



BOOK REVIEW:

PRESENCE: AN EXPLORATION OF PROFOUND CHANGE IN
PEOPLE, ORGANIZATIONS, AND SOCIETY

[PETER SENGE, C. OTTO SCHARMER, JOSEPH JAWORSKI, AND BETTY SUE
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—KURT S. TAKAMINE
CHAPMAN UNIVERSITY

Imagine you are sitting in a living room with Peter Senge (*The Fifth Discipline* and *The Dance of Change*), C. Otto Scharmer (Helsinki School of Economics), Joseph Jaworski (*Synchronicity: The Inner Path of Leadership*), and Betty Sue Flowers (Professor of English, University of Texas at Austin) as they discuss topics such as “transformational change” and “deeper levels of learning.” In this conversation, the authors not only share current research in the field of organizational learning, but reveal their personal insights and frustrations as well. This is the setting for their book, *Presence*.

How do the authors define *presence*? They describe presence as a type of “deeper listening, of being open beyond one’s preconceptions” (Senge, Scharmer, Jaworski & Flowers, 2005, p. 13). To those who have read Senge’s *The Fifth Discipline*, it sounds similar to his concept of *mental models*, where reflection and inquiry skills are critical. Senge et al. suggest that the process most organizations undertake for long-lasting transformation is fundamentally flawed: that is, the tendency is to impose “old frameworks on new realities” (p. 84). To get beyond this roadblock, an organization needs to practice *presence*.

If this concept seems somewhat oblique and metaphysical, it is because some of the discussions originate out of a Western and Eastern mystical perspective. In fact, the dialogue captured from these discussions



traverses the landscapes of science, business, spirituality, and leadership. This eclectic mix of various disciplines and ideologies brings a richness and variety to an already interesting topic.

It would have been intriguing if Robert Greenleaf could have been part of this conversation during his lifetime. Many of Greenleaf's characteristics are quite consistent with the presence motif, particularly *listening*, *awareness*, *conceptualization*, *foresight*, and *stewardship*. A comparison between presence and servant-leadership will be explored next.

Listening

Senge mentions that presence is "being fully conscious and aware in the present moment. . . .appreciat[ing] presence as deep listening, of being open beyond one's preconceptions and historical ways of making sense" (Senge et al., 2005, p. 12). This *deep listening* is compared to various spiritual metaphors, such as "opening the heart" (in Sufism) or the concept of divine revelation (in Christian circles). Listening, in this context, appears to be more of a holistic integration of cognition, emotion, and mysticism. How does this compare with Greenleaf's understanding of *listening*?

It appears to be in harmony with Robert Greenleaf's ideology. Spears (2002, p. 5) noted that one of the skills critical for the servant-leader is

a deep commitment to listening intently to others. . . .He or she seeks to listen receptively to what is being said (and not said!). Listening also encompasses getting in touch with one's own inner voice and seeking to understand what one's body, spirit, and mind are communicating. Listening, coupled with regular periods of reflection, is essential to the growth of the servant-leader.

Greenleaf and Senge agree that listening is more than just a passive exercise of the mind; it is truly an activity that requires the utilization of spirit and heart as well.



Conceptualization

Senge makes this provocative statement in his chapter entitled “Seeing Our Seeing”: “Most change initiatives that end up going nowhere don’t fail because they lack grand visions and noble intentions. They fail because people can’t see the reality they face” (Senge et al., p. 29.). Most people are crippled from achieving their dreams when their critical inner voice dismisses the unfamiliar or innovative.

Greenleaf might proffer his thoughts on conceptualization at this point. “Servant-leaders seek to nurture their abilities to ‘dream great dreams’” (Spears & Lawrence, 2002, p. 6). He might go on to say managers need to break the habit of listening to those “voices” which cause us to suspend our creative impulses. Senge might then interject Michael Ray’s work on creativity at Stanford, explaining the three assumptions for developing creativity. Creativity and conceptualization go hand-in-hand.

Greenleaf’s views on *foresight* deepen the conversation by exploring the prescient ability to see the consequences of one’s decisions on the future. This look at the intuitive mind will be discussed in the next section.

Foresight

Senge and his colleagues discuss a concept known as “the knowing of the heart,” which is a type of deep, almost primal awareness in one’s innermost being (Senge et al., p. 54). This is very much in line with Greenleaf’s characteristic of *foresight*.

Spears and Lawrence (2002, p. 7) capture the nuances of foresight when they describe it as “a characteristic that enables the servant-leader to understand the lessons from the past, the realities of the present, and the likely consequence of a decision for the future. It is also deeply rooted in the intuitive mind.” It is as intriguing as it is mysterious.



Awareness and Stewardship

These final two ideas are combined under an in-depth retreat experience that Joseph Jaworski shares in *Presence*. In his solitude, Jaworski experienced a deep awakening and connection with nature. He experienced gray whales breaching right in front of him. On another occasion, a sea lion rested her head on a rock and silently stared at Joseph. This quiet communion continued for about ten minutes and left an indelible impression on Jaworski. It was then Joseph realized that humankind was inextricably reliant on the earth for survival, and that the converse was also true. He realized that he was being “called forth” (p. 68) as a vehicle for transformation.

Greenleaf might say this experience transformed Jaworski’s view of the world in an unexpected and eventful manner. One can almost hear Greenleaf (Spears & Lawrence, 2002, p. 6) uttering these words:

Awareness is not a giver of solace—it is just the opposite. It is a disturber and an awakener. Able leaders are usually sharply awake and reasonably disturbed. They are not seekers of solace. They have their own inner serenity.

Not only are people responsible for environmental issues, they are also responsible for the service of others. In fact, much of *Presence* addresses issues pertaining to globalization, with its dizzying pace and ever-changing realities. There will be situations that will require vanguards to lead the global community through the unknown, and this will be the purview of the stewards.

Greenleaf’s end of the conversation continues: servant-leaders hold our valuable institutions and interests in trust, and “assume first and foremost a commitment to serving the needs of others” (p. 7). Senge (2005) furthers things, commenting that “we don’t yet have a new story that’s clear enough, simple enough, and widely understood enough to serve a new community of thought” (p. 217). Perhaps the world does not know what the future holds, but can place its hope in emergent stewards.



Presence is a book that is aligned with the ideals of *stewardship*, as well as the characteristics of *listening*, *awareness*, *conceptualization*, and *foresight*. I believe Greenleaf would bring vitality and fire to the dialogue with Peter Senge, C. Otto Scharmer, Joseph Jaworski and Betty Sue Flowers. In *Presence*, the examples are fresh, the conclusions accurate, and the challenges profound. The book allows readers to begin a journey that starts introspectively and moves into global awareness. Emerging leaders with presence can be effectual in our ever-changing society.

Kurt Takamine is Assistant Professor of Organizational Leadership and Human Resources at Chapman University, Manhattan Beach campus in Southern California. He is the Associate Division Chair of Organizational Leadership, overseeing over twenty campuses in California and Washington State. His areas of interest are Servant-Leadership, Ethical Leadership, Emotional Intelligence, Naikan and Morita Therapy in the Workplace, and Transformational Leadership. He serves on the editorial board for *The International Journal of Servant-Leadership*.

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