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March 2015

# Mapping Theory U to Congregational Chapters

An exploration of applying C. Otto Sharmer's  
Theory U to congregational chapter  
preparation and processes.



## INTRODUCTION

When women religious gather for assemblies and chapters, governance is a significant component of their work. Processes and procedures associated with the gatherings must flow from their constitutions and directories. In my work with congregations over the past fifteen years, I have had the privilege of reading many of these foundational documents. I am constantly amazed at the congruence and similarities that exist across the congregations concerning the parameters of governance. Governance across the diverse tapestry of women religious is always bound in discernment and most often there is mention of how one is to listen for the Spirit in and among the body that is gathered. There is usually reference to approaching their sisters in love and a recognition that the Spirit will be revealed in relationship to each other. Diversity of ideas is seen as a gift. These documents offer up the aspirational dimensions of how the sisters are to be about their canonical responsibilities as they attend to the dimensions of their communal lives.

The fundamental question for chapter planning committees becomes how to design processes that honor their constitutional requirements for the *work* that chapters are required to do while simultaneously ensuring that the experience is Spirit filled and Spirit led—the *how* they are to be together. These processes must span the preparation period prior to chapter as well as the processes of chapter itself. There is always a desire for contemplation, dialogue, deep listening and openness to how the Spirit is seeking to be revealed. In the attempt to create innovative and Spirit filled gatherings, congregations have employed various processes and approaches often drawing on the contemporary thinking of experts in the areas of spirituality, systems theory, organizational development and group dynamics.

I have found that Otto Scharmer's<sup>i</sup> explanation of the different levels of perception and change in relationship to systemic transformation to be very useful in my consulting practice. He uses the symbol of a U to explain the different levels of perception and action. I have found his work especially applicable in working with chapter planning groups. Scharmer has managed to integrate the scholarship of thought leaders from around the world and across multiple disciplines into a simple three movement process that opens up the possibilities for systemic transformation. He has applied this framework of moving around the U in both large scale and micro level change initiatives across the world, thus providing some sense of confidence in attempting to apply his concepts in my own work. (On a personal note, I do become annoyed with his use of neologisms which can often sound like jargon or 'consultant-speak'!)

I first started applying his theory in 2006 while reading *Presence: Exploring Profound Change in People, Organizations and Society*.<sup>ii</sup> I was working with a small Franciscan community that was exploring ways in which to engage their sisters in a discernment process concerning the possibility of restructuring. Issues of viability, diminishing numbers, divesting of properties and selling beloved sponsored institutions were aspects of this issue. The community was divided concerning whether or not restructuring was a realistic solution. Members on the planning committee were reading Senge's book, and were captivated by it. Many of the ideas described by the authors spoke to what they were searching for, but what alluded all of us was *how* to make the concepts real and practical in ways that would support the work we needed to accomplish. We spent many frustrating meetings slogging through different approaches and possibilities for inviting their community into this very complex and emotionally charged exploration.

In a moment of what seems now to be divine inspiration, we literally fell into the idea that perhaps we could use the three movements of Theory U that were described in the book. After all, the authors were using language like "retreat and reflect, getting in touch with mystery and inner knowing, becoming one with the world, acting swiftly with a natural flow"; these ideas resonated with all of us. Maybe we could create processes of 'observe, observe, observe' by framing life giving questions to be used in multiple venues and with different groups. What if we designed group gatherings using silence, deep listening, contemplation and prayer as a way of being at the bottom of the U, in what Scharmer called 'presencing'? Could we trust that if we were faithful to what we were saying, decisions that would be made would come from that 'deep place of knowing'? Would the congregation have the courage to 'act swiftly' on what was decided, knowing that as a prototype it didn't have to be complete or perfect? Would the congregation be disciplined enough to risk another journey around the U once decisions were made and actions taken? These were important questions, but the energy they evoked was breath taking. Our approach seemed practical, simple, and yet well grounded. We mapped various processes, gatherings and events around the U and entered into an 18 month experiment of chapter preparation using this newly found theory. It worked! The ultimate decision was not to merge with any other congregation, but to enter into their own processes of exploring the complex issues facing their congregation with a renewed sense of hope, clarity and openness to radical possibilities. There was also a collective commitment to continue to integrate the teachings and disciplines of Theory U.

