

In Dialogue

# Three Horizons Meets Presencing for Inclusive, Just and Equitable Futures

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Anthony Hodgson, and Asiya Odugleh-Kolev**

Leaving no one behind lies at the heart of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Increasingly, we recognize that issues of inclusion and social equity are interrelated global desiderata in mitigating the effects of the climate crisis and that “ensuring inclusiveness, equality and equity means approaching the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in an integrated manner” (Together 2030 Global Advocacy Working Group, 2019, p. 2). Inclusive approaches hold the potential to counter neoliberal and neoclassical understandings of development. Socially just and inclusive societies are safer and more stable and thus support conditions for socially, ecologically and relationally balanced growth (Brand et al., 2017; Pouw & Gupta, 2017). But, as of yet, realizing attempts to enliven this overlapping space have remained limited (Gupta & Vegelin, 2016). Finding socially and ecologically sustainable solutions are not related to political will and action alone. They also require a collective ability to co-create and convene spaces for genuine transdisciplinary cooperation and participation across the full spectrum of human diversity and difference in order to address the question

“what type of society [do] we want to live [in] and who [is] the ‘we’ [...] answer[ing] that question” (Abbott et al., 2017, p. 815).

A number of models have emerged to shape these kinds of exploration. Three Horizons (Curry & Hodgson, 2008; Sharpe, 2013; Sharpe et al., 2016) and Presencing (Senge et al., 2004; Scharmer, 2016) are two models that have developed initially in two distinct Communities of Practice.

*Three Horizons* is a simple framework that supports people to structure conversations about change and develop their own role in shaping the future in a reflexive way. Within the plethora of futuring and foresight approaches it falls within what is considered a ‘pathways practice’ as it attempts to deal simultaneously with complexity and agency, in a highly accessible format (Sharpe & Hodgson, 2019). *Presencing* is founded on an impetus to explore what it means to lead from the emerging future, which came from a recognition that most existing learning methodologies rely on learning from the past, while our significant leadership challenges seem to require connecting with and learning from emerging future possibilities.

Interested in the commonalities, synergies and potential for collective learning that could result from bringing these two domains of work together, Oliver Koenig, Bill Sharpe and Megan Seneque formed a small holding team. Initial explorations quickly led to the idea to invite a small but diverse group of people who would share that interest to deepen our understanding of the two practices. The particular focus drawing the group together was an interest in exploring and illuminating how these practices can contribute to creating conditions for inclusive, socially just and equitable futures. Participants in the conversation were invited to both bring in their unique understanding derived from their own personal and professional experience and, most importantly, to engage in the dialogue as a shared space of collective meaning making, bringing to the space their own deepest questions and issues that they themselves are most struggling with in relation to the topic. The following is an abridged version of the dialogue that followed.

## Participating in the Dialogue

### **Zahra Ash-Harper**

Independent Creative Director of Inclusion; pioneered the inclusion practice approach ‘Producing Inclusion’.

### **Stefan Bergheim**

Co-founder of the Centre for Societal Progress, Frankfurt; currently working with Futures Literacy Laboratories.

### **Anthony (Tony) Hodgson**

Co-developer Three Horizons and Founding Trustee and Lead Researcher of H3Uni.

### Asiya Odugleh-Kolev

Technical Officer, Community & Social Interventions, Department of Integrated Health Services, WHO, Geneva; leads community engagement for quality essential health services.

### Megan Seneque

Research Associate of the Susanna Wesley Foundation, Roehampton University and Associate of Presencing Institute; currently working on a number of UN SDG Leadership Labs in diverse countries globally.

### Bill Sharpe

Pioneer of the Three Horizons approach; Affiliate of International Futures Forum, H3Uni, and Leaders Quest.

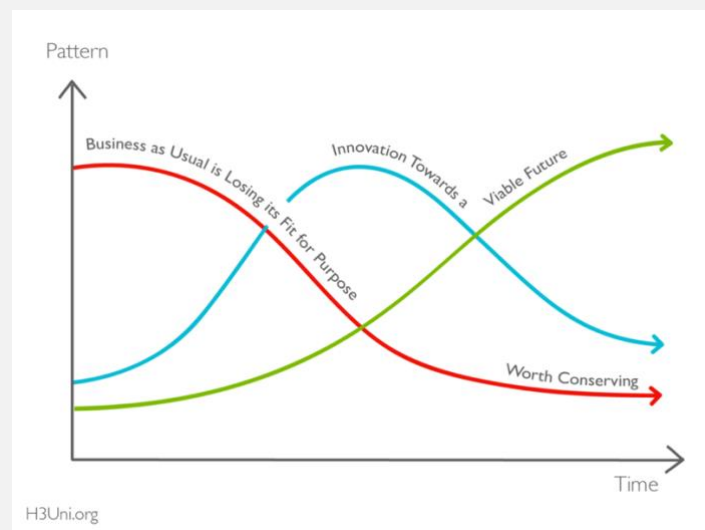
## Dialogue Facilitator

### Oliver Koenig

Professor for Inclusive Education and Inclusion Management, Bertha von Suttner University in St. Pölten.

