

## Leading From The Future

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To say that these are challenging, interesting, unprecedented times is more than a cliché. We are living through unparalleled degrees of uncertainty. Although, in the words of Thomas Friedman, writer for the *New York Times*, it is not so much that the coronavirus is a black swan (an unusual event compelling attention) or even a white elephant (something we may find hard to address directly) but more one of a herd of stampeding black elephants that we have ignored for too long: the climate emergency, increasing inequality of wealth around the globe, ocean acidification, loss of biodiversity, rogue states, international terrorism, the plight of refugees, civil wars, the rise of nationalism and more.

In light of all these phenomena, which render us incapable of planning with any degree of certainty, we are being required to live and lead from a place of sensing, intuiting and responding<sup>1</sup>, rather than predicting, planning and controlling. It is as if we are in a deep mist. Occasionally we can see a dim light beckoning us forward. Do we see clearly enough to know what our next step is? If we can take just the one step the next will then become clear.

*Start close in,  
don't take the second step  
or the third,  
start with the first  
thing  
close in,  
the step  
you don't want to take.*

Excerpt from 'Start Close In' by David Whyte

There are many ways to language what we are being called to do: move from the masculine planning paradigm to the more emergent feminine; transition from the solar, hero-centred age to the lunar, collective age; move from the Piscean to the Aquarian age<sup>2</sup>; journey through Otto Scharmer's Theory U<sup>3</sup>, shift from planning to emergence, and many more. What they have in common is the need to sensitise ourselves, both individually and collectively, and to create the spaciousness for real innovation, real freshness and real creativity to emerge. Contemporary mystic, Thomas Huebl<sup>4</sup>, talks about creating the conditions where we can 'listen to the whispers of the future'. The future is not so much a point towards which we walk but more like a voice that is quietly and constantly calling us if we can but create the inner stillness and spaciousness with which to listen, and then summon up the courage to act on what we hear.

So, what are the **conditions and practices** that can support the creation of such a sensitivity?

I want to invite you to remember the best idea that you ever had. What was happening within and around you as that idea landed in you? Perhaps it was a time when a new project, a new insight, a new home called to you. Perhaps it was when you decided to marry and had

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<sup>1</sup> See 'Reinventing Organisations' by Frederic Laloux

<sup>2</sup> See the work of Laurence Hillman at [www.laurencehillman.com](http://www.laurencehillman.com)

<sup>3</sup> See the work of Otto Scharmer at [www.ottoscharmer.com/theoryu](http://www.ottoscharmer.com/theoryu)

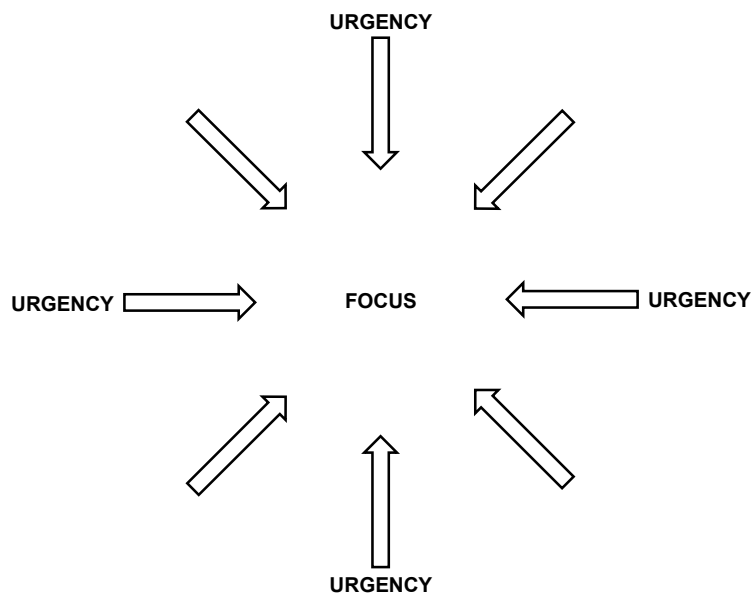
<sup>4</sup> See the work of Thomas Huebl at [www.thomashuebl.com](http://www.thomashuebl.com)

a deep sense of inner knowing that this is your partner. When I ask this question in workshops, the answers usually involve some kind of inner spaciousness. Maybe you are taking a shower, maybe you are walking in the woods, maybe you are meditating, gardening, doodling, journaling - something outside the usual busyness appears to help create the conditions, the inner spaciousness, in which the new can arrive.

