who the owner is. In the Islamic world, the Sufi tradition is deeply concerned with the nature of perception and how the mind often tricks us into distorting reality. This is famously illustrated in a story, "The Blind Ones and The Matter of the Elephant" first recorded in the twelfth century. The short version of the story is that a number of blind men are feeling an elephant and trying to understand what it is. The man feeling one of the legs argues that it's a tree trunk, the man feeling the elephant's trunk argues it's a snake. Each of them believes that they have a hold on the truth, whereas the reality is that "Each of them had felt one part out of many."

There are two key capacities which must be developed in order to be able to "uncover reality" – the first is *suspending judgement* and the second is *re-directing*.

Often it is our judgements about things that cloud our ability to see accurately. Although the US executives were experienced in car manufacturing, their judgements about what constituted manufacturing fooled their perception. Suspending judgement in practical terms means becoming aware of your own personal lenses and biases. It doesn't mean that you reject your judgements but rather that you, in a sense, hang them up like you would a coat¹¹, and examine them. You take off the coat. It means being conscious how and when your training or your judgement are affecting your perceptions.

The second capacity, re-directing, is the ability to listen and see, from different positions. Usually we listen and see from *within ourselves*. We evaluate situations and data from the personal perspective, we ask ourselves questions like "what do I think of this? How is this information useful to me?" and so on. Re-directing means asking such questions from a number of different perspectives – from outside of ourselves. So for example, if we're interested in learning about farming and we meet a farmer, re-directing could mean that we evaluate the situation from his perspective. We might ask "what does this information mean to him? What does he think of this situation?" As opposed to asking questions that are meaningful to ourselves, we would try and see from his eyes. Our entire approach and attitude is different when we're trying to understand a situation from outside of ourselves.

We can also locate ourselves in places other than within someone else. We might for example, try and examine a situation from the edge, the periphery as opposed to the centre. What does a situation look like far from the action? From a village in Bihar as opposed to from New Delhi? The ability to re-direct means being able to put ourselves in another's shoes and in other places. It means expanding our sense of place and time.

If we're being honest with ourselves we will acknowledge that suspending judgement is a pre-requisite to re-directing. We suspend judgement in order to

¹⁰ "The Blue Carbuncle" from The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes by A.C. Doyle.

¹¹ Thanks to Mille Bojer for this image.

re-direct, in order to see from outside ourselves. If we can't suspend judgement then we're closed, not open. As my colleague Adam Kahane says, we end up not shining a light onto a situation as we often think we are, but simply projecting our own movie - our own stream of thoughts, ideas and concerns - onto a situation.

Presencing

“The real challenge in understanding presencing lies not in its abstractness but in the subtlety of the experience.” – Senge et al.¹²

In the Sensing phase we uncover the current reality of the system as a whole. In the Presencing Phase we go further and uncover our deeper knowing about what is going on in the system, our role within it, and what we, individually and collectively, are being called upon to do.

Most of us are trained to objectify problems and systems as something separate and distinct from ourselves. In doing so, we forget that we are very much an active part of the systems we're trying to change. We are in deep relationship with the whole system. We learn to work within systems and systems learn to work within us. It's impossible to grasp the system as a whole without a consideration of our own relationships to it, and opening ourselves up to the question of what this whole is demanding of us.

This engagement is normally difficult to practice within our day to day lives because we live in mediated environments. These are environments where much of our stimuli are mediated through man-made features, from architecture to television, all of which have been designed to provoke very specific responses and feelings within us. These responses serve to overwhelm our inner landscape and dilute our inner knowing.

