

# Presence: Human Purpose and the Field of the Future

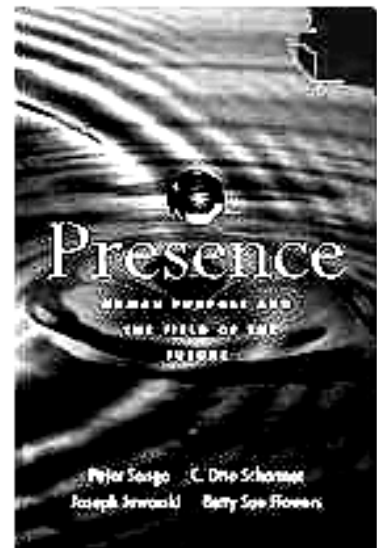
By Peter Senge, C. Otto Scharmer, Joseph Jaworski, and Betty Sue Flowers

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P r o f e s s o r K e i t h W a l k e r

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## A BRIEF SUMMARY

*Presence: Human Purpose and the Field of the Future*, was written to give the reader an honest and open look at the authors’ creation of a new theory of change and learning. The book is written in an engaging and unusual mix of explication of theory and practice, and discussion among the authors of the process of arriving at all aspects of that theory and practice. Using wisdom gleaned from their own experiences and from those of one-hundred fifty scientists and entrepreneurs whom they interviewed, the authors have devised an explanation for how profound collective change can occur. Tapping our underlying capacities to see, sense, and finally realize the possibilities actually available to us is key—and the key to tapping those capacities is using a deeper learning process—one which through inner focus allows us to become aware of the futures that are always seeking to emerge into our world.



### KEY CONCEPTS IN THIS BOOK:

- \*to learn to see, you must give up control of your thoughts and become open to seeing
- \*understanding involves becoming aware in your heart, then your head, of what is trying to come into existence in the world
- \*this deep understanding permits natural and swift action, rather than mere reaction
- \*powerful institutions must be rooted in a deep connection with nature
- \*science can no longer be fragmented, but must flow from holistic wisdom
- \*true leadership follows only from letting go

### READING PRESENCE WILL HELP YOU REFLECT ON CRITICAL QUESTIONS FACING YOU TODAY, AS YOU WORK, PLAY, CREATE, BUILD, LIVE, AND LOVE:

Can we humans as a species learn to change our self-destructive and earth-destructive ways, and to work instead towards health for ourselves and the planet?

Can we learn to recognize that we are a human community and that we are choosing our future—and then make our choices consciously and wisely, through the use of new learning & timeless wisdom?

Instead of building our present on our past, can we learn to build our present on our future—on what is possible, instead of merely on what has gone before?

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

“Peter Senge is a senior lecturer at the MIT Sloan School of Management... [and] author of the widely acclaimed book, *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization*” (p.273). His creative thinking about management and leadership has focused on translating theory into tools for change, and on fostering collaboration across institutional barriers.



C. Otto Scharmer is also a lecturer at MIT’s Sloan School, and a visiting professor at the Helsinki School of Economics. He works world-wide as an action researcher, a consultant to multinational institutions, and a lecturer. He plans to expand the theory presented in *Presence* in a new book, *Theory U: Leading from the Future as It Emerges*.



Joseph Jaworski began his career as an attorney, and has also worked in horse-breeding, life insurance, and refining. A focus in his life has been on deepening understanding of transformational leadership, culminating in his book on the subject, *Synchronicity*. He is presently the Chairman of Generon Consulting and a co-founder of the Global Leadership Initiative.



Betty Sue Flowers is the Director of the Johnson Presidential Museum and Library, and was previously a professor of English at the University of Texas. She also works as a “poet, editor, and business consultant, with publications ranging from poetry therapy to the economic myth, including two books of poetry and four television tie-in books in collaboration with Bill Moyers” (p.277).