This inner spaciousness has two dimensions to it. One is simply doing something or being somewhere unfamiliar which creates new contours in our inner landscape in which new **insights** can nestle. The other is a spaciousness which allows **digestion** of our previous experience. If we are full, busy, running from one thing to another, there is no space to digest and thus to create the emptiness into which the new can arrive. It is as if we are literally so full we cannot receive any more! If our glass is full of water we cannot simultaneously fill it with champagne. We need to empty something out first.

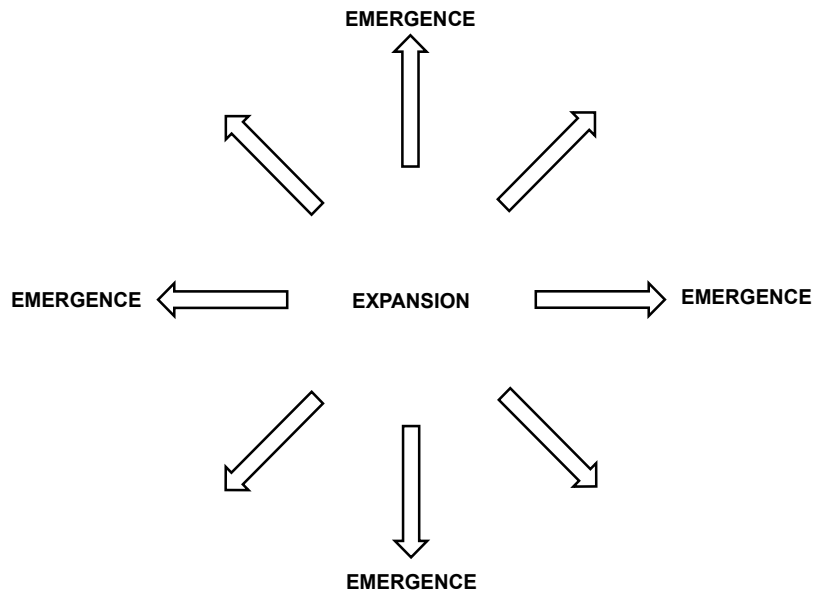
If we need spaciousness to both digest our daily experience and to create the emptiness into which the new can arise, does this always have to mean slowing down, or can time pressure and a sense of urgency also fuel processes of innovation? What is the balance between allowing things to emerge and engaging our will to act? Here are two diagrams to support the next step in our inquiry:

Diagram 1 shows urgency in our outer context leading to a degree of inner focus. Time pressure, for example where we have to arrive at a new solution to an engineering problem within 12 hours, might well create a sense of focus that supports our creativity.



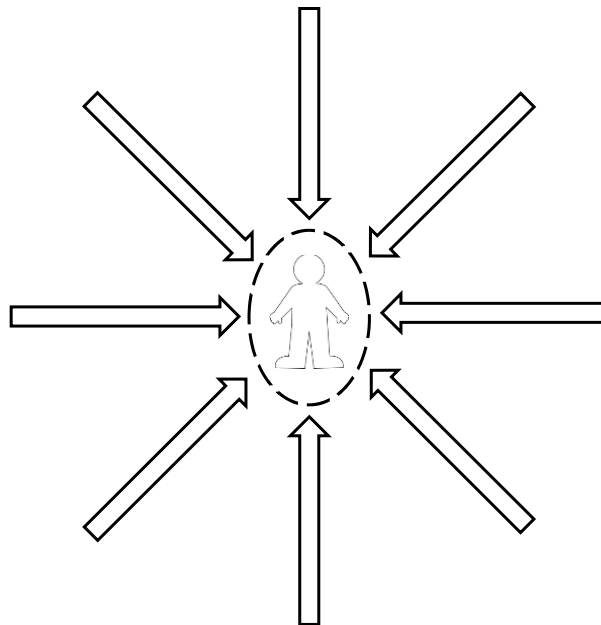
Diag 1 Urgency leading to focus

Diagram 2 suggests that an inner spaciousness that supports a sense of inner expansion can create the conditions in which we are more likely to be able to support and facilitate emergence.