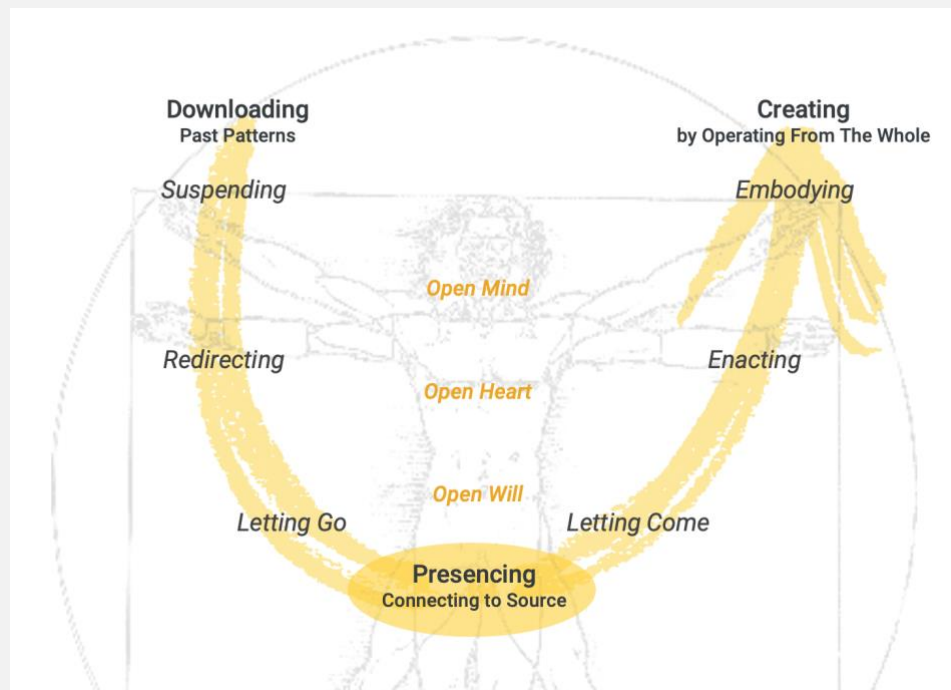
## Setting Questions and Intentions

**Oliver:** We would like to invite you to go back to the moment you received the invitation to take part in this dialogue around connecting the practices of Three Horizons and Presencing and what they can offer our work in the context of inclusive, socially just and equitable futures. What is it you believe could make a difference to our collective understanding?



*Three Horizons Framework. Creative Common License H3uni.*

The Three Horizons framework acts like a map, helping people to see where they are, where they want to be and how to get there. It uses three lines each representing a pattern of how things are done in a particular area or field and how these patterns of action develop over time. It charts Horizon 1, the dominant way things are done today that show signs of strain and lack of fit to the future; Horizon 3, our visions for how we want things to be in the future; and Horizon 2, the innovations we can establish to help make our desired future a reality.



*Presencing, CC License by the Presencing Institute - Otto Scharmer.  
www.presencing.org*

“Presencing is a blended word combining sensing (feeling the future possibility) and presence (the state of being in the present moment). It means sensing and actualizing one’s highest future possibility - acting from the presence of what is wanting to emerge” (Scharmer & Kaufer 2013, p. 19).

**Zahra:** For me this dialogue had already begun before the invitation was actually sent out. Bill and I had already come to an understanding that we wanted to continue exploring some of the things that we had started to realize through our project on equitable futures. When the invitation actually came, I was amazed by how clearly it set out our intentions, which made me feel both confident but also respected in terms of my practice. I'm struck by the honesty

and vulnerability that comes from people who are consciously thinking about transformation and about relational connections. The question that I'm really interested in at this moment, is how some of the techniques that we've developed and some of the values that accompany it can be utilized in what feels like quite a wartime preparedness: a time in which we're really going through something and where we're having to soldier and bring an amount of resistance and resolution in how we're putting forward this ambitious work. Actually, it's a hard time to be doing this work. People are tired and running on low reserves and working from the trenches of themselves and from society. I'm interested to explore how others are doing that in their practice.