## INTRODUCTION: OF PARTS AND WHOLES

In the introduction to this book, the authors emphasize that understanding this book revolves around understanding the relationship between parts and wholes. They suggest that thinking of wholes as being made up of replaceable parts, as in a machine, is no longer a useful paradigm—instead, we need to think of contemporary institutions as being living organisms that grow and change. And like living organisms, where each cell contains the blueprint for the whole, each piece of each institution is a microcosm of the whole, complete in itself. For example, a school is both a whole, complete in itself, and a part or concrete manifestation of the larger whole, the global educational system.

These global institutions, which arose as a form in the twentieth century, are a new species of life on the planet, but problematically, they do not yet understand themselves in that way. Until they do, they can never live up to their possibilities for growth and change—for creating the future. The authors suggest that what is first needed is a new model for learning—one that is not reactive and replicative, but that instead allows for deeper seeing or awareness through inward focus. Global institutions can become aware of what is healthy only through such a learning process, which the authors call “presencing.” They describe presencing as “being open beyond one’s preconceptions and historical ways of making sense” so that one is “consciously participating in a larger field for change” (p.11).

*“In short, the basic problem with the new species of global institutions is that they have not yet become aware of themselves as living. Once they do, they can then become a place for the presencing of the whole as it might be, not just as it has been.”*



In this section of the book, the authors first ponder what they call a requiem scenario: an evocation of the possibility that mankind might not develop a sustainable society in time to avoid the extinction of the human race. They consider that the shock involved in truly confronting such a possibility could be critical in leading to the change needed to prevent the scenario's becoming reality—change they see as rooted in the transformation of the heart.

They suggest that such transformation begins with transformation of seeing. Seeing freshly is posited as requiring suspension of preconceptions, of fear, of judgment, and indeed, of thought as we commonly know it in the western traditions. Groupthink is considered a significant barrier to seeing, but the idea of building a safe “container” inside which transformation can occur, is introduced. Nevertheless, the authors note, discoverers—those who see differently—are often misunderstood, ignored, and punished. Furthermore, suspension involves personal work that can be disorienting and frightening—for example, because of the power suspending thought has for unleashing strong emotions. Partly for that reason, suspension is considered not empowering in itself, but as just the beginning—the next step is a shift away from subject-object duality, with its seer and seen, towards “I-thou.”

“I-thou” relationship involves seeing the other—human or not—as a whole that exists in relationship to us and not as an “it.” This form of seeing a relationship is also described as seeing outward from the whole to the part, in a manner that can actually cause problems to “dissolve.” The authors suggest that it is at this stage in the process that feelings of empowerment can start to arise.

Joseph Jaworski then expands on these concepts through a story about his experience soloing at a wilderness retreat. Experiences he had then made him aware that humans “are out of relationship with all nature because we’ve moved into a reductive kind of awareness that is based on alienation and separation” and that “we have to change that relation to one of cocreation”(p.66). In a discussion passage, the co-authors consider his experience, and Scharmer concludes that Jaworski broke through a boundary into a different way of being—like a birth into a fuller world—simply by opening himself up and being present. When Senge talks about how sad Jaworski’s story makes him feel, Scharmer suggests that that sadness is the sadness of separation—a sadness that can be addressed through a process for connecting that the authors begin to illuminate in “Part 2: Into the Silence.”

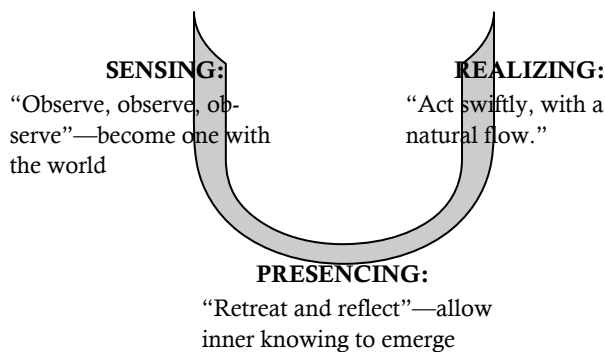
# PART 1: LEARNING TO SEE



**“Suspending does not require destroying our existing mental models of reality—which would be impossible even if we tried—or ignoring them. Rather, it entails what Bohm called ‘hanging our assumptions in front of us....’ Suspension allows us to ‘see our seeing.’”**

