

## 2023 In Eight Points: Meditating On Our Planetary Moment

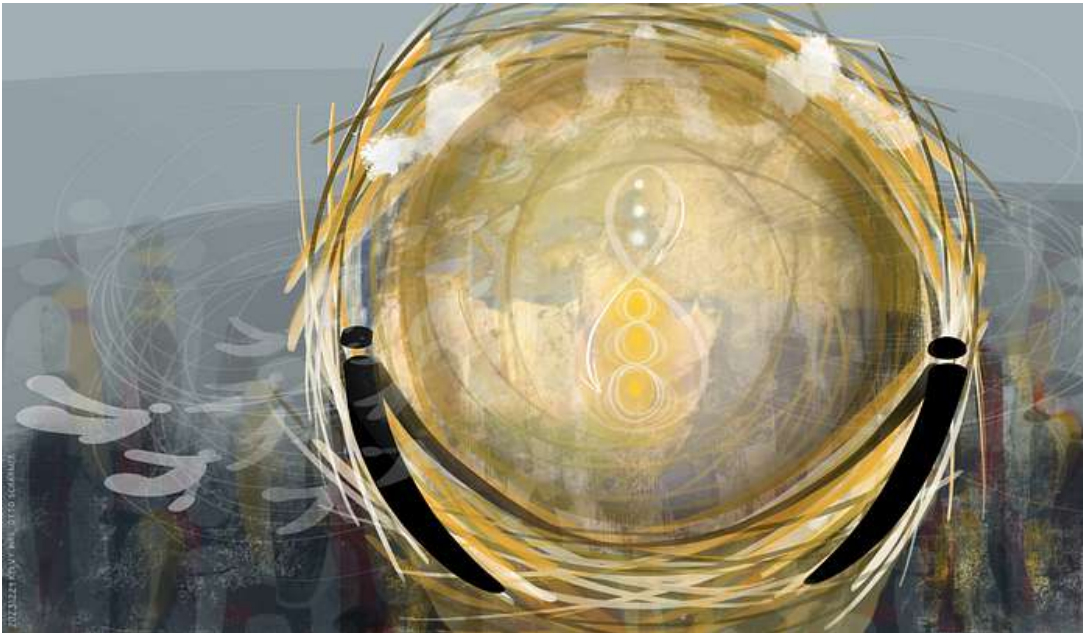


Image by Kelvy Bird

As the year draws to an end and we head into 2024, I feel the need to close the feedback loop between all the challenges of 2023 and my own sensemaking. Here are three tangible things that stand out in hindsight:

- It has been the hottest year on record: Each month from June to November has broken previous ceilings.
- It has been a year of escalating polarization and conflicts: Europe (Ukraine/Russia), the Middle East (Israel/Gaza), Africa (the Sahel region, Somalia, Ethiopia), and Asia (Armenia/Azerbaijan, Korean Peninsula, South China Sea).
- It has been the year of AI: The arrival of generative AI is reshaping human experience and societal structures in ways that were unimaginable just a few years ago.

That's what we perceive on the surface. But what are the deeper messages that these three phenomena are holding for us? What are these challenges telling us?

In this year-end contemplation, I try to decipher some of these deeper messages. If read in the spirit of a systems thinking-based reality meditation, you will come across the following themes:

- We collectively create results that nobody wants.
- We can't do more of the same (even though we keep trying).
- The challenges we face require us to look into the mirror of the whole system.
- In that mirror we see *ourselves* and our potential to shift the inner place of operating by
- . . . opening our minds to shift our thinking from a silo to a systems view,
- . . . opening our hearts to shift our relationships from toxic to transformative,
- . . . opening our wills to shift our actions from ego to eco.

- Small islands of coherence have the capacity to lift an entire system.

## 1. We collectively create results that nobody wants.

Almost no one wants to inflict more violence and destruction on nature, on others, or on themselves. Yet that's what we keep doing collectively by:

- deepening the **ecological divide**: climate destabilization, biodiversity loss
- deepening the **social divide**: polarization, inequality, war
- deepening the **spiritual divide**: hopelessness, anxiety, and depression

These three divides constitute a giant abyss in front of our collective eyes.