Zahra Ash-Harper and Bill Sharpe co-led on the project “Towards Equitable Futures” for Watershed, an independent cinema and creative technology center in Bristol, UK. The project was funded by the UK National Lottery and explored, amongst other questions, “*What are the community behaviors that welcome difference while bonding us together?*”<sup>1</sup>

**Asiya:** This whole concept of soldiering and trenches and reaching our breaking point resonated with me. I think I've reached my breaking point multiple times during my life. Professionally, I have worked in large organizations with ‘legacy’ ways of working, in which the vision they hold is not in line with how they are set up to operate. The ways of thinking about our work and ourselves and how we work on ourselves is also a legacy of our history: being aware of where we've come from, where we need to go and where we are. This whole notion of health and well-being - as in being whole in a holistic sense and not parts of ourselves -- is a question that I struggle with. When I look at the Three Horizons in light of where I am, who I am, what I'm doing, where I'm going and where I would like my current organization to go, there is something about the human soup in which all of this structuring is taking place which needs to be more intentional. For me, spirituality comes into this, not in a religious sense, but through the multi-dimensional nature of human life and experience, that somehow there is something about who we are in our essence, which is connected to something bigger than us, which is connected to nature, which is connected to consciousness. And that, through contrast, tells us something about what we don't want and what we do want. I'm holding that it's a question of choice. So how aware are we of the choices that we're making, that will take us into a certain kind of future?

**Bill:** A psychologist colleague of ours, Maureen O'Hara who worked with Carl Rogers, said, with these methods that you use, you set up a field of consciousness

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.watershed.co.uk/studio/projects/towards-equitable-futures>

in which something emergent can manifest. I've been on this journey to bring that into the world of existential convening: where it's the whole person in the whole system. So there's a deep question I am holding about what makes it appropriate and safe to use a structure, so that it is truly enabling of this deep mutuality of presence, where people are both able to be fully themselves while being fully part of the flow of the whole. I'm always looking for that because that's when we're most deeply ourselves. Whether it's in a football team or being in love, or anything that brings you into a flow together, there is that deep resolution of being fully yourself and being fully part of the whole. That to me is what being a whole system and whole person is all about, and also where structure comes into it. Since I *do structure*, my deepest question is what makes it safe and appropriate to bring this structure into the issues of inclusion and equity and fairness and their lack - that's the question I hold most deeply.

**Tony:** I think there are two things that strike me: one is something one of my teachers said: “humanity can only evolve through shock learning” and another of my teachers: “the problem is that we're all sleepwalking into the future”. Consciousness is not, in its proper senses, on the agenda. This literally led to my interest in what I now call anticipatory learning: that there are properties of awakeness that access the future in ways that our rational mind is incapable of, even though we need the support of that rational mind. For me Three Horizons was an attempt to give our minds permission to live simultaneously in three worlds. The world of happening, in the sense of “we're not in control, get used to it”, you could loosely associate with the idea of a Horizon One. If things go on the way they are, we will end up where we're going, which is quite scary. Horizon Two is where our consciousness and awareness are not kidding ourselves: we grasp the challenge. The Third Horizon is beyond consciousness: the possibility of creative and, if you like, spiritual access to domains that are not on the formal cultural agenda. This is what I now like to call cosmic ecology and terrestrial ecology. All of those things clearly have to be deeply informed by oneness and inclusion.

In its broadest sense, Anticipatory learning can be referred to forms of learning that include and use the future to stimulate a reconfigured model of itself and its environment to inform present actions that will increase surviving and thriving. Moving this idea forward Anthony Hodgson is interested in what constitutes second-order anticipatory systems. For him these are systems that include both the observer as agent as well as the act of exercising choices amongst possible pathways. He is also interested how far a system is able to adapt its behavior by incorporating informations and images of an anticipated future which go beyond simply projecting informations from the past, hence the importance of reconfiguration.

**Stefan:** Tony used the term anticipatory learning - that's the field I'm trying to navigate and which I don't really understand yet. I know many people are navigating it and saying, "I don't really know what this is about and how to define it." But that's part of new things emerging: you initially don't know what they are. That relates to what I really wanted to talk about: What kind of words and terminology do we use, and what do they mean? Are we clear, what they are? Do we continue to explore what they mean to us? And the second aspect is: who feels attracted by the words we use, like for example, "awareness." Who are we inviting or who feels invited by that signal word? The other thing is: when we do work with different types of people who have different views, or put in Futures Literacy terminology, "different images of the future," different underlying assumptions and different conclusions will come up at the end. What do we do with them if we don't like those conclusions? If they're not in line with our own values, if they're not what we want this project to do? Are we okay with that? Do we get into a fallback position of trying to control the outcomes? I'm just raising the issue here as my question.

*Futures Literacy is the skill that builds on the innate human capacity to imagine the future. It allows people to better understand the role that the future plays in what they see and do. Being futures literate empowers the imagination, enhances our ability to prepare, recover and invent as changes occur.<sup>2</sup>*

**Megan:** Stefan that so resonates with me. I immediately become resistant when I see something that is a way of seeing, a way of organizing, a methodology or an approach that is taking on a colonizing nature. I'm a South African and I know that I have a natural resistance to things that I see as totalizing in some way: it provokes a reaction, or resistance of another kind. So, I hold Theory U lightly. That's not to say that I don't believe that the work of Presencing IS the profound work of our time. I get extremely resistant to methodologies that become fixed frames: "you have to do it like this." To your point, Stefan, I'm so tuned into power, the language of power and power relations, I feel them in my blood. And I do it myself. There is no innocence here. My contribution, I would hope, is an integral awareness. Because the invitation for the work of plurality, diversity, whatever word - it's flourishing each of us. The deep irony is that the only way that we can flourish the whole is by flourishing each one of us in all of our diversity. It's not about controlling outcomes or directing, it's using approaches, tools, practices, and methods in response ways, joining people where they are. And for me, autonomy is absolutely critical. People need to make choices, they need to be given permission. We can only create the enabling conditions that