The first capacity of Presencing is *letting go*. Letting go of what? When confronted with a challenge we often have our favourite theories, tools and ideas about what is needed. We often, sometimes sub-consciously, believe that if only everyone else adopted our positions or solutions then everything would be fine. The practice of letting go is an act of letting go of all these things. It's about giving up and surrendering oneself to whatever it is that might want to emerge. It's about putting ourselves into a state of profound openness. At the very least such an action takes courage. We cling to our ideas and notions because they serve to ground us. They orientate us, tell us who we are and what we're supposed to do. Letting go, in a very practical sense, means leaving the shores of our certainty. It means overcoming our fear of the unknown. It means going into the wide open unknown without knowing or having any certainty of where such a step will lead us. The practice of letting go is often compared to the act of dying, which can be thought of as the ultimate act of letting go. We often need to let go of something, to bury something, for something new to be born. Letting go reflects the act of dying which can be seen in any natural cycle.

The second capacity of Presencing is *letting come*. Once again, this is about entering a profound state of openness, and being sensitive and open to

¹² “Presence”

whatever it is that wants to emerge, to whatever wants to be born. While the phrase “letting come” seems to be quite passive, the act of giving birth is far from a passive act. It’s something that can be extremely painful and violent. Letting come is a uniquely difficult point in the U-Process because it represents a shift to action and all action is a commitment of some sort. It’s at this stage that the process is most vulnerable and sensitive. It’s a time of some anxiety. If we think of it as the birthing process for new ideas and for a new understanding of our vocation, then our role is to act as mother, mid-wife and witness at the same time. This is done by maintaining an openness to whatever wants to emerge, regardless of how insane, ludicrous or unrealistic it might seem on first sight.

Both letting go and letting come are acts of *surrender*.

The Presencing phase involves spending a considerable amount of time alone in nature, on a wilderness solo. Being in nature facilitates letting go and letting come, it helps us “free ourselves” and “stand outside so that we can think and see in a new way.”¹³ There are many complex explanations of why being in nature facilitates this happening. For me the simplest and clearest explanation is that when we’re in nature we “...begin to get a sense of what it would all be like if we weren’t the centre of it all.”¹⁴ In other words, we’re able to take clear steps away from purely ego-centric perspectives. We step outside of ourselves. Somewhat paradoxically, we do this in order to listen to our innermost voices.

There are a number of schools of thought as to the conditions under which presencing occurs and what exactly is supposed to happen during presencing.

Speaking strictly from personal experience, presencing can happen under a number of different conditions and in a number of ways. If I were to try and describe it I would say it’s the space between waking and dreaming, where your mind is floating free. Sometimes I might enter this state with a conscious thought or problem in my mind but this isn’t always the case. In this state I’m not consciously directing my thoughts. At the very most I might give them a gentle nudge. It feels like being in a space of dreamy free association. Since I started becoming aware of this experience as a state that could be entered into consciously I’ve been able to access it more and more consistently. When I’m trying to write something and it’s forced or isn’t working, it often helps to calm myself down, slow my breathing and enter into what I used to call a space of “zoning.” Of course, it helps immeasurably if the space I’m in is quiet, but more than this what I need is to be uninterrupted. It’s in this space that my best ideas and deepest insights come and it’s to this space that I return when I’m stuck. This is *the place I go when I want to write*.

In many ways presencing is not simply a space where ideas and insights come to an individual but it’s also a space where the individual experiences the oneness of creation. This experience (beautifully described in the book *Presence*), drove Generon partner Joseph Jaworski to take on a sacred vow to do everything in his power to protect and serve the whole. The experience

¹³ “Development Practitioners and Social Process: Artists of the Invisible” by Allan Kaplan

¹⁴ “Attack of the Superheroes” by Thomas de Zengotita (Harpers, December, 2004)

allowed him to become, in the words of George Bernard Shaw “a force of nature.”

Finally, it would be a mistake to think that this phase is about making a choice. Rather it’s about arriving at the place of “no-choice” where it’s blindingly clear what an individual or group must do. Then the only choice is saying yes or no. It’s about arriving to a place of deep knowing and profound clarity as to what the following course of action must be.

