

In Dialogue

# Ubuntu:

## A Philosophy for Systems Transformation

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**Megan Seneque, Aggie Kalungu-Banda, Martin Kalungu-Banda, Sharon Munyaka**

Ubuntu.lab is an initiative born of both frustration and inspiration. When the MITx MOOC (massive open online course) u-lab<sup>1</sup> launched in 2015, it garnered 70,000 registrants in the first year. However, the Presencing Institute's Martin Kalungu-Banda could not help but note the striking absence of participants from Africa. As a Senior Faculty member of the Institute and practitioner of Theory U, the framework on which u-lab was developed, he found it distressing that this methodology, now widely accessible through the MOOC, remained somehow inaccessible to the African continent. This frustration led to the inspiration for Ubuntu.Lab, a Theory U-based collective learning journey to co-create Africa's future, and the Ubuntu.Lab Institute to support Ubuntu.Lab and related activities.<sup>2</sup>

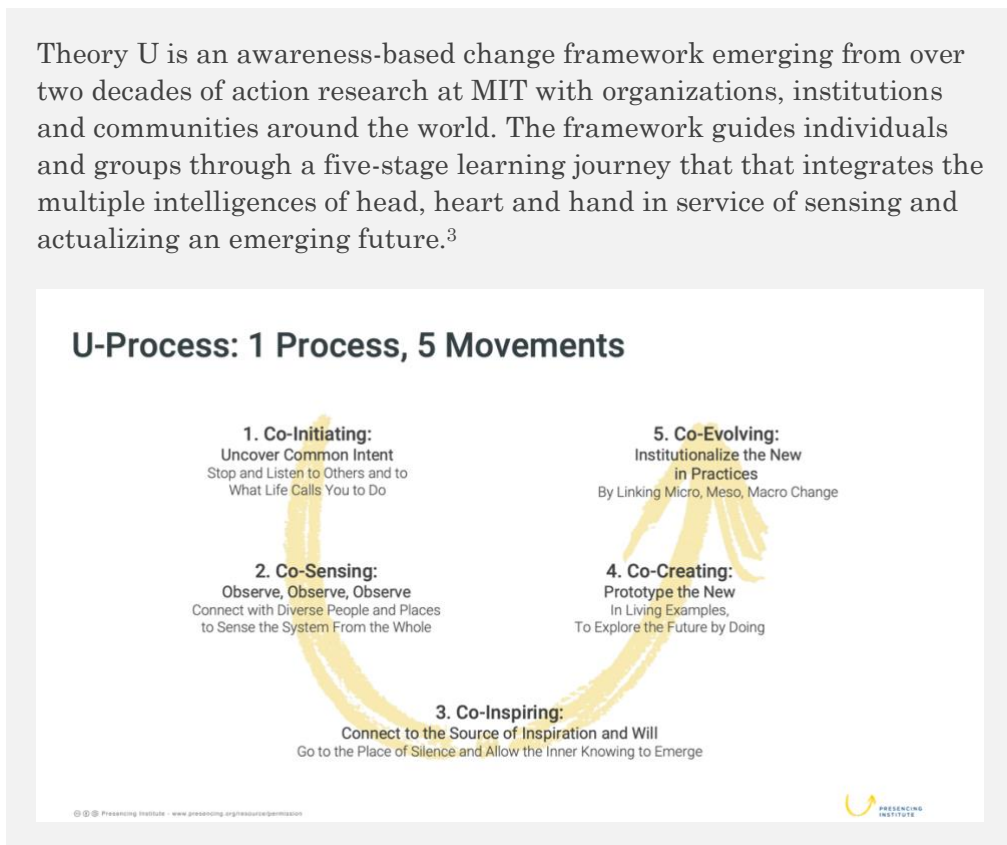
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<sup>1</sup> u-lab is a massive open online course (MOOC) hosted by MITx annually that guides participants through and online-to-offline Theory U learning journey <https://www.u-school.org/offerings/u-lab-1x-2023/pages/home>.

<sup>2</sup> For more information about ubuntu.lab, see these two articles: 1) The rising of Ubuntu.lab: <https://medium.com/presencing-institute-blog/part-one-the-rising-of-ubuntu-lab-e4abe33c3c34>  
2) An Ubuntu.lab Impact Story: <https://medium.com/presencing-institute-blog/part-two-an-ubuntu-lab-impact-story-4894c0acac31>

Over time, the holding team has begun to adapt the offering to better reflect the African context, cultures and knowledge systems, allowing for the creative expression of the U process on the African continent. This critical and creative engagement with the methodology of Theory U through the philosophy of Ubuntu highlights an aspect of awareness-based systems change that feels especially relevant in a post-pandemic, and arguably more globally conscious, world. Ubuntu.lab (and the Ubuntu.Lab Institute) are living examples of a methodology that is contextualised and deeply embedded in place, thus avoiding an unwitting repetition of past colonial patterns.