*Diag 2 Inner spaciousness supporting expansion and emergence*

It's important to also note that, for some people, the same time pressure might instead lead to a contraction in our nervous system, a tightness, which inhibits the flow of innovation. See Diagram 3 below:



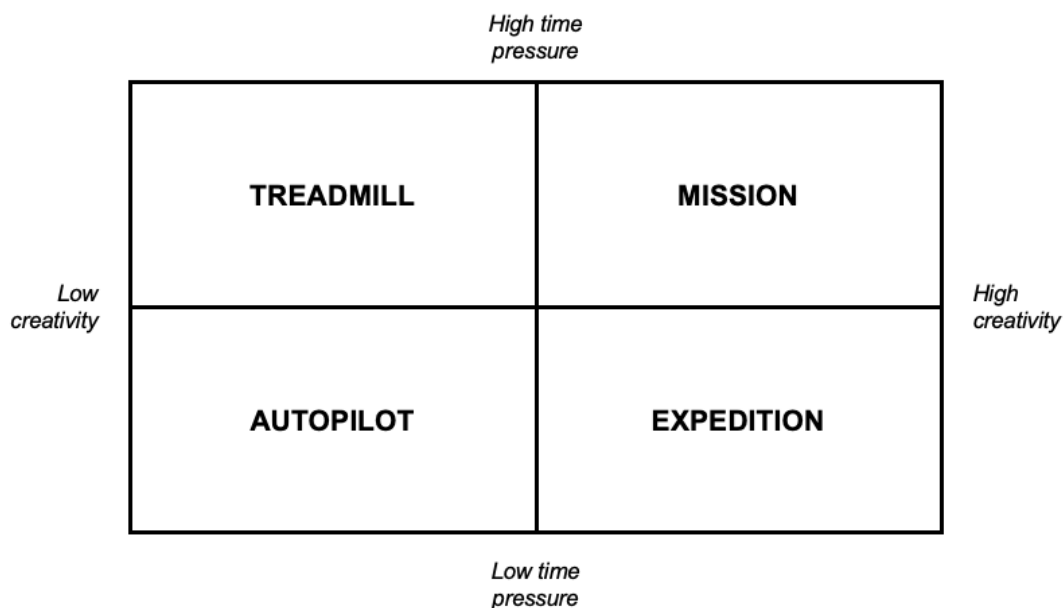
*Diag 3 Urgency with high pressure creating a lower chance of emergence*

The question then arises as to why some people might experience time pressure as helpful and focusing while others experience it as leading to a contraction in their nervous system which makes it less likely that they will innovate.

In 'Creativity Under the Gun'<sup>5</sup> Amabile, Hadley and Kramer suggest that there are four mindsets at play:

Creative thinking is *unlikely* when people feel as if they are on **Autopilot**, receiving little encouragement from management to be creative, engaging in less collaborative work overall and feel little time pressure. Equally, experiencing a highly fragmented workday with many activities and high time pressure, without a sense that the work they are doing is important, can create a **Treadmill** experience and, again, low levels of creativity.

In contrast, creative thinking is *more likely* when people feel as if they are on an **Expedition**, with little or no time pressure and showing creative thinking that is oriented towards generating or exploring ideas and identifying problems; or on a highly time-pressured **Mission**, focussing on one activity for a significant part of the day and being left undisturbed or even protected by management.



Diag 4 Creativity and time pressure – four mindsets at play (Amabile, Hadley and Kramer, 2002)

This research is helpful but also limited. It locates the key determinants in the external environment and, in particular, in whether people are allowed to focus on their work, and whether a sense of meaningful time pressure is being conveyed.

While external constraints clearly are impactful, I would like to suggest that how we respond to these constraints is also a product of our inner conditioning. Having one hour to complete a complex task, even with unsupportive management and in a chaotic workplace, does not, *in and of itself*, constitute pressure. The pressure is, in the end, our own creation. It will be composed of many inner experiences including our own histories, culture, previous experience of similar tasks and more. If, for example, we have grown up in a culture where time feels more relaxed and elastic, we may notice the requirement to complete the task within an hour and feel calm about whether or not we do that. If we have grown up in a culture where we are rewarded for achieving optimal productivity within a given time frame

<sup>5</sup> 'Creativity Under The Gun' by Teresa Amabile, Constance Noonan Hadley, & Steven J. Kramer, published Harvard Business Review, August 2002

we are likely to approach such a task with a different degree of inner spaciousness. If we have experienced abuse and trauma in our past we are likely to carry fear and contraction in our nervous systems which make it harder to relax and feel calm. These are just a few examples of how our inner state, and our inner conditioning, are likely to affect how creative we are under time pressure. We might summarise this as:

**Practising inner spaciousness, *whatever the external circumstance*, will support our capacity to perform and to innovate.**

We might also note that, while inner expansion and inner spaciousness *can* create the right conditions for allowing new things to emerge, they can also lead to our energy becoming diffuse and ineffective unless harnessed to a clear *intention* and a sense of agency.

**Intention** is a catalysing power. The clearer and stronger the intention, the more magnetic is the field it creates. Intention is like a pebble dropped into a still pond. When we drop the pebble smoothly and from a great height it creates large ripples. Similarly, when we announce, to ourselves or to others, a clear intention, people and resources are more likely to be drawn to support the realisation of that intention.