## THEORY U AND SPIRITUAL PRACTICES:

In the elaboration of his theory, Scharmer is very clear about the spiritual component of his work. He talks about how moving down the U requires an *open mind, open heart, and open will*. He talks about the ‘voices’ or shadows that will impede the capacity for openness and letting go, drawing upon theologians both ancient and contemporary. He insists that we must move beyond the *closed mind* of downloading and judgment in order to see the world as it is; that our *heart will clamp close and harden* if we allow our cynical selves to run the show, and that the voice of fear will paralyze us from moving into the emerging future that longs for us. His framework is steeped in a contemplative and spiritual understanding of what it takes to move into a transformation moment. It is because of his integration of the spiritual dimensions of change that makes this theory very applicable to religious congregations.

Scharmer offers different ways in which to explore the U. The basic theory relies on three movements, *co-observing, co-discerning, and co-creating*. His colleague and collaborator, Brian Arthur,<sup>iii</sup> expanded on the three movements and further delineated the journey into five stages that a system must take as it moves through systemic change. Since my inaugural venture into applying his work, I have continued to steep myself in his work to apply this framework. I have learned a lot and am grateful to the many committees and congregations willing to learn with me as we continue to experiment with applying the depth and complexity of his amazing ideas. We are learning that the framework can be used in implicit ways by a working group or made explicit to entire congregations. The degree to which it is directly ‘taught’ or simply applied as an operative framework depends on the needs and desires of the members of a congregation and the wisdom of the chapter planning group.

### THEORY U: FIVE STAGES<sup>IV</sup>



## APPLYING EACH STAGE TO CONGREGATIONAL CHAPTERS:

### CO-INITIATING

*The answer to how is yes. Peter Block*

This stage involves a communal ‘yes’ to moving forward together. The formal declaration that chapter planning will begin, initiating the implementation phase of chapter acts, or launching a new initiative are all examples of co-initiating. *Uncovering common intent*---it is as simple as that. Co-initiating is the important first step of a collective affirmation that a journey has begun. An important note here is to realize that the theory is as much a spiral as it is a two dimensional U. Beginning the formal process of chapter planning is co-initiating at a macro level. Applying the theory to a prototype or chapter act is more of a micro-application. The willingness to move through the stages of this framework is as much a life stance as it is a contemporary theory of systems change. It becomes a way of ‘being’ in our lives---personally and communally.

This initial stage corresponds to the discipline of *open mind* that allows the system to move forward in one accord. The voice of judgment is the individual and collective voice that keeps us in an echo-chamber of our own thinking or colluding with those who always agree with us. So, while relatively simple in concept, it is harder than it may seem at first glance.

### CO-SENSING

*To pay attention: this is our endless and proper work. Mary Oliver*

The several months devoted to chapter preparation centers primarily in this second stage. This is the stage where the body is invited into a full awareness of the context in which it is navigating, to literally ‘see with fresh eyes’ the landscape in which they find themselves. This includes the inner journey of personal awareness, a collective exploration of assumptions and long held beliefs as well as full disclosure of relevant data and the signs of the times. Tools that are most helpful in supporting a system in co-sensing include framing relevant and compelling questions and convening small gatherings in which to engage in inquiry.

A courageous step that a few congregations are taking in this second stage is a willingness to move outside the boundaries of the congregation in order to engage other conversation partners. An example of this is when a congregation experimented with inviting millennials into focus group processes and explored concepts related to *their sense of belonging, finding meaning in their lives, and their spirituality*. These focus group conversations were listening sessions for the conveners and were not meant as data gathering tools to be handed over to

their vocation directors. The planning committee understood this process as a way of being in the *place of most potential* and listening deeply to the wisdom of this generation in order to *see the field*. Other examples of moving beyond traditional boundaries is the willingness of some congregations to engage members of staff departments or lay co-ministers into inquiry concerning issues related to collaboration or new ways of being in mission. They are willing to go outside traditional chapter preparation that only engages sisters and associates and actually be *in the field* for observation and inquiry. Sometimes, the exploration moves beyond a simple focus group or conversation circle process and literally becomes a *deep dive* into a particular concept or issue. Congregations exploring alternative forms of relationships or new understanding of the vows often employ a deep dive process that supports the possibilities of innovation and creative thinking.