Theory U is an awareness-based change framework emerging from over two decades of action research at MIT with organizations, institutions and communities around the world. The framework guides individuals and groups through a five-stage learning journey that integrates the multiple intelligences of head, heart and hand in service of sensing and actualizing an emerging future.<sup>3</sup>



In the following dialogue, founders Martin and Aggie Kalungu-Banda, along with facilitator Sharon Munyaka, join the Journal of Awareness-Based System Change's Associate Editor, Megan Seneque, to share their experiences and learning from launching and holding Ubuntu.Lab. Together they explore how different knowledge systems, including science, can be brought into conversation in an effort to democratize knowledge and support transformative societal change. They also delve into what it might mean, and what it looks like in practice, to have a distinct identity that lies within the context of local cultural

<sup>3</sup> For more information about Theory U see <https://www.u-school.org/theory-u>

and spiritual traditions and indigenous knowledges, while also actively participating in and contributing to a global community and movement.

The dialogue was prompted by an event held in March 2022, when the Ubuntu.Lab community came together to commemorate the life and contributions of Sister Letta, a professed nun, traditional healer, researcher and matriarch. Sister Letta embodied the paradoxes and potential of working across and with multiple knowledge systems, and her work and legacy are referenced throughout the dialogue.

## Participating in the Dialogue

### **Aggie Kalungu-Banda**

Aggie is the Co-Founder of Ubuntu.Lab and Managing Partner of Beyond Business School Consulting. She is also the Co-Founder of Impact Hub Lusaka and serves as an Associate of the Presencing Institute.

### **Martin Kalungu-Banda**

Martin Kalungu-Banda is Senior Faculty member of the Presencing Institute, a Visiting Fellow at the Saïd Business School of the University of Oxford, and a Senior Adviser to the Africa-Oxford (AfOx) Programme the University's Skoll Centre for Social Entrepreneurship. He is also a Research Fellow at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT).

### **Sharon Munyaka**

Sharon is an Industrial and Organizational Psychologist registered by the Health Professions Council of South Africa (HPCSA) and President (2022-2023) of the Society of Industrial and Organisational Psychology of South Africa (SIOPSA). Currently, she is part of the Presencing Institute facilitation team delivering Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) Leadership Labs to the United Nations.

### **Dialogue Facilitator: Megan Seneque**

Megan is an Associate of the Presencing Institute and Associate Editor of JASC. She is research associate with the Susanna Wesley Foundation at Roehampton University and Australian Catholic University. She integrates theory and practice in her work of systemic intervention.

## The Story of Ubuntu.Lab

**Megan Seneque:** Thank you for coming together today. This dialogue is very much about making visible a body of work that might not otherwise come into public view and which we feel is really important.

The impetus was that beautiful ceremony with Sister Letta and that tribute to her and her work of bringing Indigenous knowledge and practices together with western scientific knowledge systems. It's something about bringing the voice of

Africa in a very full way to show what the practice of Ubuntu actually means, and what it brings.

**Sharon Munyaka:** What I'm hearing is: what is the story of Ubuntu? What was the inception of the Lab? Why we even needed the lab—then, what work has been done and what are the intentions going forward? So if I think about it in three containers: how it started, how it's going, and where to go from here. These could be guiding pillars for the conversation.

**Megan Seneque:** That sounds perfect, and I would add a personal dimension.

What has drawn each of you and continues to draw you to the work? Each of you has a particular positionality. I know Aggie and Martin have a shared an intention, but they also have personal intentions, and I'd really like to hear what continues to draw you into the story of Ubuntu, the Ubuntu.Lab, and the Ubuntu Institute.

**Sharon Munyaka:** The way Martin and Aggie are sitting (side-by-side) reminds me of a picture of our parents in our homes where they're sitting for a portrait. I think in every home there's a picture of Mom and Dad, with their arms folded, and sitting there. I think the photographer said, “Okay, don't smile. Be serious, as the people in charge of this home.”

**Martin Kalungu-Banda:** I think it was part of the culture of photography. You didn't smile

**Megan Seneque:** Okay, should we ask our parents, Sharon? [*Referring to Aggie and Martin sitting together side-by-side*]

**Sharon Munyaka:** Yes, our parents can start.

**Aggie Kalungu-Banda:** One thing that really excites me about this journey of Ubuntu.Lab is the Ubuntu philosophy itself. As African change makers, we share a common philosophy that we all grew up with. We know what it means, and it's not something that is strange to us.

### Ubuntu Philosophy

Ubuntu is a philosophy and life-force that means “I am because you are” or “My wellbeing is intricately intertwined/inseparable with your wellbeing.” The terms “you are” and “your wellbeing” does not simply refer to “present humans.” It also refers to Our Ancestors (who are affected by our not dealing with one another well), to Future Generations (those who will call us their Ancestors, who when they are not well being of what we did will curse us); to Mother Nature (whose unwellness directly means our unwellness).

(M. Kalunga-Banda, personal communication, May 29, 2023)

Even when we were starting the program based on the global u-lab, we had a shared understand that people could identify with on the Continent. And I think it has really helped us also to connect just as human beings. Most of us have never met face-to-face. For instance, I've never met Sharon. We just meet online, but it's like we have met in person before.

When people travel, one thing that excites me is noticing people say, 'Oh, I'm around,' and brothers and sisters in that town just want to go and meet. I think it's well known that

for you to work together with people and bring about development, you need to get to know each other well enough, and I think this is an area where our Ubuntu.Lab community is doing quite well. I am looking forward to a day when we'll be able to meet face-to-face and share our dreams, again, and our reason why we came together: co-creating Africa's future.