Realising

“Most goals are not achieved by single acts of will, even heroic ones. They are achieved by sustained acts of will, that is, by a change of habit, of custom and of culture.” – Max Dublin¹⁵

Realising is the space of multiple rapid conclusions, which unfold over time. In the U-Process we enter the space of realising with clarity on what it is we need to do next. We usually don’t know exactly where this action is going to take us, but we know what the next steps are and we know in what direction to make them. This is a space where we almost let our insight propel us towards and into action. We thus enter the realising space with a picture in our minds of what it is we want to create. This is very different from a plan. It’s a picture and it may well be that we can’t see all the tiny details of the picture but nonetheless we have a very real sense of the broad details of it, we can see shapes and colours and discern who might be in the picture.

My experience of realising as an individual (typically when I write) is that I need to just let my hand go. I don’t stop and ponder and think, but almost enter into this strange state of being driven by my vision and trusting that if I just let my hand go, it will move on its own accord and produce whatever it is that needs to be produced. I need to get out of the way of whatever action is trying to emerge, to take my churning mind out of the frame. If I put myself in between my hand and my insight, then I’ll falter and become confused. This is about letting come. As Stephen King once put it, the writer “is not the water but the pipe.”

There are then (at least) two approaches one can take to producing something new, be it a sculpture or a piece of software. The first is by going through a long and detailed planning process. We can try and anticipate and design for as many different scenarios as possible and put the whole plan on paper before taking the first step. This is how modern planning processes usually work. The U-Process however, has a different way of approaching the realisation of new ideas which involves creating quick, incomplete models which can be physically worked with. Instead of planning and designing, you just start. You take the first step as quickly as possible. You try something out and then evaluate it. You walk around it, test it and then change it. This process is sometimes called “rapid prototyping” but can also be thought of as simply applying the principle “start now.”¹⁶

¹⁵ “Futurehype: “ by Max Dublin

¹⁶ See Pioneers of Change philosophy at www.pioneersofchange.net

One of the most powerful ideas behind such an approach is to “fail often, fail early” in that we learn best from making mistakes. By making small mistakes early, rather than single catastrophic mistakes, we go through a repeated learning cycle. This learning cycle is almost like a mini-U-Process. An artist friend of mine once illustrated how this works for him. He explained that every morning he wakes up and goes to his studio where he simply looks at the work he’s done the night before. He then goes for a quiet walk in the woods. When he comes back he starts working. Doing this in short cycles, be they daily or otherwise, is what happens in the realising phase. At each step in the cycle we clarify and uncover a new aspect of the picture.

This cycle can continue for a long time. In the case of an Einstein or a Black Elk (that is, in the case of a great insight) it’s the work of a life-time to excavate the details and grow the seed. The approach then, is one of cultivation and not of a single grand heroic action which results in a problem being solved. Any results achieved, are simply the result of uncovering details, of getting out of the way of what wants to emerge. Max Dublin explains how cultivation is not like sending a man to the moon, where a vast amount of planning results in a single explosive action. He writes, “Cultivation as an alternative paradigm to war for facing the future is different not only because it is ever constructive, but also because it is constructive by means of being respectful of context and paying close attention to detail. It is not like a moonshot, which is essentially an exercise in decontextualisation through the creation of a self-contained environment. Few things in life are like moonshots. Most things are not like that, cannot be made like that because they are too complex, too dependent for their success on paying attention to and interacting with context, to the external environment – including the needs of other people – rather than subduing it by blasting through it. Because it examines context, cultivation requires attention to detail and interaction with that which is being cultivated, be it a school, a child, a tree, a car, a factory.”

A final, image that illustrates how realising, and in fact the U-Process, is about cultivation comes from sculpture. In order to measure the progress of an ambitious sculpture, a smaller model is usually carved. This model was then placed in a bath of water. As the sculptor worked, they lowered the level of the water to see what they should be seeing on the real sculpture. The process of creating a sculpture then becomes one of slowly lowering the water level and allowing details to emerge. (Of-course the sculptor has usually made many, many small models before he starts carving the final piece.) Some of the greatest sculptures in the world took many decades of such patient uncovering to create. Similarly, the process of realising is a slow and steady one. It’s not dramatic. It’s anything but a moonshot.