***A clear intention catalyses a field of resonance in which projects and plans can be realised.***

A strong inner intention has a similar energetic quality to a commitment. WH Murray, leader of the Scottish Himalayan Expedition in 1951 wrote:

*Until one is committed, there is hesitancy, the chance to draw back, always ineffectiveness. Concerning all acts of initiative and creation, there is one elementary truth the ignorance of which kills countless ideas and splendid plans: that the moment one definitely commits oneself, then providence moves too.*

*All sorts of things occur to help one that would never otherwise have occurred. A whole stream of events issues from the decision, raising in one's favour all manner of unforeseen incidents, meetings and material assistance which no man could have dreamed would have come his way.*

It starts to become clear, then, that we need to create a “sweet spot” where there is sufficient inner spaciousness to meet whatever the time requirements might be in order to allow us to listen to the whisper of the future and for innovation to arise.

But what is this “whisper of the future” and how do we recognise it? It may be helpful to distinguish the natures of *imagination, intuition and inspiration*. The reason for this is to draw a distinction between where we are re-packaging ideas from the past and calling it ‘the future’, and where we are really accessing something new and drawing in something fresh, which can, in Thomas Huebl’s phrase, “expand the gameboard of humanity”.

When we conjure up our **imagination** we are often using thought processes, concepts and ideas that are already known to us but re-formulating them and reconfiguring them in a way that *feels* new. It is not actually drawing in new energy or insight, but it can *feel* like that as the presenting idea or image can *feel* fresh and new.

**Intuition**, on the other hand, gives us access to information that is already in the field<sup>6</sup> but not so apparent to us because we are more focused on our immediate senses – sight,

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<sup>6</sup> The field here refers to a field of conscious awareness, rather than a field of professional expertise.

hearing, taste, touch and smell <sup>7</sup>. When we access our intuition, we are not actually experiencing anything new but more refining our sensitivity so that we can become aware of more subtle parts of our energy fields that have always been present but that we are usually too fast or insensitive to notice.

In Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, we see how Caesar ignores the warning of the soothsayer

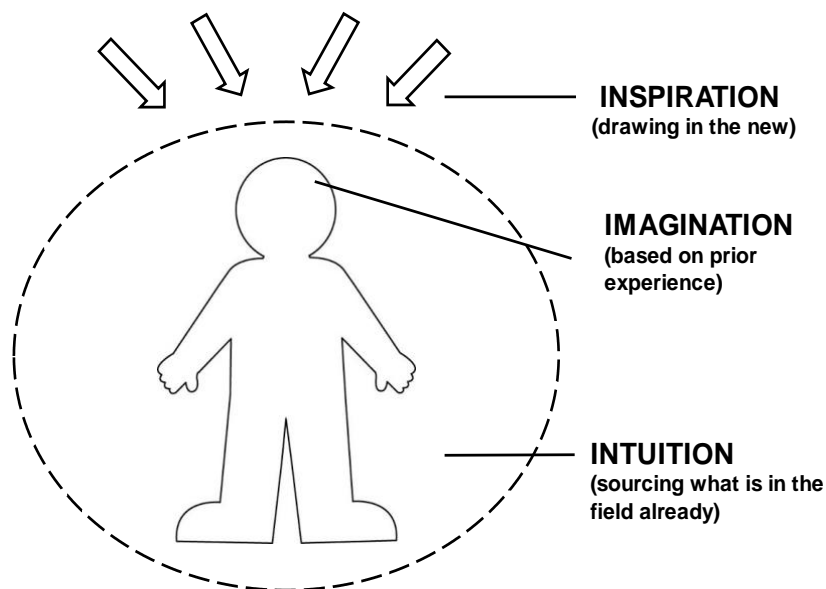
*"Beware the Ides of March"*

and goes ahead with his plan to enter the Senate and start a bid for power.

Metaphorically we might equate the soothsayer with our intuition. How often do we have a nagging doubt, an intuitive hunch, that we ignore because we already have a plan of action that we are committed to?

**Inspiration**, in contrast, involves the practice of opening to the mystery of creation, some would call it God or the Divine, and to realms that are more closely connected to our soul - allowing something really new and fresh, something from beyond our usual habit of *thinking*, to arrive in us. This has been a practice for thousands of years and the top of the head, or what is sometimes known as the *crown chakra*, is often described as the place where this inspiration arrives. The anointment of a new monarch; the blessing of a child when a priest or rabbi gently touches the fontanelle of the baby; the wearing of a crown where the points serve as lightning rods to attract this inspiration, are just a few of the many symbolic representations of this practice. One contemporary practice we can engage in is to meditate and allow our crown chakra, the highest point of our head, to open, inviting in new insights and inspirations<sup>8</sup>.