I think I can end for now, and maybe Martin can pick up on the origins of Ubuntu.Lab.

**Martin Kalungu-Banda:** Each time we tell this story we learn from our own experience, and isn't that part of what storytelling is all about? Yes, the listeners learn. But once the storyteller finds good listeners, the storyteller learns from the story they lived.

So, in a way, we are telling the story looking backward. We do not often tell the story forward. When we tell the story forward, that's the space of vision. When you can say, 'in five or 10 years' time I want to be doing this'. That's telling the story forward.

But when you tell the story backward, you have arrived. Somehow you tell the story with the hindsight of having walked the journey.

There are times when I tell the story this way: 'this is what we thought, this is what we planned'. But there are also times when I look back and begin to notice how things were changing. Not with logic, but in the moment—through a series of drifts. You drift into one part, piece, rhythm of what will eventually, when you look back, sound very logical. But which was not logical; it was a series of drifts. Maybe that is where the inner wisdom lies—noticing the logic in the experience of these drifts.

Why do I say this? Personally I didn't initially think of Ubuntu as a philosophy to work with. Originally, it was U-School Africa that I passionately wanted to help bring into being. We were on a U-journey through the global classroom.<sup>4</sup> That

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<sup>4</sup> The Presencing Global Classroom was a series of coordinated events which took place online from 2006-2012 for the purpose of teaching Theory U in a globally distributed manner. This served as a prototype for what developed into u.lab, starting in 2015.

was the focus. Along the u-lab journey, it dawned on me: we don't have Africans following this phenomenal global movement. Could we create a situation where we on the African continent can be part of this global movement? For years, when in meetings with colleagues at the Presencing Institute, I shared and repeated my intention to create U-School Africa. I wasn't talking about Ubuntu Lab Institute.

And I wanted us, the Africans, to use the methods and processes of Theory U to shift our own circumstances. Aggie, you might recall this differently. For me, the Ubuntu philosophy became more prominent, and I cannot remember exactly when we stumbled on it. I suspect it was during our trip across Africa. That's when, for us, the birthing to us of Ubuntu struck us: 'Oh, my God, we have a resource here.' And then we started re-learning and learning the philosophy of Ubuntu. I remember buying any book I could lay my hands on. I recall buying J.S. Mbiti's book on Ubuntu philosophy.

It was much later on, in a meeting with Ubuntu.Lab colleagues I proudly announced there was this Malawian philosopher who wrote this book (which I had read many years ago when I was studying anthropology in my twenties). To my embarrassment, one of our community members, Lillian Owiti, said, "With all due respect, Martin, J.S. Mbiti is not Malawian and he is not Zambian, either. He is Kenyan." [laughs]

Many years ago I studied anthropology, and J.S. Mbiti's book *African Religions and Philosophy* was like a Bible for anybody who wanted to understand Africans.

That's when I went there and dug up every book I could find. I read everything. I watched any videos I could find from Bishop Tutu who revisited the concept and practice of Ubuntu in modern times.

## Manifest Logic and Latent Logic

**Martin Kalungu-Banda:** So what I'm trying to say is that there is an evolution taking place. When we look from this end it looks very logical, but we were stumbling upon new ways of thinking, new ways of doing things along the way. But I'm not taking away from the possibility or belief that there is an inner logic. When you catch a call, experience a calling, there is a deeper inner logic guiding you. There is an invisible hand guiding you, if you are open to it. I think that's what early colleagues, Aggie and I were open to.

Now, if I'm telling the story, I would say this with a little bit of hindsight: we want to co-create Africa's future, a future where poverty is a thing of the past, environmental degradation is a thing of the past, the enslavement of girls on the continent is a thing of the past, and education being accessed by only a few lucky people with financial resources is a thing of the past. That is what we mean when we say "co-creating Africa's future".

But that was not part of the manifest logic. I suspect it was part of the latent logic.

So how do we achieve this—co-creating Africa’s future? The primary and basic tool or technique—call it methodology—is what Aggie refers to: we are shifting the quality of our relationships. Literally that is the cradle from which we are constructing Africa's future, co-creating Africa's future.

Why do I so emphasize this? You, Megan, and the three of us—Sharon, Aggie and myself—have all lived in Cape Town. We know, for instance, how fellow Africans in South Africa would refer to everything north of the Limpopo as *going to Africa*.

Now we feel we are all Africans. Now we are feeling like one. In the first cohort of Ubuntu.Lab, we had colleagues in Namibia, we had colleagues in East Africa, colleagues in West Africa. “It is the first time that I'm sitting in one learning environment with people across many boundaries,” many participants acknowledged. For us, that was, believe it or not, revolutionary. The fact that someone in Ghana could sit in the same classroom as someone in Nairobi and another person in Lusaka. Even within the same country, this experience of profound connection was transformative: in Zambia I was in the same virtual classroom with Mr. Phiri of Mpika—a ‘remote’ place in Zambia. It was magical. Hence the celebration.

When Sharon went to Kampala it was a big moment of celebration. Seeing photos of Sharon and Consilous and others meeting in Uganda’s capital city, it is like she has arrived home. When I was in Johannesburg, Sharon was there. We said, ‘We’ve got to meet. You can't just end up doing your meetings from one hotel to the next.’ And when we meet, I’m meeting my sisters and brothers. It's heart felt, not just intellectual awareness.