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<sup>2</sup> <https://en.unesco.org/futuresliteracy>

invite them to turn up and be fully present and become fully human together. That's what I bring: a wholehearted rigor, because I think that's what it requires, because we don't have easy answers, thank God. Otherwise, we would contribute to the very problems we are seeking to address.

## The Tension between Roles and Authentic Presence

**Stefan:** Where I would like to dig a bit deeper was the mentioning of legacy. All this transformation and transition work, it's all linked to legacy. It could be our habits, our laws, our structures, or buildings like skyscrapers. It's all part of our legacy. From the Futures Literacy world, the legacy that is under-explored is up here in our minds, the assumptions that we have. The images that we have of the future are based on underlying assumptions that also have a source. They determine how we look into the future and what we do in the present. We can see skyscrapers; we can read laws. But the legacies in our minds are much harder to make visible. The other thing I always struggle with is how to get the whole person into a conversation. I observe individuals coming to conversations not as people, but in their official roles. People are being hired and paid for performing a certain task or a role in an organization. As much as I love to see the person and as much as maybe the person loves to be there as an individual, they have that baggage. They have to have that baggage and we need them to have that baggage. If there were no roles and tasks, hardly anything would function. The challenge is a paradox: we want ourselves, the *people* to show up, but how can we all do that?

**Tony:** Around the end of last century, I helped some colleagues set up a kind of think tank called International Futures Forum. We gathered people from diverse backgrounds to look at the question of how we make sense of a world that we no longer understand and don't control. We tried to develop a culture, which was a bit like the saloon bar in a western, where you can only come in for a drink if you check your weapons at the door. We have a culture which suppresses authentic presence. We're all so preoccupied with a role that we've been given that we don't even realize we've been given it. So I think it's very interesting when we ask people: "Who are you?" They usually say "I am a doctor" or something else. The identification is with the role. It's always been a challenge for me in facilitating to somehow draw out of myself very inadequately as much authentic presence as I can to try and signal to at least someone in the group I'm working with: You can be yourself here. I don't know whether you find that kind of a challenge as well.



IFF is a registered charity which aims to enable people and organizations to flourish within complex, messy, seemingly intractable issues, building competency for thriving in complexity and capacity for transformative innovation through a community hub, events, workshops, tools, processes, training and other online materials.<sup>3</sup>

**Oliver:** When I look at the question that Bill has brought to the fore, of finding ways of connecting the structural dimension, we could put the structural dimension as being something that is held within different kinds of roles. The existential dimension is what Zahra and Tony referred to as forms of authentic presence. We could see roles also as part of the baggage - as the legacy. A part that is very important, because without them hardly anything would function, which you could reframe as being the central quality of the First Horizon. But being stuck within the roles and the parameters of the role, is just reinforcing us to stay in the Downloading mode. So embracing this idea of “supporting systems to see and sense themselves”: when have we been given and taken up a particular role? When have we incorporated these roles as parts of ourselves? You can see a role and you can identify with that role and ask what it is that is enabled through that role, but also what is being suppressed through the roles I've taken on?

**Bill:** I have a thought that's been bubbling for a few minutes. And it starts with the word “paradox.” I'm finding this conversation quite helpful, it has given me a sudden sense of liberation: you can use structure in ways that can either be enabling or totalizing. I'm now very acutely aware of the nervousness I felt as Zahra and I were building the process, that simply by introducing familiar tools, I might overlay authentic presence with something that was restrictive. In fact, we had to talk that through in the context of “life needs some structure.” First Horizon structures do have roles, that's how they're maintained – I know who the doctor and who the shopkeeper is. The Third Horizon is when we reassert the primacy of relationship and its creative power to bring in something new. I like to contrast the patterned integrity of the First Horizon with the creative integrity of the Third where you step out and manifest something of yourself in service of the life of the whole. Zahra, you've been the most clear about the need to occupy space: that your discipline is to encourage people to occupy their own space. In doing that, you are also surrendering to that, and surrendering to the whole in service of it. What we've got to do is be acutely sensitive that we are living a paradox.

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.internationalfuturesforum.com>

**Zahra:** Thanks, Bill, it's really good to go back to some of the things that we were thinking about because I was reflecting when the question of roles came up, that that actually was something that was really acute in our work together: the overwhelming responsibility that people carried into the room. When we first started designing, I often used to think about how to include the people I perceived as having the least structural power in the conversation well and equitably. But we first had a big stumble when the person with the most power was not able to bring themselves, their whole selves, in, without the responsibility of having to speak for the organization, or all the responsibilities they hold within. It forced me into a very new dynamic: being in service of that.