See Diagram 5 below for a simple graphic representation of this:



<sup>7</sup> Some say there is a 6<sup>th</sup> sense (proprioception – the capacity of our brain to understand where our body is in space), a 7<sup>th</sup> sense (emotions), and that our intuition is combination of the 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> sense.

<sup>8</sup> When practicing this kind of meditation, it is important to 'ground' oneself before and after, for example by pressing one's feet into the ground, waggling toes and fingers, stretching, consciously noticing one's body sensations, and generally ensuring a good connection to one's physical body. Some people also find it easier to access inspiration by focussing deeply into the heart rather than opening the crown .

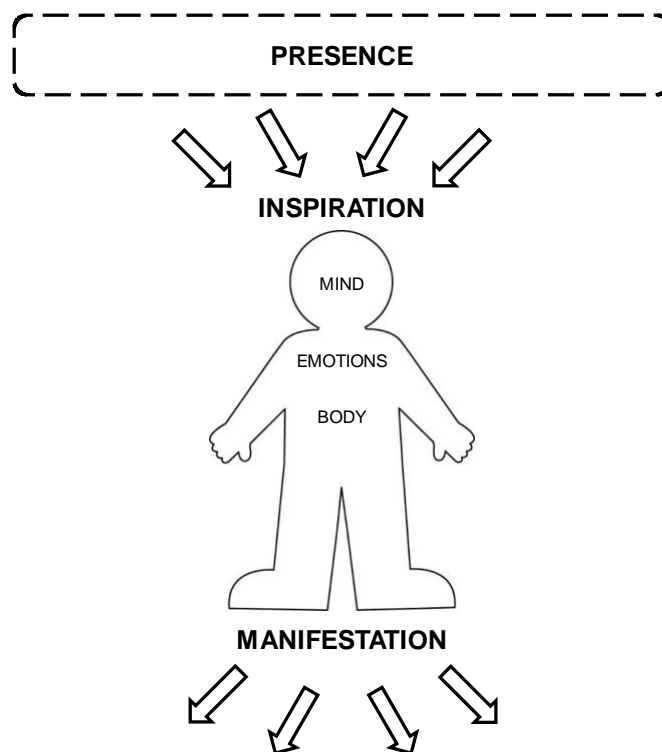
Diag 5 Inspiration, imagination and intuition

What these practices - accessing our intuition, drawing in inspiration and cultivating our imagination - have in common is that each is enhanced by the practice of presence.<sup>9</sup>

**Presence** lies at the core of our life. It is the place of stillness, expansion, sensing, deep feeling. It is both empty and full at the same time. As Thomas Huebl says:

*“The empty space is not empty-empty. It's full-empty, which means it's super-intelligent. By listening to stillness, there are many, many inspirations, innovations, insights, understandings, a different learning, that arise. Not the learning through feeding more form, the learning through emptying. And they're both important. It's important that we learn about form and it's important that we learn through emptiness. Why? Because it keeps the mind open, it keeps the mind creative. It says, “This is how we look at life right now and this is all we learned about life, and we're open to it being a relative perspective, that there's more to it.”*

Diagram 6 (below) attempts to show this. Once we receive real inspiration, the call of the future, we want to allow it to land fully in our physical body so we become aware of how it feels physically within us. We want to allow it to land in our emotional body so we understand and feel how it touches us or moves us or maybe even frightens us. We want to allow it to land in our mind so we understand and can witness our thoughts in relationship to it. In this way it becomes a fully embodied insight which can then, when woven with a horizontal network of relationships, networks and alliances, manifest a new impulse in the world.



Diag 6 Manifesting inspiration (derived from the teachings of Thomas Huebl)

When this happens, we will experience a sense of satisfaction. A sense of our purpose being manifested in life and in form. We will have a sense that we are making the

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<sup>9</sup> Interestingly, presence can be experienced as both a verb e.g. we presence our inner experiences; and a noun e.g. we rest in presence.

contribution we are here to make. It doesn't matter what size the contribution is. What matters is that it is *your* contribution. Your unique offering. Your gift to the world.

I close with this touching and humbling reminder, from the poet Martha Postlewaite, who writes:

*Do not try to save  
the whole world  
or do anything grandiose.  
Instead, create  
a clearing  
in the dense forest  
of your life  
and wait there  
patiently,  
until the song  
that is your life  
falls into your own cut hands and you  
recognise and greet it.  
Only then will you know how to give yourself  
to this world  
so worth of rescue.*

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