It is through these relationships that we will co-create Africa's future. Creating the future we want begins with changing the quality of our relationships. We no longer see Namibia. We no longer see Lesotho. We no longer see Cairo as in Egypt. We just see Mongy [an Egyptian member of Ubuntu.Lab], a fellow African. And that's an amazing feeling and experience. Everything else is a footnote. Let me stop there.

## Embodying Ubuntu (or Grounding in the African Way)

**Aggie Kalungu-Banda:** I want to emphasize one point. The first cohort of Ubuntu.Lab, we mostly saw as the facilitators’ training.<sup>5</sup> I think the focus was so much on Theory U, as you said, because it was based on the u-lab. Even if Ubuntu was there, we were just using it as a word. But then we quickly realized that we really need to bring it in, and we had a session where we started looking

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<sup>5</sup> As we a way of providing quality education and reducing the cost of online learning (due to having to pay for data), Ubuntu.Lab decided to train local facilitators with the skills to hold transformative learning spaces. Nineteen facilitators participated in the training and then hosted 24 in-person learning hubs across eight countries.

at the whole five stages of Theory U, and said, ‘in an African way of life, what does it mean to co-initiate? What does it mean to co-sense?’

We looked at all the stages of the U and I think at that point—it was during coffee time, I think, we were in our conservatory—and we were also trying to think how best to start this session. For some reason, Sister Letta came into my mind. I called her immediately and I said to her, ‘Can you find a way for us to open the sessions in an African way?’ She said, ‘Leave it with me. I’ll get back to you.’ I think after two or three days she phoned me back, and she said, ‘I’m ready.’

We started the first session with the second cohort in an African way. As Martin mentioned, we dove deeper into what that that really meant. We brought it to listening: how do we listen in a new African way? We were really trying to bring it closer to home. That is, if this theory is really good and it's the framework that is guiding us, how can we ground it into our own ways of life on the continent as well?

**Sharon Munyaka:** Thank you. I think, just listening to the two of you, for me what comes up is the issue of embodiment. It is connecting with what Ubuntu means for different people. How does it show up across the continent.

I know that we are living Ubuntu. We are living it in how we interact with one another. We are living it in how we make decisions, how we show up for one another. Part of it is because Ubuntu already exists. The wisdom is already there—and we are just being activated again. We are giving Ubuntu a language and reference for anyone to understand what it is, what it feels like and what it looks like. To help me grasp it, I divided the word UBUNTU.

And for me the **U is about being united** across the African continent through our common love for Africa. When I look at the **B, it's about building an Africa** that we want. If we united in terms of poverty alleviation, if we're talking about gender-based violence and eradicating that, we are all building towards that; we are all building towards that common goal.

**The U for me is being unapologetic** about naming the pain points. You know, as Africans, we're holding up the mirror and seeing no one's coming. We are the plan for our challenges on the continent, and I think this is why we keep coming back, why I keep coming back, why I am responsive to the call for Ubuntu Lab initiatives. Aggie doesn't need to ask twice. Just once. It's a quick text, and that resonates across the whole Ubuntu Lab system in a way where there's nothing to think about. We're like, ‘Yes, we're ready. Let's go!’ We are the foot soldiers, we are doing this work. So, we are unapologetic about our love for the African Continent as we unpack what it means and what we can all do.

I think it's also around needing to work towards a common goal. We try and find that in terms of the prototypes that people embark on. People put their hands up and say, ‘hey, this is what I’m working on. Can you connect me to this person?’ On the Ubuntu Lab Alumni WhatsApp group chat, people share so generously



about different activities going on the African Continent. Someone is looking for a resource, they put it on the group, and that connection happens.

**The T in the Ubuntu is about being tied together** in our love for Africa. The metaphor that comes up is when we pull together branches, and we are tied like firewood into one strong bundle of wood. It's so strong that nothing can break it down. And if I think about the different people across the continent who've put their hands up from inception to now: 'I'm here, I can do this. I am here, I can do that.'

No one feels that a contribution is too small or that they are too important for this environment.' It's just something about our interaction, about how relationships are nurtured, where the space has been created for people to say, 'I have something to contribute from where I'm sitting. I think I have a voice. I think I have something that will help to create this Africa that we want.'

**And the U has been around unlearning.** And the unlearning has been tough, because we come in with all these files about how things should be or could be.

Then there's the **new learning that's coming up**; the reactivation of the knowledge from the land. I mean an example that I always share with people is about probiotics. And I remember this growing up. If your tummy is sore, eat the soil, because there your system is going to get sorted out. Anyone who grew up in a farming area would know this wisdom.

I know in our African culture, when you are very ill, you are encouraged to go home to the land of your birth. The belief is that the system remembers, the land of your birth remembers, your ancestors remember. The healing comes through the air you're breathing, through the soil. It is in being a part of that space that a re-connection is made and this is bigger than us. So here is an opportunity to understand the wisdom of the African continent and how we reactivate what we have forgotten.

COVID also opened the conversation around indigenous knowledge. We're saying, 'we don't know this phenomenon (COVID) that's come up.' The pandemic propelled us to learn, unlearn and relearn. As Ubuntu Lab, we held webinars during the height of the COVID pandemic and people shared their thoughts from across the continent. We shared on different approaches that people were using to manage symptoms, such as herbs that people were taking. It was a space to engage on the knowledge held across the continent.