What we ended up doing was assigning new roles and responsibilities for “care” within the structure. We assigned people with partners in order to support and be aware of another person with some real attention, so people didn't end up getting lost in that process. It was very edifying for people but also forged strong relationships and creative partnerships that took on a life of their own. I think it's very interesting thinking about roles because often we like to simplify. But actually, the pluralism and the inclusion that I really enjoy, is how to hold the complexity and who is holding that role at different times. There were times when Bill was nervous of a certain sort of process and I would hold the responsibility for the complexity and the faith in that process, faith that things would be okay, because we had each other's backs.

For me, this conversation is very much like that. There is that question of what happens if we don't always agree, or what happens if we don't come to the same conclusions? For me, the deep respect and affinity for pluralism that holds that together is care. And we haven't mentioned love yet. I think it is important that I say very frankly that the conversations have inspired feelings of complete love for the minds and the spirits and the intention and accountability that I'm hearing. It makes me feel safe to know even in vulnerability, there's that compassion.

**Megan:** Do you know what that sparks for me Zahra? We often joke and we say that no method is facilitator-proof. What we mean by that is that our authentic presence is our primary diagnostic tool, but we have so dialed down ourselves as an organ of perception. It's not just relating to roles, it's relating to how we've over-privileged particular ways of understanding, ways of speaking, ways of expressing ourselves, forms of knowledge that we've forgotten actually -- just being authentic. I was chatting to someone last night and we said that being authentic has a tonal quality. We spoke about tone. There's something for me about the whole embodiment piece. We don't come in with only our analytical capabilities and our intellectual understandings, our knowledge base, whatever that might be. We come in ourselves as fully vulnerable, whole human beings. That's the nature of the work. I mean, that IS the work. Knowing that uncertainty that sits with it is part of what it means to be human. To the extent that we can do that we will end up with others who do the same.

**Asiya:** What's coming up for me is, is this question that we all have multiple roles. I remember when I became a mother in my late 40s. And suddenly, that took me into a completely different role. That changed my role and my relationship with everyone else around me. As a woman there are moments in life where you are totally reshaped. It was only through the practice of regular introspection, and methods and tools for self-inquiry and self-compassion that took me within myself. Embodiment became about recognizing that I have a mental body, an emotional body, a physical body, and that they're all interconnected. I think integrating all of the various parts of myself, all of the roles that I've played in my life, not seeing the differentiation between my personal and professional, that there is some kind of wholeness that I have come into and a realization: "I'm not different in different places," which allows for an expression in the way we structure our relationships, our workplaces and our lives that gives rise to authenticity. There's something to be said about taking apart and building back together again: the taking apart has to be multi-dimensional and intentional.

## Authentic Presence as a Structure for Plurality

**Megan:** Something that's still sitting with me is the nature of the structure. We're constantly talking about structuring for emergence. Structure and life are actually mutually interdependent. It's the *nature* of the structure that we're talking about. For me structuring for emergence, and the responsiveness, alertness and vigilance that is required in giving people the choice, is a structure of co-enabling connectivity. We're doing work at the moment in the UN context in Francophone Africa. My French is not wonderful, but I start by this sort of self-deprecating way of using humor, speaking a bit of *franglais* and then there's a sort of amusement, and it immediately sets a tonal quality.

In deep dialogue work, David Bohm talks about tonality and tone. It requires being present because that itself is part of the structure. What enables people to let go of formal roles in professional contexts is a permission to bring whatever other dimensions of themselves they choose to bring. I'll never tell someone that they need to be authentically present. I mean, imagine if I say now "Stefan come on, step up and be authentically present." Good luck with that one. When you are authentically present, it provides a structure of another kind and I'm deeply curious about the nature and quality of that structure. At different points we could take up different roles, but what we lean into and learn is that there are allocated roles, just like there are allocated leadership positions. When you are creating dynamic living organisms, ecosystems of the kinds that we are creating, different roles emerge.

**Oliver:** I loved the image that you created Asiya, about this process of disassembling -- about taking apart and putting things back together. If I take that image and project it onto the template we are holding, I would say the taking apart is part of finding and dwelling into this feeling of presence, or the

left side of the U in Theory U (Scharmer, 2016). And the putting back together part is the right side. Seemingly there is the question of *what* is being put together. That struck me, because that's one of my big questions: this idea of deconstructing and reconstructing structure, as represented in the work of Horizon Two. That can only come fully into life if it's been generated by a deeper vision, which can neither be urged nor forced upon. The nature of the Third Horizon is beyond consciousness, something that is not yet on a formal cultural agenda. The question I'm holding is about the nature of experiences we need to engage in that truly move us beyond what is and not into mere projections of aspects of the past. What becomes very clear is how much the language and ideas of Theory U and those of Three Horizons have to offer one another in terms of complementary perspectives.