The authors open this section with a discussion of experiences they have had where they have seen the tragedy of separation overcome through transformations of the heart. They discuss group work done in South Africa at the time of the fall of apartheid, and also a project called Vision Guatemala that was extraordinarily successful in helping that country recover from its civil war. Reference is made to a Mayan scripture that says, “We did not put our ideas together. We put our purposes together. And we agreed. Then we decided.” The idea that such clarity of purpose must arise from clarity of awareness is considered, and the idea that such clarity can only arise from a special kind of silence evolves.

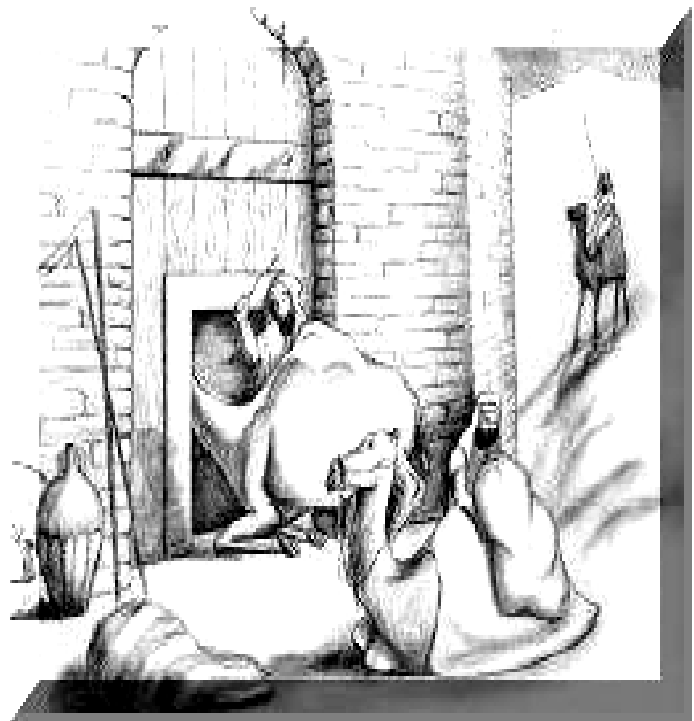
The idea that without such silence, one can have surface understanding but not inner knowing, leads to an explication of a theory concerning a “second type” of learning. This theory is given embodiment in the form of a U that shows varying depths for perceiving reality and levels of action that follow from that, as shown in this chart adapted from p.88:



The authors next compare the bottom of this U to the eye of a needle—to a threshold that can be crossed only through a process of letting go. They characterize this letting go as a letting go of control, or a form of surrender leading to the birth of a de-centered self.

Finally, they suggest that while presencing opens individuals or groups to a larger field and thus to greater power, because it paradoxically requires looking within, individuals and groups may resist the transformation at the bottom of the U by clinging to the habit of looking outside themselves at an ‘external’ world. Solutions to this problem are considered in “Part 3: Becoming a Force of Nature.”