The space that's been created within Ubuntu Lab has given us the freedom to dream, the freedom to say, 'oh, my goodness, what else is possible?'

Another paradox is our late Sister Letta who was a Catholic nun, a matriarch, a healer, a clinical psychologist, a teacher and a community leader. When I first met her, my brain had no file for a Catholic nun who is also a traditional healer. I was thankful for the time to know her and understand how she navigated different spaces and remained the vessel through which she interacted with these different domains.

Let me stop there for now, and allow Aggie and Martin to come in.

**Aggie Kalungu-Banda:** I like what you have just said Sharon, about how people are always ready to jump in and do something. And when you see that everybody is doing this all entirely [voluntarily]—I mean we have never really been funded.

From the beginning, when we were supposed to have been funded, and then the funder pulled out, people just said, 'let's do this. Let's have the face-to-face meeting because this is how Africa gets left out.' So let's also show the world that—yes, you promise and then you pull out, but we are going to go ahead.

I think that has been the spirit of what has been making us move on in this journey of ours. And it's so heart-warming that we are ready to give our time without really waiting to be paid anything.

People have been there, as Sharon has, since 2018. They are just there, and more and more are coming on board. We know that we're living in a world that doesn't just allow you to lead a life where you are just doing the work you want to do; you need to earn money. Hopefully one day we will jointly come up with the resources that we need to be sure that we fulfill everything that we want to do on our continent.

## Learning and Unlearning For and From Africa

**Martin Kalungu-Banda:** I must say it's absolute genius. I've never heard UBUNTU as an acronym said in the manner that Sharon said—it's fascinating. I'm hearing it for the first time, and it makes a lot of sense.

I could point my finger to any one of the letters and I would connect. For example, if I say *unapologetic*. You know our history as being that of people apologizing—all the time—for who we are, where we are coming from, who we want to be all the time. And instead, UBUNTU declares an unapologetic approach towards life.

I'm not even saying that we have gone past being apologetic because those are deep and engrained issues which connect to the last U in Ubuntu. To truly be unapologetic we have to unlearn what we have been made to believe over hundreds of years. Being apologetic about who we are is in our DNA. Because of the length of time—over four hundred years—of slavery and colonialism, being apologetic has managed to seep into our DNA. Someone says, if you practice something over generations—say for a 1,000 years—people are born thinking, seeing, feeling that way. So, to be second-class citizens in the world seems to be right.

The first thing that ever dawned on me when I went to study in England was, 'Oh, my God! I found a white person begging, and just for the sake of it I had to give them something.' Because in my brain they cannot beg. Begging belongs to us, black Africans. That's the reality you see. They can't be beggars. It's almost

like it's not right that they should be begging. On the other hand, it's "normal" for us to beg, to be poor. That's why I like the idea of unlearning—unlearning our story as slaves.

We are not denying that we were enslaved and we continue to be enslaved in many ways, but we are not going to live with that, as if that's how nature was ordained to be. We need to unlearn that. We need to unlearn what colonialism wanted to do and continues to do. We need to unlearn what rigged economic systems tell us are the correct ways of organizing our lives. Unfair economic systems—we need to unlearn those. We need to relearn the freedom to question. And the freedom to create alternatives.

For example, take the World Bank and the UN. Do they serve our interest to the core? Can we sit down and chat about these things and see whether they are serving the future we want to create? What I am finding is different from the time when I was younger in university and more militant is that now I can engage in these conversations without being militant. Yes, I will be on a very strong path. But I can sit down and say, *let's talk about this and what else is possible*. If you refuse to talk, I need to find within myself what else will make you engage with me.

Because of the opportunity to learn to unpack anger for some time, you begin to notice that issues of justice and freedom are not based on race. They are based on hunger and education. Hunger for the well-being of all, and therefore you begin to notice that it is possible to be an African in spite of your skin colour. And that's why, when you sit with Hannah in Port Elizabeth and Anna in Namibia [White members of Ubuntu.Lab], they are as African as could be. They are as hungry for the redemption of the continent as anybody can be. It changes the game. Again, it flips back to the quality of relationships. Then you understand that it's possible to say we are creating an organization that is for Africans who want to co-create Africa's future.

So it's unlearning a lot of things. We have just begun scratching the surface and feel we are on the right path. However, we are at less than 1% towards the 100% we want to be.

Megan, you have been part of this journey in many respects. What are you thinking?

**Megan Seneque:** It was so interesting for me working and teaching in Rome last week. I was introduced to a group of women. There were 36 women from across the globe: Latin America, Africa, Eastern Europe, the UK, Indonesia, Australia. Someone said: "Megan is originally South African." She finished her introduction and I said, "I am fully African. There's nothing 'originally South African' about me. I wouldn't actually even know what that term means. And it completely broke the ice. I sat at breakfast that day with a Kenyan woman. She's living in Rome now. We were sisters. We'd met each other the night before and we made eye contact, and we knew that we were deeply connected. That's how it was, and she was my beacon in some way through the two days I was with them.