## 2. We can't do more of the same (even though we keep trying).

What does that abyss have to say to us? *You cannot do more of the same.*

- In the case of the *ecological divide* that means: you cannot do more of the same while hoping for a future techno fix (like geoengineering, as currently proposed by the fossil fuel industry).
- In the case of the *social divide* it means that no side can kill its way out of the current entanglement. We see this in Ukraine/Russia, a story of massive casualties on both sides for essentially no territorial gain for anyone; and we see this in Israel/Gaza, where neither Hamas nor Israel can get what they want by doing more of the same (heinous attacks and slaughtering of women and children by Hamas, bombings in Gaza that have killed more than 20,000 people, many of them women and children, by the IDF)
- In the case of the *spiritual divide* it means that the pandemic of hopelessness and loneliness, largely amplified (if not created) by AI-enabled social media, cannot be fixed by even more technologies, e.g., medical treatments that address the symptoms but not the root issues: the violence and pain that we collectively inflict on our planet (pollution), on each other (war), and on ourselves (hopelessness).

The abyss says: you can't do more of the same — look into the mirror. But thus far we're not listening. We're burning more fossil fuels; bombing and killing more people; and amplifying the pandemic of hopelessness by allowing Big Tech to turn human experience into profit-making machines led by *organized irresponsibility*, which just amplifies all the symptoms mentioned above.

As we keep doing the same, as the challenges keep piling up, and as the divides deepen, we get an even deeper look into the mirror of the collective abyss. What do we see? We are seeing *ourselves*.

### **3. The challenges we face require us to look into the mirror of the whole system.**

We are doing all these things to ourselves. At this point, many of us feel drawn to jump to a reactive response. But the trick at this stage, as my good friend Dayna Cunningham once told me, is this: *keep the gaze steady*.

Keeping the gaze steady means to see our own role in the making of the situation. It's about seeing clearly the *making* of what has happened, of what keeps happening. It's about linking it to our own sense of agency and accountability, which opens a shared body of understanding and possibility.

Keeping the gaze steady means we cannot address and close the three divides with the same thinking that created them:

- We cannot solve the planetary emergency without profoundly reflecting on our role and relationship with our planet. Is our role to continue the current road of destruction or to transform and reshape our systems from extraction to regeneration and flourishing?
- We cannot solve our escalating wars and tensions with the same foreign policy mindset and logic that created them. That mindset of *othering* denies our interdependency, our entanglement with the world around us.
- We cannot solve the pandemic of loneliness, hopelessness, and depression by applying the same thinking that created them: tech fixes that focus on symptoms but not on the root issues.

Keeping the gaze steady means to face and acknowledge the profound sense of loss and hopelessness of our current moment. In fact, the hopelessness and pain that many younger people feel signals a deeper level of connectedness to the pain inflicted on the planet, on each other, and perhaps also on ourselves.

### **4. In that mirror we see ourselves and our potential to shift our source of operating.**

**When we stay with those difficult feelings, when we let go of preconceived notions, we can begin to notice a deeper place of source and resonance.** As we deepen our gaze into the mirror, into **seeing ourselves** through the eyes of the whole, we notice that there is yet another presence available around, between, and within us that in the noise of our everyday lives we almost always miss and ignore. It's a place and source of presence that is not judgmental, not cynical, and not afraid; it just is — and it is also a foreshadowing of what it is *becoming*.

In that deeper place of presence, the boundary — between me and you, between us and them, between me and it — is profoundly collapsing. What used to be in here is suddenly distributed all over. My own experience of self and space morphs into a panoramic sensing *from the field*. My chronological sense of time slows down to stillness. If I stay with and surrender to it, and that begins to shift everything around me.

## 5. By opening our minds we shift our thinking from silos to systems.

Shifting the source of our thinking from our existing bubbles and silos (ego) to the ecosystem around us (eco) may sound like a small thing. But it affects everything. Thinking creates the world. Real deep thinking — that is, creating something from nothing — is among the few things that machines (including generative AI) can't do.

An example from the past year concerns how we conceive of and make sense of violence. On a surface level there is *direct* violence. One person is the victim, one is the perpetrator. News reports rarely go below this level.

One level deeper, there is *structural* violence. The perpetrators of violence are not people but structures (examples are systemic racism and other mechanisms that exclude particular groups from opportunity). In just about all conflicts around the world there is an interplay between direct and structural violence.