The use of 'self-organizing' conversation circles have been met with amazing success and excitement. The discipline here is to *connect with people and places* in order to see the whole system. These self-organizing conversation circles can replace or augment traditional middle level or local governance groups that traditionally provide the venue for working on chapter preparation. For larger congregations that span multiple provinces, the concept of self-organizing groups provides for crossing provincial boundaries by using technology in order to 'convene' the circle.

An important discipline involved in co-sensing includes empathic listening—that is, listening as if one is literally 'walking in the other's shoes'. Another important discipline is the willingness and ability to let go of out dated assumptions or long held beliefs that no longer serve the whole. This stage involves an open mind and an open heart and necessitates a willingness to see things that one has never 'seen' before. The Greek word for repent or repentance is *metanoia* and is very applicable for this stage. It literally means *new mind*. When a body engages in radical truth telling about what is and explores creative possibilities of what might be, new mindsets are possible. New possibilities of being in mission, new understandings of inviting relationships, new articulations of the vows, innovative ways of creating 'soft restructuring' instead of civil and canonical mergers are a few examples of breakthrough thinking that has occurred during this stage of co-sensing. These innovative *possibilities* are further framed and make their way to the chapter agenda for communal exploration and discernment. It is important to note here that creative possibilities emerge from the collective conversations occurring across the system in multiple venues. This stage is organic, fluid, dynamic and engages the whole as much as possible.

A core group or steering committee must hold the integration of these multiple conversations and deep dive experiences. Their work is to frame questions that are in service to the

whole, invite multiple ways of convening groups, ensure that the necessary resources and materials are provided, and to synthesize the feedback coming from the different venues. A significant role of a planning group using these multiple processes is to continually communicate across the system so that the body is aware of what is emerging across the congregation. Processes and materials to support this phase are created and coordinated by the energy, synergy and expertise of this working group. It is important to resource this group with members who are able to work creatively, who can work outside the scope of committee meetings, and who are able to frame compelling questions and synthesize tomes of information. It is also important to resource this group with someone who is experienced in applying this conceptual framework.

## **CO-PRESENCING**

*We sit around a ring and suppose. But the secret sits in the middle and knows. Robert Frost*

Another way to think about co-presencing is to think of it as communal discernment—a time when the body comes together as a community for the purpose of discerning the will of God for their lives. At a macro level then, congregations move into the co-presencing stage when they gather for their Chapter. However, congregations often gather their members for pre-chapter events. The purpose of the pre-chapter gatherings is to provide a communal experience for the ongoing chapter preparation. By this time, the collective journey is deep into the U process—moving in and out of the co-sensing and co-presencing stages. Examples of communal discernment at this stage includes the formal nomination process that may occur where nominees are named and agree to move forward for discerning elected leadership or affirming levels of participation that will be employed at the chapter. These interim gatherings also allow for the affirmation of a *critical issue or an emerging possibility* as appropriate agenda items for the chapter.

Finally, the *chapter itself* is an experience of being at the ‘bottom of the U’ where the community experiences the mystery, grace and transformative experience of ‘connecting to the Source’. It is at this stage the body connects with the Spirit that is moving within and among the group and engages in the discipline of open will—allowing the *Grand Will*<sup>v</sup> to be known.