And Martin knows for me that integral ecology—the work of understanding that we are deeply interconnected with one another and with everything in the natural world—is an informing framework for my research and practice. As Bayo Akomolafe would say, “we are being acted upon all the time, but we think we're in charge.” So when you talk about driftology, Martin, and you talk about telling a story in hindsight, the whole of last week working on integral ecology with an Order of Nuns in Rome, this was a constantly unfolding process.

### **Integral Ecology:**

The context for using the term was set out in the 2015 encyclical letter from the Pope: *Laudato Si': On Care for our Common Home*. As with the Ubuntu philosophy, it is based in a recognition that we are deeply interconnected and deeply interdependent—with one another and with Mother Nature. The paradigmatic framework of *Laudato Si'* recognises that the ruptures and crises that we face—ecological, spiritual, social, cultural, economic, political—are interdependent, and call for an integration of different forms of knowledge and wisdom. An integral approach means that all the social sciences, natural sciences, humanities, indigenous wisdom and knowledge systems need to be brought into dialogue, as together we convene or prepare the future. A future that responds to the "Cry of the Earth" and the "Cry of the Poor" (*Laudato Si'*)

—M. Seneque, personal communication, May 29, 2023

The convener of the concepts of ‘postactivism’, ‘transraciality’ and ‘ontofugitivity’, Dr. Bayo Akomolafe is a widely celebrated international speaker, teacher, public intellectual, essayist and author of two books, *These Wilds Beyond our Fences: Letters to My Daughter on Humanity’s Search for Home* (North Atlantic Books) and *We Will Tell our Own Story: The Lions of Africa Speak*.<sup>6</sup>

We took one step and then another one followed, and then we met another person. and then we were introduced to another person. And so everything that you're saying speaks to me about the call of this time and the unique contribution, and why I say for me it's the concept, the practice, and the spirit of Ubuntu.

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<sup>6</sup> <https://www.bayoakomolafe.net/about>

In this project, we work with a co-design team of five women, one of whom is a French woman, who has a retreat centre in St Lucia, north of Durban in South Africa. And how did she introduce herself? With Ubuntu, and how Ubuntu has drawn her into this work. So there is for me profound learning from Africa for Africa, for the rest of the world, and we've caught glimpses of it. I mean, that's what we have from the deep insights from your work in the Ubuntu lab and in the Institute, and from other work happening globally around Ubuntu, for example with John Volmink<sup>7</sup> people who are really working to theorise Ubuntu, not as a concept that is out of context, but as a deep practice. So for me, my absolute desire is for this learning—what you're learning and the insights that are emerging in your own context and from your journey—that we continue to surface those, to hold those, to connect them, so that web that you are making visible can become visible for the rest of the world.

There are seeds of the future that you talk about, that are constantly present. And in our history also. As Bayo Akomolafe says, the past is yet to come. These are the seeds of the past. That's the unlearning and unapologetic nature of things that you talk about. Those seeds for Ubuntu to become a genuine philosophy for mutual coexistence in every sense of what that requires.

*I'm of the Yoruba people of West Nigeria and some parts of West Africa. We don't think of time as an arrow of God flowing from a fixed past through the elusive present, and to an always fugitive future. That notion of time being a straight line is missing from our cosmology. Time is slushy. It's not even cyclical. It's slushy— it falls in on itself. It's rhizomatic. And in this sense, the past is yet to come (to quote Karen Barad); the past is not yet done; the future has already happened. This notion of time is melty and trickly. Sugary and sticky. It is what allows us to face ancestry as a serious matter in civilizational endings. It's the invitation for us to sit with the past—with the crack of time—and do other kinds of work there.*

—Bayo Akomolafe, re-posted from Facebook (08.14.22)

That's what I would most wish to bring to life, and I see that you're living it. Everything that you describe is an embodiment, as you say, Sharon. There's no other word for it.

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<sup>7</sup> Professor John Volmink is a leading figure and academic in Higher Education in South Africa. He has been instrumental in the Ubuntu Global Network.  
<https://www.ubuntuglobalnetwork.com/our-mission-2/>

**Aggie Kalungu-Banda:** I like what you said, Megan, that it is a gift. I think in one of the sessions a long time ago we had said that this would be a gift to the world—that this is the way the world needs to live. And looking at what Sharon has shared with us about what UBUNTU stands for. I also feel that people who have not experienced Ubuntu, and have not lived it, also have some unlearning to do.

They need to unlearn how Africa is perceived. Maybe they can unlearn and feel—what is it that is coming from this as a philosophy of the way people need to live? They're interconnected, as you said, with nature, with ourselves, and so what is it that they can learn? They have learned in a different way, through classrooms, but they can unlearn.

Something that I see as a big gift is that we're already interacting with the Presencing Institute with our friends globally; we are already starting to share. They can also pass it on in their communities and, of course, we do know that other communities as well have similar wisdom as Ubuntu. We can collaborate and see how we can make the world a better place.

**Sharon Munyaka:** I think there's also an opportunity through the work of Ubuntu. If I think about how the beating of drums opens up portals of connection, how chanting brings people together. What is possible in terms of accessing other parts of our intelligence, not just, you know, at a head level but the different senses? When we met in Lusaka, Zambia in 2018, we were challenged to think beyond the five senses. There are many, many more senses that we have as humans, how even just in terms of sound, the aesthetics, what it all does. Or if we think about dreams, right? So, the learning is also around opening up the wisdom that's already there, because how do we tap into that? It's almost creating for me the safety, which keeps coming up as a theme, so the safety to think beyond “this is acceptable”, or “this is right.” Ubuntu and the work of Ubuntu.Lab is revolutionary in that way that we can sit on a zoom call from across the continent, find points of resonance, but also be open enough to say, “oh, but we do this differently, or we understand this phenomenon in this way”.