## PART 2: INTO THE SILENCE



**“In ancient Jerusalem, there was a gate called ‘the needle’ which was so narrow that when a fully loaded camel approached it, the camel driver had to take off all bundles before the camel could pass through.... At the bottom of the [learning] U lies a sort of inner gate, which likewise requires us to drop the baggage we’ve acquired on our journey. As we move through it, we begin to see from within the source of what is emerging, letting it come into being through us.... [W]hat happens cannot be understood rationally because something that appears impossible has occurred—like a camel passing through the eye of the needle” (pp.91-92).**

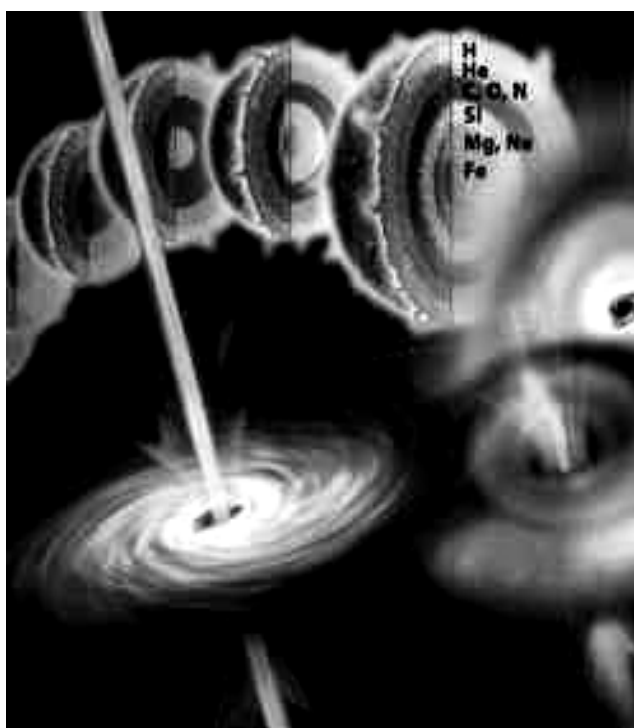
In the opening chapter of this section, called “In the Corridor of Dreams,” the authors discuss excitedly experiences they had just had at high-level meeting involving multinational players, where concerns about the dangers of growth and globalization were openly and honestly discussed. The need for the emergence of NGOs, women, and youth, into leadership roles, is also explored. The authors suggest that somehow these developments will connect with the work they’ve “been doing to understand the U movement and reconnect with nature” (p.134), though the means by which this will happen is not yet clear to them.

Indeed, the authors next consider the problem of how “fragmented awareness” can doom visions from the outset. Visions must arise when they arise, spontaneously, as we discover our power to shape reality and our responsibility to our future—visions cannot be forced. Furthermore, vision is tied to intention—but to a particular type of intention, which is not based in preconceived plans or simple self-interest, but instead in knowing what it is you should be doing in the world. However, though intentions must be large, initiatives can be small—indeed, they often should be, as small but successful steps help focus intention and generate momentum. The authors suggest that awakening into vision and intention that are in service to the whole requires “a shift in will, accessible to all who come to understand and choose it” (p.147).

However, the authors emphasize that “nothing undermines the creative process more than the naïve belief that once the vision is clear, it’s just a matter of ‘implementation’”(p.149). Instead, they see the key as acting *while* remaining open—dancing between inspiration and experimentation. Rapid prototyping is promoted as a means of creating that is congruent with this dance, because “we learn how to do something truly new only through doing it, then adjusting”(p.153). Moreover, attachment to a prototype must be avoided, in order to allow openness to feedback from the universe. Prototyping can then become part of an “organic metamorphosis”—a self-sustaining process of continual innovation. Synchronicity can then become a further support, because action and intent are aligned with the universe as it is unfolding.

Finally, the authors consider that our institutions may be, through the U process, emerging into true democracy and self-governance. Though most western institutions presently function as “totalitarian dictatorships,” the limits of the current style of capitalistic democracy may be being reached. The idea that democracy may be learning process we’ve just begun, is put forward, and Senge concludes this section by noting that it is “deep connection with nature” that “provides the inspiration for democratic thinking”(p.180).