Deep listening and dialogue are important disciplines of co-presencing. The conversations that occur at the tables and in the large group must be dialogic. The word dialogue comes from the Greek word *dia logos*—often translated as *through the word*. A way to understand the profound nature of dialogue is that meaning and new insights emerge *through our words and within the silence*. Dialogue can literally become a flow of meaning. I have found Christina Baldwin’s work in calling the circle very helpful here.<sup>vi</sup> She talks about the disciplines neces-



sary to authentically engage one another in conversation. She offers these three very simple yet profound “practices of council”:<sup>vii</sup>

- Speaking with intention
- Listening with attention
- Self-monitoring our impact and contributions

In her subsequent work and collaboration with Ann Linnea, she has reframed the last practice to be that of ‘contribute to the well being of the group’.<sup>viii</sup> These practices are excellent conversational guides for groups desiring to be in dialogue together. A common complaint I hear from chapter planning committees is the prevalence of what one group called their ‘chapter queens’. Those are the participants who never miss an opportunity to go to the open mic and seem to be more interested in gaining the floor than contributing to the thread of conversation that is emerging from the body. This behavior is often disruptive to the work at hand and the conversation can become fragmented or alienating for the group. When entering into large group sharing, it is helpful to remember the Quaker precept that says one may speak only if their words serve to *improve on the silence*. The more willing a group is to embrace these practices, the more possibility there is for the Spirit to be heard. A skilled and experienced facilitator is often necessary to support the group at this point in their journey.

A very simple tool that I have found to be extremely effective is to configure the tables so that there is a range of diversity and perspective around the table. It is also helpful to invite the group to change the mix of table mates by asking 2 or 3 to change tables once or twice during the gathering, depending how many days the event may be occurring. This helps to widen the circle of conversation partners and allows the individuals to experience a broader sense of the group.

A critical component of this stage is bringing to the assembled body *well defined, well framed and well vetted issues or statements of possibility* that have emerged from the previous stage of co-sensing. The framed issues or possibility statements come from the myriad of conversations and deep dive experiences leading to chapter. The chapter planning committee is responsible for ensuring this happens, however they may engage others from outside their core committee to serve as ‘listeners and writers’ to get the feedback coming from the co-sensing stage into manageable content for chapter. The well framed issue statement or statements of possibility are hard won, often evoke the voices of fear, cynicism or judgment because they concretely point to possible action in response to what has been talked about for months, if not years.

There are also times that issues or possibilities emerge in ‘real time’ from the conversations on the chapter floor. It is very helpful to have a small working group to agree to be listeners, bearing witness to the proceedings and conversations that are occurring. This small working

group then must be able to frame what is emerging into a manageable form in which the body can deliberate and discern.

Sitting at the bottom of the U can be arduous and challenging work. It is at this stage of the journey that the collective opens itself up for what is trying to be revealed. During this time, there are moments of confusion, chaos, and at times complete unknowing---this is usually what transformation looks and feels like. However, it is well worth the effort. Rumi, the thirteenth century Sufi mystic said it this way:<sup>ix</sup>

Out beyond ideas of wrongdoing  
and rightdoing there is a field.  
I'll meet you there.

When the soul lies down in that grass  
the world is too full to talk about.

## CO-CREATING

*The future enters into us, in order to transform us, long before it happens. Rainer Maria Rilke*

Once the body has moved through the co-presencing stage and made choice about actions for the future, it enters into the co-creating phase of the journey. Scharmer is very clear that this stage of co-creating is not about being perfect or creating something that is supposed to last forever. His favorite term for this phase is to 'make a landing strip for the future' by creating prototypes. A prototype is a best *first answer* to a compelling issue or innovative possibility. The ability to tinker and try on new things is freeing for congregations during this time of transition and living in what Nancy Schreck calls 'the middle space'.<sup>x</sup> Examples of prototypes could be experimenting with houses of presence in urban cores where not only vowed sisters but others drawn to the charism of the congregation live in an intentional community and support the life of a neighborhood riddled with crime and economic misery. Perhaps this intentional community creates its own common purse and lives outside the security of guaranteed financial support from the congregation. Another example would be to encourage a small group who are willing to experiment with new ways of living a committed life steeped in the Gospel message of social justice outside the traditional path of vowed life to the Church. Prototypes such as these offer creative ways to explore what it might look like to live prophetic life form in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Prototypes are held and blessed by a community. Those involved in the prototypes are committed to ongoing discernment and openly share their learnings. They know that they are *trying on* these new possibilities in service to the whole. A common understanding is that failure is as an opportunity for growth and fodder for ongoing discernment.