I think the opportunity is around developing new language, developing new practices, expanding the knowledge that we have, and making it African, so that more and more people can relate to it and plug in because the embedding is happening over time. People are more familiar with the methodology of Theory U, more open to experiment, so the seeds have been sown, and the future is here—even if unevenly distributed. But it's here, and we need to just plug at it and keep it going. So, yeah, lots of scope for Ubuntu on the Continent. The change is here.

**Megan Seneque:** You know, Sharon, as you talk. I'm thinking of the first research summer school<sup>8</sup> that the Presencing Institute hosted. One participant was a Māori woman from New Zealand and we built a relationship and connection very quickly early on. At some point she came to me, and she said, “You know, Megan, there's no acknowledgement in this process that actually the wisdom that is contained in the U-journey is wisdom that we embody and embed all the time. It is our Indigenous wisdom.” There's something there that you've said: Africa is expanding the knowledge and the practices too so that the methodology itself doesn't, once again, become a source of colonization unwittingly, and people think they've got to do it correctly. There's no doing it correctly, you know. If you look at the first *In Dialogue* in the very first issue of the journal (Journal of Awareness-Based Systems Change), where Senior Faculty of the Presencing Institute were in conversation together about the origins of the U practices, Otto Scharmer says that it is not a case of bringing Theory U into the world: “You don't need to bring the U anywhere. It's already there. It's just not attended to. And all we do is provide methods and tools to it and follow the path which moves you one way or another, into a U-type of process... It's about paying attention to what's already there, at least in a dormant capacity” (Arts et al., 2021, p. 130).

And the bringing it to life on the African continent is different from the bringing it to life in other contexts.

And so I'm working at the moment with Australian Catholic University, and we are developing a core curriculum for all students around integral ecology and what it means. It's experiential, so we're looking at water. We're looking at food, fire and agriculture. We're looking at technology and time. We're looking at different dimensions through different knowledge systems. But one of the young historians I'm working with said, “You know, Megan, when I think about all the Aboriginal wisdom and Indigenous knowledge that we have in on the continent of Australia. What do we teach our first-year students? We teach them Ubuntu. It's wrong. Not that we can't learn from Africa, but we have incredible indigenous wisdom”. So we take something from Africa and then we colonize the concept, and we teach it. I mean to your point, Aggie, the learning and unlearning needed when you've just colonized the concept that is not even yours to own. You don't have an experience of it and you teach it as a concept and those are the patterns for me as an educator. And in the context of transforming higher education, that's what I'm paying attention to.

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<sup>8</sup> In 2019, the Presencing Institute hosted the inaugural Social Field Research summer school bringing together academics, research-practitioners, artists and students working to advance the field of social field research and awareness-based systems change. <https://www.u-school.org/news/recap-of-the-social-field-research-summer-school>

## Embedded Locally, Witnessed Globally

**Megan Seneque:** What are the things that you are still holding in relation to this dialogue that you would like to express?

**Martin Kalungu-Banda:** The bit that sits with me as a question mark is how we belong to the global community of the u-school for transformation—where we received the inspiration to do and to be what we are seeking to do—and at the same time listen to what the African soil is asking us to contribute towards.

**The u-school for Transformation** is the Presencing Institute's platform for making the tools and methods for societal transformation developed by the institute globally accessible, and for connecting individual changemakers, organisations and eco-system activation movements in regions around using Theory U methodologies to address societal challenges.<sup>9</sup>

This is not an easy path to walk, because sometimes it feels like we are separating ourselves from the whole. Far from it. That's not what we are seeking to do, but we also need to be cognizant of the fact that we have to be distinct enough to find ourselves. How we play these two—belonging to the larger whole while being distinct enough to find ourselves—is easier said than done. Hopefully as we engage in dialogue with the rest of our community in the Presencing Institute, this is appreciated, or we learn ways of showing up as being both—being members and part of the global movement, but also being a movement on the African continent, because there are peculiarities to our situation. As I said earlier on, the peculiarities emanate from history. There are characteristics that are unique to us. We are not just like all the other continents where things were allowed to evolve as humans increased in numbers and travelled across seas—but no, there are characteristics that are unique to us. The scars and the still open wounds of colonialism, of slavery; those cannot be just subsumed into the global. If we are to heal the traumas of these things that happened, we may have to look into ourselves and probably caucus amongst ourselves to find healing.

Yes, all our brothers and sisters across the globe—who understand the fractures that came through these unfortunate human events—would be like in a village when sometimes you are not the unwell person, but you feel you have a responsibility to support the unwell person or persons. What did we see in my village?

The well persons were either drum beaters or singers/dancers, so that the unwell person who is in the centre of the circle knows they have all come to support

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<sup>9</sup> <https://www.u-school.org/u-school>



their journey to wellbeing. So, I recognize my responsibility and my duty, and I stand there to see, to dance, to beat the drum, to ululate, so that the unwell person might open themselves up to the spirits who will do the healing in the person. That's why the person sat in the middle. That's why the person danced from the middle, but the people who are well created a circle of faith. The circle is also a ring of hope and positive energy to facilitate healing. I expect the global community to do that for U.School Africa or Ubuntu.Lab Institute.