**Asiya:** There's something about structure that is always there: it's not an empty space or a vacuum. So, what is it that is present? And what is the layering that we do that supports the emergence of a structure which is disempowering? I think deconstructing and restructuring is about going back to something that was always there.

**Stefan:** You're describing the structure first, making it visible, so that we can really talk about it: What purpose does the structure serve? What do you see, what do I see? Is that what you mean? It's always there. It's not a blank page obviously.

**Zahra:** Both of the things that you've said have resonated. It comes back to this notion of a structure, and this feeling of what is oppressive, what is enabling, what is safe and what is appropriate. I saw this piece yesterday, "The Meaning of Zong" at Bristol Old Vic<sup>4</sup>, about a group of enslaved people of African decent and the eventual demise of slavery, it was called. It's obviously quite an activating subject matter for people. And to be watching it in the Bristol Old Vic, which is quite a White institution and the audience was predominantly a White audience. The show is interestingly pitching this work in a place, I would say, of entertainment. There was laughter, there was irreverence. Now the appropriateness of that structure is then influenced by the tone of the structure. For me, I nearly left about 20 minutes in. I reflected whilst still in the show: I felt so uncomfortable within the assigned structure of this work, as well as within the content of the work, and with the audience attending. I was really feeling a deep discomfort about the order, the timeliness and the tidiness of this conversation.

In Bristol, there is a very deep connection to slavery because we built the boats. We pushed them off into their journeys. There has been a huge financial return in the city. Bristol Old Vic is a building that is very much a product of slavery in lots of ways. So it's a very interesting little microcosm that's folded into itself, to

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<sup>4</sup> <https://bristololdvic.org.uk/whats-on/the-meaning-of-zong>

look at this notion of appropriateness of structures as they deal with togetherness and content. For me, in that moment, I had to reflect on what was the thing that was making me feel most uncomfortable. It was not the subject matter, because I've watched and experienced a lot of things around slavery. For me it was the fact that the conversation needed to have a tone of empathy, seriousness and recognition of the subject matter in the city where that hadn't been had. Therefore, to make this leap towards entertainment around this subject matter just felt really inappropriate. It took me a while to realize that it was not the production that I was uncomfortable with -- it was the way the audience related to it. I asked myself, 'Where can I pitch myself in regards to that discomfort?' I decided I needed to honor the production and my discomfort by getting to the end of it and experiencing it. I tried to be really honest in conversation when we went back out into the intermission and at the end. I ended up staying a lot longer than I thought I would because actually the support of the people in that conversation was very interesting now.

My gut instinct told me a lot of the White audience members that I tried to engage in that conversation didn't really have much to contribute, because they were more comfortable accepting the structure that was given to them, accepting the freedom to have a bit of entertainment in that space, and to use the subject matter in this way as the privilege of buying a ticket allows them. I was attempting to stimulate conversation about the structure and tone of the piece; they wanted to go home and have a good sleep, and move past it. Whereas for me, I went home and was up until about two, just reflecting on and trying to find my place in the world again. So this returns me back to this notion of what's the point of inclusion. We are all one, but we're not all having one experience of the same subject matter. For me, if they had done a screening for people of difference, for invited people to come into a safer space to explore that subject matter, it would have given me a more direct route to my own experience. I think that that's the need for inclusion. It's thinking, yes, there is equity to be had, but that equity doesn't require the same solutions for everybody.

**Megan:** I was recently part of a group hosting a conversation around racial justice in the context of the Methodist Church in Great Britain (*see Seneque et al., 2021 for the broader context of the racial justice initiative in the Methodist Church*). We used narrative as a structure around inclusion and invited three stories that were very different. We were reflecting afterwards on that transition from listening deeply and to hearing narratives of others. The structure, the narrative structuring, which is what we intended, didn't hold for the small group conversations. The conversation immediately went into problem solving mode: how do we solve the problem of racial justice? The tonality changes everything. The moment you then want people to feel that they're not really in a position to make a comment because they are White and they haven't actually had an experience of what it means to be a Black person -- it didn't enable the kind of mutuality that you're talking about, the tonality which also provides structure. People felt unable to tap into their lived experience in some way. That's the thing

about polarity. Inclusion is not about a pendulum swing of ‘then we privilege this or that.’ We are actually trying to navigate as we learn how to be fully human together. This is the space and it's not easy. So it's really about that tonal structure and paying attention to that in an ongoing way, so not designing and hoping that it will land, but actually tuning in and being responsive. Creating that environment, structuring and restructuring constantly. Tuning into what is the impact of that structure for me – and noticing that – was quite profound.

**Anthony:** What is striking me more and more, is the extreme oddity of exclusion. You know, if we try to solve the problem of inclusion, we've failed to notice that it is odd that we are having this problem. I know that's a rather extreme view, but I'm just trying to practice lateral thinking. I'm just trying to tune into this around what is the most compassionate starting point in all this. It seems to be a hell of a lot further back than our institutional cultural structures permit.