Co-creating also involves decisions that a body may make concerning issues that point to a

completion of life as it has always been known. These decisions may help to free up future decisions about an emerging future but are understood as letting go of the past and what 'used to be'. Decisions to sell property, to let go of a sponsored ministry, to no longer recruit new members are also examples of 'moving up the U' in a communal act of co-creating. These examples are not prototypes, but are decisions that are in service to what may be trying to emerge. They are examples of making room for the new. In these instances, what may be being created is the freedom for others to move forward in new and yet unimagined ways.

## **CO-EVOLVING**

*For us there is only the trying. The rest is not our business. T.S. Eliot*

Systems are created in order to provide something of value to groups of people. Systems emerge and evolve in response to the needs of the time. The fifth stage of co-evolving happens over the span of a long period, often past the era of those who worked on its behalf. Congregations of women religious that emerged across the United States during the middle ages and up until the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century evolved from the good works of the foundresses—Angela Merici, Catherine McAuley, Nano Nagle, and Elizabeth Ann Seton to name a few. These women didn't set out to create religious institutes, the institutes emerged over time in response to the unique circumstances of when they were founded. We can only imagine that each foundress was faithful to her inner longing as well as astutely aware of the external landscape. She acted in communion with others to respond as faithfully as she knew how. Systems will emerge beyond us. We must do what is ours to do in these times. The rest is in God's hands.

## CONCLUDING COMMENTS:

*I would it were not so, but so it is. Who ever made music of a mild day? Mary Oliver*

The following image illustrates how the five movements of Theory U can be applied to your congregational chapter planning processes. I often use this depiction as a way to quickly explain how the U journey will unfold over the planning process. The co-sensing stage is highlighted because it is where most of the preparation occurs. Again, it is important to note that this mapping is at a macro level. The journey becomes one of a spiral, going deeper each time one navigates through the movements. As such, the journey is dynamic, intuitive, organic, fluid and emergent. As daunting as that may sound, applying these stages can be quite pragmatic, focused, deliberate and navigated with a reasonable sense of ease. Chaos does erupt every now and again, so one must be willing to tolerate a little messiness along the way

### Five Stages of Theory U *Congregational Chapter Planning Processes*



*Authors note:*

*I am deeply grateful to the generosity of C. Otto Scharmer and his colleagues at the Presencing Institute for making their work available to the public. For more information, be sure to visit [www.presencing.com](http://www.presencing.com)*

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## Notes

- <sup>i</sup>C. Otto Scharmer, *Theory U: Leading From the Future as It Emerges*. Society for Organizational Learning, Cambridge MA 2007
- <sup>ii</sup>Peter Senge, C. Otto Scharmer, Joseph Jaworski, Betty Sue Flowers. *Presence: Exploring Profound Change in People, Organizations and Society*, Nicholas Brealey Publishing. Great Britain, 2005
- <sup>iii</sup>C. Otto Scharmer, *Addressing the Blind Spot of Our Time, An Executive Summary of Theory U: Leading From the Future as It Emerges*, Sept. 19, 2007, p. 6, (To download a copy of this executive summary go to [www.theoryu.com](http://www.theoryu.com))
- <sup>iv</sup>Scharmer, *Addressing the Blind Spot of Our Time, An Executive Summary of Theory U*
- <sup>v</sup>A term attributed to the theologian Martin Buber.
- <sup>vi</sup>Christina Baldwin. *Calling the Circle: The First and Future Culture*. Bantam Books. 1998
- <sup>vii</sup>Baldwin. *Calling the Circle*, pg. 71
- <sup>viii</sup>Christina Baldwin & Ann Linnea. *A Guide to Peer Spirit Circling*. Peer Spirit Life and Leadership Through Circle, Quest & Story. Peer Spirit, Inc. Langley, WA 2011  
[www.peerspirit.com](http://www.peerspirit.com)
- <sup>ix</sup>Coleman Barks. *The Essential Rumi*. Harper Collins, 1995
- <sup>x</sup>Nancy Schreck OSF. LCWR 2014 Keynote Address, *However Long the Night: Holy Mystery Revealed in Our Midst*