A third form of violence in many cases gives rise to the other two: *attentional violence*. Attentional violence means not to see the other in terms of who they really are. This form of violence is committed when one person or group doesn't see others as "legitimate" (to use Maturana's term).

A deepened understanding of the current conflicts around the world requires looking at them on all three levels. Over the past year, in our increasingly polarized world, I have found it very difficult to "hold the space for peace" ([Harari, Yuval Noah: 2023](#)) — that is, a space for the evolution of the whole that is beyond the hyperpolarized discourse that now paralyzes collective thought and action. As the holding of this space becomes more difficult in many places today, it also becomes even more important to do so, by building our capacity to hear and hold complex, divergent and conflicting perspectives.

For this first transformation to take hold — the inversion of our thinking from silos to systems, from ego to eco — a second transformation is required, one that concerns the inversion of our relationships.

## 6. By opening our hearts we shift our relationships from toxic to transformative.

The second transformation is about opening our hearts to shift our relationships. We do that by shifting the inner place from where our listening and our conversations originate. Shifting our listening means moving from downloading and factual to empathic and generative listening. Shifting our conversations means moving from downloading and debate to dialogue and collective creativity.

Not a single challenge contemplated above can be addressed with the old style of listening and conversing, which would only result in more of the same. The key to moving beyond our old patterns of actions lies in transforming our conversations from *confirming* and *confronting* to *connecting* and *co-creating* by shifting the **inner place** from where our conversation and listening originate: from *inside* the boundary of our own system to *outside* of it, that means stepping out of

our preconceived ideas and listening from the perspective of others and from the social field as a whole.

This process of **decentering** — which sometimes can feel stressful because it comes with not knowing, with uncertainty, and with taking risk — is a capacity that can be trained and cultivated. Without it we will remain stuck in our old tracks.

For this second transformation to take hold — the inversion of our relationships from transactional (or toxic) to transformative — a third transformation is required, one that concerns the inversion of our actions.

## **7. By opening our wills we shift our actions from ego to eco.**

The third transformation entails shifting the origin of our actions from inside to beyond the collapsing boundary of our system. We see this happening in many places around the world, where, in moments of crisis, systemic breakdown, and existential need, people are rising to the occasion and helping each other. We see it in inspiring volunteer work that often is the secret sauce in creating resilience after hardship and loss (including in Ukraine, Israel, Gaza and other places of amazing community response). We see it also when traditional entities — companies, NGOs, or nation-states — collaborate in new ways across boundaries. In the language of Theory U we call this “awareness-based collective action” (ABC). We see it locally and across sectors. We even see it on a country level. It’s nothing short of amazing what we as humans can do if we choose to operate from an eco perspective rather than an ego perspective.

That said, we also know how painful it is to sit in partnership meetings in which an ecosystem-way of collaboration is disabled through a partner insisting to remain in unilateral control (which means, that there is no trust and the origin of action remains stuck inside that organization’s boundaries). For a more detailed view on the evolutionary patterns of institutional inversion and transformation see my recent blog on [Philanthropy 4.0](#). The capacity for decentering our siloed actions towards co-creative patterns across boundaries requires the opening of the mind, of the heart and of the will.

## **8. Small islands of coherence have the capacity to lift an entire system.**

“When a system is far from equilibrium,” says Nobel Prize-winning chemist Ilya Prigogine, “small islands of coherence in a sea of chaos have the capacity to lift the entire system to a higher order.” That our system is far from equilibrium became abundantly clear in 2023. Most people share that feeling. We also know that the “sea of chaos” is not in short supply.

But what about these “small islands of coherence” that have the capacity to tip our evolutionary trajectory in one direction or another? That’s where *our* role comes into focus — and by “our” I mean all of us, anyone contemplating the current moment with even the faintest open mind and heart.

When systems collapse, what are we left with? Each other. We are left with our relationships to the land, to ourselves, to one another. Small islands of coherence, as I understand it, are microcosms of the future that is trying to emerge.

## Now is the time

Where is the smallest unit of an *island of coherence*? It's in our heart. It's in our relationships. It's in our circles of deep listening and generative conversation. It's in our efforts to transform difficult stakeholder relationships in our work and lives through generative listening and conversation.

I am inspired by Vaclav Havel's distinction between optimism and hope. "Hope is not the conviction that something will turn out well, but the certainty that something makes sense, regardless of how it turns out."