## PART 3: BECOMING A FORCE OF NATURE



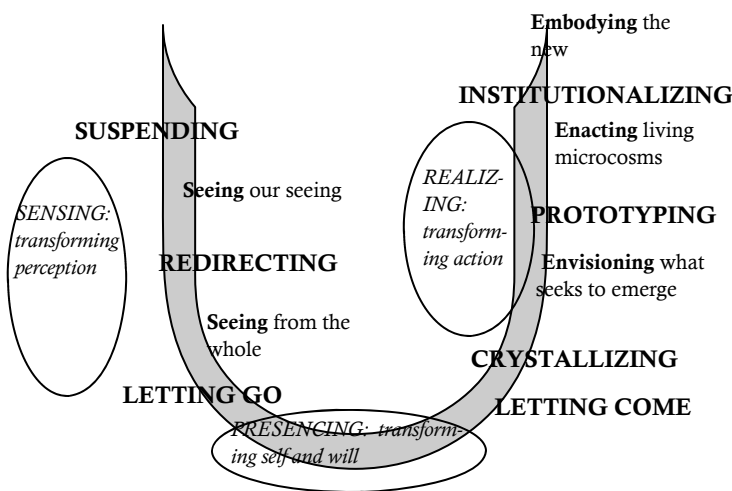
**“Genuine visions arise from crystallizing a larger intent, focusing the energy and sense of purposefulness that come from presencing. We use the term ‘crystallizing intent’ because of the way a crystal can concentrate or focus light. Crystallizing intent requires being open to the larger intention and imaginatively translating the intuitions that arise into concrete images and visions that guide action” (p.137).**

In this section of the book, the authors explore the idea that new realities of our global culture will require new ideas about leadership. For example, they suggest a return to the ancient idea that those in positions of power in organizations should be committed to the moral development of their organizations and selves (indeed, they call for a general return to respect for “old” ideas and elders). They further suggest that as leadership models move from hierarchical structures to power-sharing networks, “many people will need to be deeply committed to cultivating their capacity to serve what’s seeking to emerge”(p.192).

Similarly, the authors consider the possibility that a new science is emerging—a more integrative science, balancing knowledge and wisdom. Quantum theory, recent developments in biology and medicine, and non-western and indigenous scientific traditions, are posited as together leading to an emerging science that will potentially transform “the particle nature of the isolate self”(p.194). Science—in academia and in mind-set—is seen as moving away from fragmentation, or seeing separateness where there is actually wholeness, to recognizing global interdependence of emotion, thought, and “measurable phenomena.” Furthermore, we are reminded, scientists like Einstein who speak of such matters are not just “philosophizing,” but talking about what they know and how they work as scientists. However, change is hindered by our lack of understanding of “the forces that have led to our dependence on modern technology and the part we play in maintaining those forces”(p.210).

Finally, the authors present a more refined version of their U conceptualization, which they suggest will give people language with which to speak of a different way of being in the world. Their diagram, on p.225, is similar to this:

# PART 4: MEETING OUR FUTURE

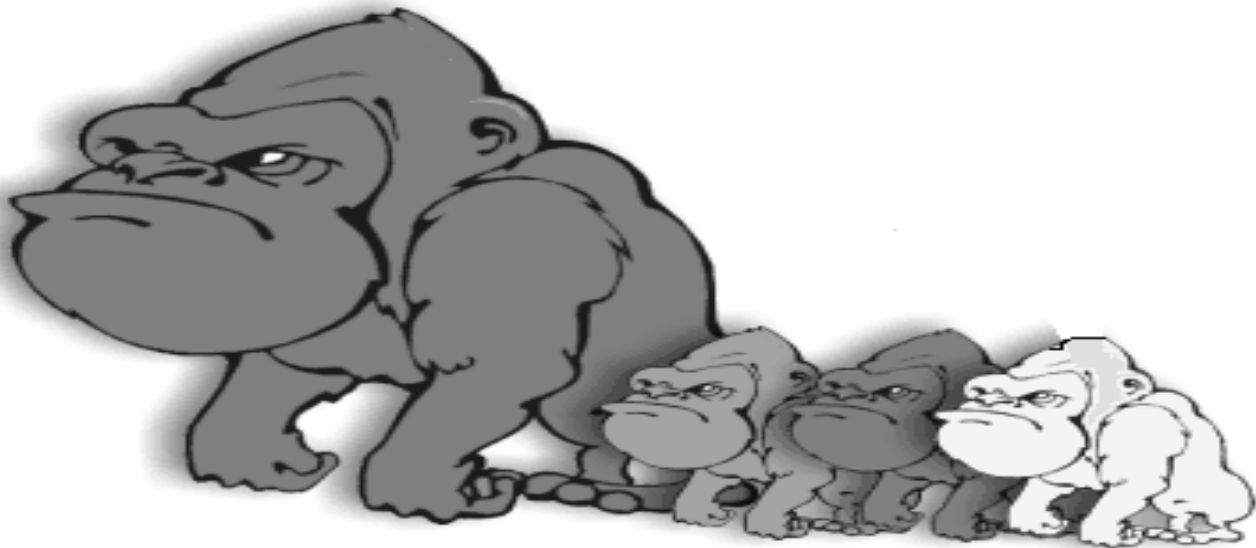


Finally, the authors discuss what they call “the mystery” at the bottom of the U, which they say may not be explainable, but which they conceptualize variously: for example, as pre-sensing; as relating to one’s highest future possibility; and as becoming conscious of the interaction between the absolute and the manifest. They emphasize that giving up control or will at the bottom of the U does not imply servitude or becoming a machine, but instead, implies choosing to become your highest, most human, self. Flowers summarizes it thusly: the bottom of the U is the key point where “the fire of creation burns and enters the world through us”(p.240).

**“The Buddhist approach rests on rigorous disciplines of cultivation that start with paying attention to our present way of living and the role of thought in the prison we’ve created for ourselves. As we said before, until we can start to master our own thought, to ‘pacify the mind,’ we won’t be able to escape this prison of our own thinking. Only then, can we be open to what’s emerging”(p.230).**

In this epilogue, the authors consider whether a collective sense of purpose could be developing in the world—a sort of recognition of a purpose for human existence. They discuss a novel written by Daniel Quinn called *Ishmael*, in which a man has a conversation with a gorilla. The gorilla is in a room where there is a sign that says, “With man gone, will there be hope for gorilla?” The authors observe that though it presently appears that most non-human species on earth would be better off without man, perhaps that is not so: perhaps we do have something to offer to the planet if we move from being takers to being givers. We need to recognize our connectedness with nature, and recognize that it is a bi-directional connectedness, and that we are suffering by our loss of relationship with other species just as they are suffering by loss of relationship with us. Indeed, we are even suffering through loss of relationship with matter, like, water, that we normally think of as inanimate. Senge quotes American environmental architect Bill McDonough, asking “‘What will it take for us to become indigenous again?’—not as we were, but as we might be?” and answers himself, “I think if we can find our place [in the world], we will find our purpose”(p.253).

## EPILOGUE: “WITH MAN GONE, WILL THERE BE HOPE FOR GORILLA?”



### THE ESSENCE OF *PRESENCE* IN ONE SIMPLE STORY

In this epilogue, on p. 253, Senge tells of giving a presentation in Egypt at a leadership conference, where he described the astounding effect of music on the crystalline structure of water—something Senge had learned about through the work of scientist Masuru Emoto of Japan. After the presentation, Senge was approached by a Saudi business executive who told the following story about his grandfather:

*My grandfather taught me that when you are sick, you should take a bowl of water and you should read to it.... If you know the Koran, read the Koran. But it doesn't really matter what you read, so long as it is something that has real meaning to you. Then you take the water and wash yourself with it, and you will get well. Now I understand what my grandfather was trying to teach me.*

Senge says that though he had only the “dimpest appreciation” of what this man meant, he nevertheless felt that the two of them were “bound to a common destiny far more powerful than [their] differing cultures, one in which there was equal room for old wisdom and new science” (p.253).