So that's one of the things that I, as a person, am grappling with.

The other one is just what Aggie began to talk about with regard to resources. To activate a movement like this requires a lot of resources, but the process of searching for resources can re-entrench dependency and colonialism and all these things we are talking about, because resources, in the first place, sit in certain places. But maybe we need to be creative enough and find other forms of resources amongst ourselves, and we have tried before. We have tried to host cohorts where people contribute whatever they feel like. We wanted to set up a new economy: an economy where people can contribute in different ways because it takes so much to run a cohort. People understood our call when we said, "If you have financial resources, kindly put in, but don't fail to turn up for the program because you didn't have the money. Even if you don't have a penny, you have something else you can give to the community." So, we encourage people to show up and pay in their community with their skills, with their knowledge, with their time. Payment does not have to go into the coffers called Ubuntu Lab, it can go into the community. You might be someone who knows plumbing, and can offer your skills at the nearby school. Maybe you are a good listener. Go and counsel the children at the nearby community center.

We are still playing with these concepts. How can we create an economy that is not bound by the modern-day interpretation of money? These are all in the exploratory phase and it requires courage and fortitude to further explore them.

## Democratizing Knowledge and the Secrecy of Wisdom

**Martin Kalungu-Banda:** My final comment is probably—what do we define as education?

What do we define as wellbeing? What do we define as science? Those are very deep questions for me, for which I do not have answers. All I know is that we need to not just reinvent education, but also reinvent our thinking about what constitutes education; reinvent wellbeing and the thinking about wellbeing.

But being here in Zambia with Aggie, who has not been well for some time now, shows me—as Sharon said—that walking the home soil is a journey towards healing. The local people we are meeting here know something about this and that as part of what it takes to regain well-being. The yearning I have is how do we bring science to all that wisdom and knowledge people have, and science in the sense of, can we know the underlying interplay between things. So, if I eat

soil from an anthill to deal with my bloated tummy, what is actually happening? What is contained in that type of soil, why does my tummy respond like that?

That's what I mean by science. And can anybody else who comes to know that replicate it? Admittedly some of our juicy pieces of wisdom are shrouded in secrecy. Knowledge and wisdom were shrouded under the banner of secrecy, and sometimes they deliberately created the smoke—so that the unsuspecting persons concentrated on the smoke, while the real thing—the fire—remained only known to certain individuals because it was a form of trade.

How do we come to know what is behind the claim to knowledge or skill? Revealing what is “behind” and making available to everyone is what, for me, democratizing knowledge and wisdom looks like. We are not saying everything was brilliant about our history, our traditions, and our culture. We also had ways that needed improving.

That's why the scientific method surfaces the underlying reasons and the conditions under which certain things happen, so that we can play the game at any time those conditions are in place. Science in this way is needed on the African continent to make more explicit our knowledge and traditions and wisdom.

**Sharon Munyaka:** A big thanks for the opportunity to be in dialogue. I think there's lots that needs to be unpacked. My mind was just kind of thinking about the secrecy of wisdom: what is that about? If knowledge is currency and we bring in the aspect of witchcraft and our own belief systems as well, how do we rethink how information is shared? If we're saying there's democratization of knowledge and we're opening spaces to say, but this helps, don't hide this information, what becomes possible. How do we reorganize ourselves to enable that sharing of knowledge? If we think about oral tradition, how do we document? Because you would know little children who are staying in the village would know, 'oh this tree does this.' A child who lives in the city will not know that, an adult living in the city would not know that. But we are getting clues from what is around us, so really lots of scope for more information to surface around how we can really bring this knowledge to the rest of the world. So thank you, Megan.

**Aggie Kalungu-Banda:** Yeah. Thank you. Megan, for making the time to start the dialogue. I think for me, I'm going away with the question of 'How do we deal with the issue of Christianity and our and cultures and traditions?' I'm saying this because even when we began having the welcome, the way when we asked Sister Letta to do that, you won't believe how many messages I got from people saying they would leave if this is what we are going to be doing in the sessions. The majority of us are Christians as well. So how do we embrace our own traditions and culture? Because I think once we get that right, we can be much stronger. Right now I think others hold a little bit back and feel, maybe, there is something we are trying to do here, which is very unchristian. So, I would love to pursue the question of Christianity and Ubuntu.

**Megan Seneque:** That really resonates with me as well, Aggie. It's holding the polarities there and understanding that we have a lot to learn from those polarities—what you were saying earlier, Sharon. I think you use the word contradictions. Like Sister Letta. Trying to remember your language, Sharon, but the matriarch, the religious sister, a scholar herself, the traditional healer. These are not irreconcilable things. In fact, these things are what need to be brought together in an integral ecology, Aggie.

And it's not to try and merge them with one another. So to Martin's point about, how do we make something that is distinct and our own, and unique that can also speak to a global community without diminishing itself, without being apologetic, you know, without feeling in some way not quite up to that.

So I think we've picked some very profound questions that if we were to address them—together—we would come to profound understandings.ext

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