The year 2024 will present profound choices. Elections will take place in the US, India, Indonesia, South Africa, the EU, the UK, and other democracies. People's choices will set the stage for the future of deep transformation work, one way or another. We don't know the outcomes. But we do know that *now is the moment* to do what makes sense regardless of the outcomes.

## A planetary action research community of change makers and leaders

So, what does it take for us as human beings to access that deeper level of our agency — the belief that something "makes sense regardless of how it turns out"? Accessing that deeper level requires us to access our deep humanity. Just as the regeneration of the soil in regenerative agriculture requires methods and tools of cultivation, the same is required for accessing our deeper levels of humanity to reconnect with what truly makes sense for us.

I am immensely thankful for the community of people in and around the Presencing Institute and the u-school ecosystem who continue to co-create, co-evolve, and refine all these methods and tools. They are critical for bringing about the necessary shifts toward human and planetary flourishing in all our systems in ways that our current polycrisis is calling for.

The Presencing Institute and its global ecosystem of partners and core team members is an action research community of change makers and leaders who use the methods and tools of awareness-based systems change to facilitate processes of transforming our systems from extractive to regenerative, from ego to eco, and from degradation to flourishing.

What does it mean to be part of such an action research community? It means being a practitioner in creating small islands of coherence in our work one way or another — and then methodically reflecting on and sharing these experiences, methods and tools.

But we have learned that just supplying methods and tools for this work is not enough. What's also necessary are places and spaces for experiencing them in a social context through applied practice fields. In addition we have learned that through the intentional use of technology it is possible to link these small islands of coherence with each other to form beginning *ecosystems of coherence*.

In 2023 we focused on living examples of these ecosystems in three domains:

- **Build Capacity & Activate Ecosystems:** we launched our redesigned and updated **u-lab** that is available through MITx as well as our **Ecosystem Leadership Program** in Latin America (a three year capacity building and ecosystem activation program)

- **Create Innovation Labs:** through systems labs that focus on **Education for Human Flourishing** (in partnership with the OECD), **Ecosystem restoration and regenerative agriculture** (various partners); **SDG Leadership Labs** (in collaboration with UN and Humanitarian Country Teams); **UN 2.0** (in collaboration with multiple agencies); **Business as a force for good** (in collaboration with Eileen Fisher Foundation and other partners) as well as **Transformative finance** (in partnership with the [GABV](#)) and **Philanthropy 4.0**
- **Generate Knowledge, Methods, and Tools:** Creating and evolving new **social arts** and related methods, tools, and practices (such as the **4D Mapping online** tool), as well as sharing knowledge through our peer-reviewed [Journal of Awareness-Based Systems Change](#), which just reached the remarkable threshold of 100,000 views and downloads in its first three years of publication.

We know that all this is just a small beginning. Even though we only operate with a very small core, many of these efforts involve hundreds or in some cases thousands of volunteering change makers across the globe. We're really part of a massive movement of volunteers and change makers that keep clarifying and acting on *'what makes sense regardless of how it turns out.'*

That kind of unconditional commitment and action is grounded in a profound shift in awareness that, in this moment, perhaps is our most significant source of hope.

We know that the road ahead will not be easy. We know that many more disruptions are coming our way. But I also feel the presence of profound positive possibility that is palpable across so many places today. Even though 2023 was a difficult year for most of us most of the time, I am ending that year on a different note. More calm, connected, and also more confident that together we will be able to activate and realize the positive potential for change that most of us can feel right now.

I feel a deep gratitude for being alive in this moment. I feel gratitude for being connected to all of the initiatives mentioned (and many that were not), to all of you who co-created them as partners, team members, volunteers, and funders in dozens of projects and initiatives across the globe, and to being connected with those of you who are involved in different but likeminded initiatives in other places and contexts.

I feel that these are the years that I — and perhaps we — have been born for. These are the moments where we need to show up. Yes, it's not easy, and that's exactly why we chose to be here — to be here *together*. These days, months, and years are the moments to be fully present with what is emerging from our relationships with the land, with each other, and with ourselves.

*If you want to support the Presencing Institute and its u-school for Transformation: we are funded through contributions from our community and [appreciate any contribution](#) you may consider.*

*If you want to check out further resources: [Presencing Institute](#), [ottoscharmer.com](#), [u-school.org](#), [Journal of Awareness-Based Systems Change](#)*

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