“Hardwired to the Cosmos”

“And then she saw it. She could not say what it is she saw, staring at the cubicle door, there was no shape, no form, no words or theorems. But it was there, whole and unimaginably beautiful. It was simple. It was so simple. Lisa Durnau burst from the cubicle, rushed to the Paperchase store, bought a pad and a big marker. Then she ran for her train. She never made it. Somewhere between the fifth and sixth carriages, it hit her like lightning. She knew exactly what she had to do. She knelt sobbing on the platform while her shaking hands tried to jam down equations. Ideas poured through her. She was hardwired to the cosmos.”

- Ian McDonald, *River of Gods*.

In August last year I went on my first writing retreat. I had to produce the very first draft of a “fieldbook” bringing together Generon’s learning to date with the U-Process. I knew a peaceful place in Devon, in the countryside, run by some friends. It sounded ideal. One bright summer day I packed my bags and boarded a train for deepest Devon. I had with me a bag bulging with reference books, papers and six months of notes. Stretching out before me were two weeks of working without disturbances. Everything was perfect right? Not quite.

Up to the point where I found myself facing an empty page, all my thoughts had been on creating the right physical conditions for my task. On being faced with my inner conditions, I didn’t know where to start. I looked at the page helplessly, I looked at the masses of books and papers and notes which I had spread around me. I looked out of the window into the valley below. It started raining. For two days I tried to start and couldn’t. It wasn’t writers block. I just didn’t know what to write. Give me something to write and I would. I was on the edge of panic, counting down the days I had left. It seemed like a very short time. I knew I couldn’t turn up after two weeks without having a draft. None of this helped. I simply couldn’t figure out how to start.

On the morning of the third day I realised that I had a process right under my nose. The U-Process. I sketched out a little schedule. Four days of sensing, a weekend of presencing and roughly five days of realising. That would, however, mean not putting pen to paper for six whole days. Eight days counting the two that had just passed. I would have five days to write the entire draft. It seemed like a pretty big risk to take. I decided that I had to take it. It was a matter of faith in the process that I was going to write about. It seemed somewhat like a cruel joke. Prove that the process you’re writing about works by using it as a process to write. I groaned and decided I had no choice. To cut to the punchline, I spent four days reading. I then went into the nearest town for a two day weekend retreat. I came back and wrote the first draft. I went home a day early.

Applying the U-Process at least at the individual level need not be a complex procedure. It can be practiced by anybody. Take any creative task (that is, a task where something needs to be created). The sensing phase involves “seeing” the situation, the problem, the material that one has to work with. It’s a process of immersion into the world of the task. It means putting your tools

down, be it a laptop, a sewing machine or a hammer. It means using your own self as an antenna. If you're going to work, for example, with fabric, then immerse yourself in understanding it - feeling, touching, smelling and "becoming one" with it and for that matter everything else related to your task. "Seeing" is a tactile act, it's about intimate relationship, it's not about observing from the outside. It means poking and prodding and playing. If you're trying to create public policy then immerse yourself in the context of the policy. Whose idea was it? Why is it needed? Who will it impact? Who thinks it's a bad idea? Who thinks it's a good idea? Has something like this been done before? Where? What happened?

This process of immersion is a process of becoming open and sensitive – without a prior agenda for action, without a prior conclusion that requires data for proof or any other judgements that may cloud our "seeing". It means accepting all data, all ideas, observing them and engaging them with an open, genuine and unconditional curiosity. Our aim is to "camp out beside the problem."

The presencing phase is an intensely personal experience, which can also be done in a group, where it can have the qualities of a group experience. The quality of this experience, and the space needed to get to it, is dependent, to an extent, on our individual needs. What do we need in order to hear ourselves clearly? For a master practitioner, presencing means being able to be silent at will amidst the babble of inner voices and thoughts that normally fill our heads. From this space of silence a deep inner knowing emerges. A master can do this through various forms of meditation (or similar methods) and will experience this fully and consciously. Unfortunately, for those that have not experienced this consciously (we have all experienced it unconsciously), it's very hard to "prove" rationally that inner knowing emerges from silence. Many of us are not masters at presencing. We are not adept at achieving silence and being comfortable with the legitimacy of what emerges from it. In these cases we must do what we can, use whatever methods we know and generally start where we are. At Generon, we take groups of people into nature where they spend an extended period of time alone. For those of us without experience in meditation or similar methods this is an effective way of listening to ourselves. It should be recognised though that for some people, even this can be an intensely challenging experience and requires both preparation and willingness.