## Shifting Organizations by Structuring for Presence

**Bill:** There's a term that's got some currency recently - Theory of Change - and I loathe it. What is your theory of change? What's your theory of history? What's your theory of art? What's your theory of research? If you had one, it would cause you endless grief. Making the distinction really clear might help around structure. A set of paintbrushes is not a theory of art, fortunately, because if it were, it would completely destroy the artist. I tried to think about Three Horizons not as a theory of change. It's a tool for inquiring into change and inquiring into power and oppression, and what's holding the current structure in place. I think there's some way of articulating this difference, and that the structures that we found we can use, like dilemmas and horizons, are enabling because there are tools for bringing some of these questions of “who am I” and “who am I in relation to others” into view without prescribing how we meet them creatively.

**Asiya:** I think the biggest challenge in our organizations, particularly our public sector organizations in health and education, but across all sectors, there's very limited opportunity to create the spaces for a different way of thinking and working. Because that's a societal structure that itself needs to be reconfigured in a way that supports this inquiry and questioning of “why are we here”? And what is it that we're contributing to? In my own experience within my own team, for example, we've been trying to figure out a way to maintain connectivity and a sense of belonging from the beginning of the pandemic. When it came that we couldn't meet face to face, the question was, “how do we continue to connect with each other in a virtual environment”? We put in place check-ins, and a grounding practice at the beginning of meetings before we talk about the work.

We've been doing this for over two years. A few weeks ago, we had an inflection point where one of our members wanted to opt-out of the check-ins and groundings and join for the business part. This led to a re-think about what it is

that we're trying to do. Our manager actually prioritizes creating safe spaces where people can express themselves and that is something that he has a strong value for, so he invited all of us to speak about what's working, what's not working, how are we feeling about it. The fact that we were able to have this conversation is unusual. It came to a point where everybody expressed their voices. It's necessary for all the voices to feel that they're safe to really say what they think, even if it lands in a way that is unsettling. And then it's how we deal with that. What it's turned into now is a shift away from an artificial kind of "Now we have our check-in." This morning's meeting was the first meeting where it seemed to flow. It was a beautiful kind of flow, and had a very natural feel, but it had to be artificially created to get us there, and there had to be rupture points. It wasn't a smooth process but through that it got us to a very different place.

**Stefan:** In my understanding, Asiya brought in the logic of large organizations in general, not just public. I see the same patterns also in for-profit corporations. It's all over the place. I was smiling when you mentioned the check-in, which I often see as being misused as getting more quickly to the outcomes that support the existing structure and the ways things are. Is it helping us move faster? Then you can go ahead. It's not about questioning the underlying structures. Reflecting on it, I made some more peace with that during the last 20 minutes or so.

Because we do have those "Guardians of the structure" in the organizations and they need to be there. We all agree that we need structure. We also need the Guardians to watch out that the structure stays in place. They're in a powerful position and they have no interest in the structure being dismantled. They watch for the outcomes. They set up the project proposals in a way that it's quite certain that the outcomes of that project will maintain the structure as it is and leave no room for emergence. But maybe the real emergence is in-between projects. It's not inside the project, but with the people who then have a conversation after the project and before the next one and then think what might the next project look like. Within the Three Horizons, that could be where the real change then happens: there are fewer of these kinds of proposals and projects and more projects that support emergence. That makes me calm down a little bit and not be so anxious that it has to happen in this project. Maybe it happens on the path to the next project. Accept the structure the way it is. Prepare the ground for some emergence, but don't be disappointed if it doesn't happen in that project and don't push it. Don't overextend those Guardians of the structure because then they're not going to invite you back into the room.

## Centralizing Love in Change Work

**Zahra:** A new inquiry has started to flower in me around this notion of "who's not in the room"? It links back to this notion of satisfaction with the structure and the usefulness of the structure as it's formed, and then how you grow and dismantle or deconstruct the structure to be useful in allowing something new to

emerge. I think that naturally comes up when you allow more people into the room. That is an interesting notion for us to consider; who do we feel is missing from this conversation, and how might we invite those people to join a furthering of this conversation. I think extending that circle, naturally, uncomfortably, respectfully, but also into an area that currently isn't, would be a really good inflection point. And just to finish and bring it back to this production. The thing I took away most definitely was that the weakness of the production was that it continued to adhere to the structures that created itself. But what was also coming out in its most beautiful moments, was the love between, the love that enabled enslaved people and other people to come together and try to end slavery. The vulnerability of the moment and in themselves enabled them to find love together, but these moments were incidental and accidental.

We love each other by accident. It is a vehicle that allows us to talk explicitly in semiprofessional and professional spaces about the humanity that is attached to love. Actually, the more we focus on dismantling things, and we don't focus on finding that common ground, which love can premise, the further away from the achievement we get. If we were putting it simply, if we really want to achieve inclusion, centralizing love and the chaos that that brings is often a much more humane way to do it than to try and organize it too much.