*Presence: An Exploration of Profound Change in People, Organizations, and Society* is the 2005 Doubleday version of the original *Presence*, which was a short-run, limited edition version published by SoL. The book is slightly shorter, but otherwise essentially the same, so either version can provide the reader with the details of the ideas highlighted in this Executive Book Summary.

The *Presence Workbook*—a collection of presencing tools and practices—is also currently available for purchase, or it can be downloaded free from the SoL website with a book purchase.



## APPLYING PRESENCING IN YOUR LIFE TODAY

\*Learning to suspend, or “see your own seeing,” as you are guided to do in *Presence*, will help you see possibilities for change and growth in any aspect of your life that you choose to explore, by helping you escape from the trap of “what is” and move to the freedom of what can be

\*The personal peace and empowerment you can experience from stilling the chatter of your mind, and listening instead to the voice of the core of your being, will help you redefine priorities, reduce stress, improve relationships, become more productive—be a leader in and of your own life

\*Groups and institutions you belong to can learn to move from working out from the past, reactively, to working with the future that wants to emerge—by focusing not on putting the members’ ideas together, but on coming to know deeply the members’ common purposes and letting action flow from that

## PRESENCE: AN EVALUATIVE ANALYSIS BY STUDENT

Although *Presence* was written in the first decade of the twenty-first century, many of the ideas in this book are reminiscent of an era in North America history found almost fifty years earlier in time: the sixties. Back then, eastern religions and philosophies, and indigenous North American culture and religion, greatly influenced the lives of many, especially those of young people—like the young people some of the authors of this book were at the time. The authors freely admit that many of their ideas draw on ancient wisdom—especially Buddhism. Much of what the reader of *Presence* is asked to do as part of the process of presencing fits well within a Buddhist tradition, especially as it was represented in North American popular culture in the sixties and again in the “new Age” movement of the nineties. For example, the very term “presencing” reminds this writer of the sixties admonition (and book of the same name), “be here now”—which encouraged the same Buddhist focus on living in the present moment (though not *for* the present moment). Similarly, the guidance given in *Presence* for listening to what is within

when the mind has stopped its chattering, hearkens to the sixties focus on meditation, such as the then-popular transcendental meditation—rooted in ancient practice—or the advice this writer personally remembers, on the importance of “stilling the mad monkey the mind.”

That said, I personally believe that these ancient ideas have such great value that they can never be recycled or re-presented or reworked too many times! Our North American culture does move quickly and often heedlessly, and any advice we are given that promotes a mental slowing-down, or pause for reflection, can never be inappropriate. Similarly, the damage we are doing to nature through our lack of relationship with her—a reality that cannot be denied by any thinking citizen in our society—is another key concept in this book, which is especially tied in the book to indigenous belief. I think this is another excellent example of a borrowed idea we as a culture have heard many times before, especially in the sixties and the nineties, but one that we obviously still need to hear again, because though positive change has begun, the process is as yet moving too slowly—think Kyoto.

Therefore, I think this book has

great value for a number of reasons. The authors are individuals of great credibility in the business and academic worlds, and perhaps by putting forth certain ideas, variants of which have been put forth before by others since time immemorial, the ideas can gain some credibility and exposure they did not necessarily have with some sectors of society when they were presented in the hippy sixties or the new age nineties. The authors’ representation of many ancient concepts is not necessarily the most pure or profound—they are, they say, creating a “new theory.” Nevertheless, their representation is adequate for their purposes, and indeed, would probably be as esoteric as it could be while still being not too far outside the comfort zone of business and other leaders schooled exclusively in western thought. From that zone of safe dissonance, the probable reader of this book could easily learn much that could help him begin to evolve personally into new manners of thought and action—and such individual personal development is arguably the best source of all growth for groups and institutions.