For individuals not yet ready to do either of these, they may even try something more familiar, like watching a movie or listening to music. In general watching a movie or listening to music is not in itself an act of presencing, but it can serve as a way to transition between sensing and presencing. Naturally, it depends on the type of movie or music (Rambo or the Rambo soundtrack probably won't work) but often when we watch a slow movie or listen to a piece of music that touches us emotionally it leaves us in a contemplative state where we start to reflect on our own inner landscape. This space of quiet and contemplation gives us a taste of what it means to presence. A certain quality of physical space, especially for non-masters, is usually necessary in order to practice presencing.

The shift from presencing to realising is simultaneously gentle and fast. It comes as an explosion of energy as we finally allow all our ideas to meet the material world, to take form. We pick up our pen, laptop, hammer and simply start work, trusting in what will come. The first moments of shifting from presencing to realising must be gentle in that nothing is rejected, everything is acceptable. This is not yet a space for the rational mind. There will be plenty of time later for sorting and pruning and rationalising. Instead, this is a space for your hands to create whatever they will. This is the point of creation.

In groups this whole process is usually more complex. To grossly simplify, the key barrier when working with groups is a lack of trust. In all my experiences of using the U-Process with groups the three biggest tasks have been to cultivate enough trust within individuals, across the group and in the process (be it the U-Process or some other) – in order to move forward. If the group does not know each other at all then trust must be built, in order to get the group to the point where individuals feel that they can take the risk of being open. The degree of difficulty in building trust within a group is, of course, also a function of how much individuals trust themselves. The work of building trust thus has to take place at all three levels, the group, the personal and the process.

It's almost certain that an attempt to use the U-Process, at least as an explicit process, will fail if the group does not trust itself and the process. If the group trusts itself but not the process, if they as a whole require empirical "proof" in the process before they will step into an experience of it – then it's also unlikely that the process will work. If on the other hand, the group is open to the experience and believes that they have some need of it – then the process will work. How well it will work is, of course, a function of many things and another question.

I started experimenting with the U-Process with groups of social activists within the community of Pioneers of Change. We used the process in many contexts, from small team meetings to six month learning programmes. At Generon we have developed and are growing a practice around the U-Process and have experimented with it in a different set of contexts, such as with corporate clients and multi-stakeholder groups. In doing so we have learnt a lot about how to bring groups together for the purposes of social innovation. Many of the insights that I discuss in this paper come from my experiences at Pioneers of Change and at Generon.

In a recent conversation about the U-Process a friend pointed out to me that there is no upper limit to what we can learn. We can always learn more and get better at whatever it is we're doing. This is profoundly true of the U-Process. We can always get better. In this paper I have outlined my current understanding of the U-Process as best I can. I have lightly touched upon my experiences with it and there is, of course, a lot more that I could have said. I haven't done this, in part, because of limits on time and space. The more important reason, however, for not providing detailed prescriptions for how the U-Process works is because there are an infinitely large number of ways it could be used and I would not, in any way, like to preclude or close down avenues of experimentation. An experiment with the U-Process doesn't require much more information than is presented here. At most it requires openness

and a tolerance for risk, that is, a willingness to fail. For those of you interested in this process, I would invite you to make it your own and hopefully share your experiences.

Ultimately, the journey the U-Process invites us on is, at heart, about creation. There can never be a prescription for creation, at least no more than there can be a prescription for art or living in general – there are only points of departure. This is a journey where we experience the intense drama of bringing something new into the world. In doing so we remember that we are joyously and forever “hardwired to the cosmos.”

</end>

Acknowledgements & Sources

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