**Megan:** This brings me back to the spiritual dimension. There is a scholar from Georgetown University, Ilia Delio, a Franciscan in the Faculty of Science and Religion. She's written a book called "The Unbearable Wholeness of Being" (Delio, 2013) reworking the philosophy and work of Teilhard de Chardin. In short it says when we as humanity rediscover the power of love, it will be as though we discovered the power of fire for the first time. I think because we've so seemed to romanticize the notion of love, we've forgotten that it is actually the animating force of the universe. All the post-humanist philosophers, the Bayo Akomolafe's<sup>5</sup> of this world, are taking us in this direction of the structuring that love brings. And it's a complete reconfiguration of our understanding of love.

**Asiya:** Can I just reflect on that and clarify? What I was talking about - this fundamental aspect - that there is something in this space. I think love is that space. Love is what is there fundamentally, and our legacy and our history has influenced how we perceive and experience love. This separation from us as beings of love is what we're trying to get back to. I think loving each other is fundamental. It's our natural state. We need to reconfigure our understandings and perceptions of love fundamentally.

**Bill:** I've constantly come back to wondering what I'm doing working on these structural processes, with Tony. And I always think of them in this mode of a

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.bayoakomolafe.net/about> Bayo Akomolafe is a post-humanist, post-colonial scholar, philosopher, writer, activist and Executive Director of the Emergence Network



tool, leaving open the possibility that people can bring in their own practice. A totalizing methodology would be a theory that would somehow pull in all these different things and put them in a place and say, that's what they are. That would be the opposite of what we want. Whereas a set of paintbrushes allow you to paint a picture, the loving space is one that in and of itself makes it possible for people to bring in their uniqueness and bring themselves into relationship with others - this idea of mutuality. What we haven't used up until now is the word 'truth' alongside love. This has been a journey for me. I used to work on problems that could be seen in a detached way – what Tony and I call cognitive convening – where what is true is what is least personal. But since some work with conflict, and then being in deep dialogue with Zahra, I've gradually moved into this domain of existential truth, where what is true is what is most personal – what you stand for. This dialogue and all this work has convinced me that these thinking structures are adequate for inquiry into the existential truth, the personal truth, just as much as for the “out there” cognitive truth. What we're all exploring is the quality of love, which, if we practice, embodies that. There is a way of holding these things, if they are held with love, to hear the truth that is existential in the other person within the shared structures. If we really tried to embody that, as you put it 'to hold it lightly,' they are adequate to that inquiry, and they improve it.

**Asiya:** I think it varies from context to context. In organizations, where structures are enforced, and power is enforced, I think there's something about transitioning to these open spaces. In order to do that, you have to introduce ways of creating those spaces. And I think that is what I struggle with, because working with people who want order and who want to move through an agenda, you've got to give them something that keeps them with you, but then takes you a little bit further into opening up the spaces in different parts of the organization. We tend to look for expertise outside of the organization to tell us what to do. Whereas in fact, we ourselves have to take on the responsibility and accountability for shifting ourselves. That requires contriving some experiences, to allow people to have that embodied experience of what that difference is that we're looking for.

**Tony:** I tried to introduce some of our methods that Bill is familiar with to our local community here in Scotland, to deal with what became fashionably called the climate emergency. Everything you guys say tells me why it didn't work. The conundrum is how does anyone get a taste of a different way of experiencing where they're at that opens up the kind of the inner and outer door to changing the capacity to act in a more transformative way? There are ways of putting people in predicaments, facing them with challenges, just as Oliver and friends have put us in a kind of challenge here. There's a method and a structure here of dialogue. I guess, Oliver, you've got some sort of guiding principles in the way you like to enable these things to happen.

What we could do is eventually extract and formulate your guiding principles, enshrine them in law, and make them compulsory. I believe that's what you are

calling colonization. Whereas another outcome might be that we've been helped to experience differently and tune in differently and more creatively and hopefully benignly to something that wasn't there, at least in this form, before we started that which we're sensing is kind of useful. If we got the hang of that, then we're probably going to continue doing it whether Oliver was there or not, whether we've got the rulebook or not. Because we've now got initiated into the different experience that we were blind to before.

I see it as layers and layers and layers of blindness. So, there's this kind of triangle of realizing the necessity of the predicament we're in, in a whole variety of ways and where each of us is embedded in some aspect of that. Then there is the recognition that we lack the experiences that have been triggered, so that's, if you like, the awareness base. So how do we trigger those experiences with very carefully designed methods that are deceptively simple, like three lines on a piece of paper? Those enable the experience to emerge, but are facilitated in a way where they don't become the next rulebook. Rather they've informed life, and we're actually dealing with those necessities in a better way, however small. So it hopefully becomes a benign cycle.

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