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## **Presencing Connection: Life Writing and Personal Development**

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**Abstract:** The global present has been diagnosed as a disruptive moment of disconnection. In this essay, I stage an interdisciplinary encounter between the self-reflexive genre of life writing on the one hand, and recent theories of personal development and leadership in order to compare recent approaches to the present as a moment of transformation. In order to overcome present disruptions, it is necessary to acknowledge past patterns of relating to the social and natural environment, but also to go beyond self- and systems awareness and develop innovative ways of connecting that complement a cognitive understanding of crisis with affective and embodied practices. By bringing together life writings and leadership theories, I introduce a range of current ways of envisioning connection and sketch how they may contribute to making more sustainable relational imaginaries and practices accessible to a wider public.

**Keywords:** Crisis of Connection; Life Writing; Leadership Theory; Relationality; Creativity; Sustainability.

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DOI: 10.24193/cechinox.2023.44.27

Most people [...] live their lives as a sort of temporal blur around the point where their body actually is – anticipating the future, or holding on to the past. They're usually so busy thinking about what happens next that the only time they ever find out what is happening now is when they come to look back on it<sup>1</sup>.

### **The Present as a Moment of Disconnection and Disruption**

The present is an elusive object of attention. It is not only on Terry Pratchett's satirical Discworld that it tends to only make sense in retrospect. My contribution to our exploration of the past in our Here and Now is to investigate how to make better use of the present as a moment of transition and transformation. This is urgent because, in spite of unprecedented global interconnectedness, contemporary western societies are going through a "crisis of connection"<sup>2</sup>:

People are increasingly disconnected from themselves and each other, with a state of alienation, isolation, and fragmentation characterizing much of the modern world. The quintessential

“we,” as in “We the people” or “We hold these truths to be self-evident,” which once served as a reference to a collective consciousness and state of communion, if not community, has lost all meaning. In the place of the “we,” we have been left with the “me,” the solitary individual, whose needs, wants, and desires take precedence over the collective<sup>3</sup>.

This crisis of isolation does not exist *in* isolation: MIT organisation scholar Otto Scharmer diagnoses our global present to be a “dying system”: “Finance. Food. Fuel. Water shortage. Resource scarcity. Climate chaos. Mass poverty. Mass migration. Fundamentalism. Terrorism. Financial oligarchies. We have entered an Age of Disruption”<sup>4</sup>. In disciplines ranging from psychology, pedagogy and cultural studies to theology and organisation science, scholars thus caution us that beneath the surface of these disruptions, western modernity has lost touch with something essential. The capacity for collaboration which has been instrumental in our evolution has atrophied, along with social relations, resulting in empathy fatigue and a rise in loneliness and depression. Failure to attend to our need for relations which neuroscientists declare essential to human wellbeing<sup>5</sup> has led to an unsustainable level of anxiety in the present<sup>6</sup>. The very ideal of a sovereign human self has come under attack as a result: “the ‘crisis of connection’ sees us being confronted with an inverted version of the old cultural ideal of autonomous individuality”<sup>7</sup>. The loss of solidarity foregrounded by this sorry figure is especially problematic because the global crisis requires cooperation across cultural and

disciplinary divides to address the many current challenges listed in the UN’s chart of sustainable development goals<sup>8</sup>.

Writers in the social sciences as well as the humanities have therefore started to call for a paradigm shift in our appreciation of social relations, as exemplified by Scharmer:

We need a new culture of communication and a framework of economic thought that does not simply put another single dogma at the center of the intellectual universe, but that puts our shared reality at the center of our attention. What is needed is the ability to hold and evolve our collective attention at the same rate at which the reality around us keeps changing<sup>9</sup>.

This reframing of the social field calls for concerted action, especially since reconceptualisations of the “ideal of autonomous subjectivity as an emblem of loss”<sup>10</sup> have not yet been replaced by viable new relational imaginaries: “relationality scholarship’ seems to have made very little impact on the popular imagination, which continues to be dominated by idealisations (and illusions) of freedom, independence, and autonomy, especially in our anxious neoliberal times”<sup>11</sup>.

In this essay I want to contribute to the mission of invigorating such a relational cultural narrative. This essay stages an encounter between two such discourses which usually live in separate “conceptual bubbles”: between two literary works on the one hand and two examples of visionary leadership and organisational education on the other. Whereas literary texts, exemplified by Clare Hastings’ *Gardening*

*Notes from a Late Bloomer* (2018) and Kae Tempest's *On Connection* (2020) give insight into individual, singular experiences of personal development, leadership books such as Robert Kegan and Lisa Lahey's *Immunity to Change* (2009) and Otto Scharmer *et al.*'s *Presence* (2005), foster a systems awareness which transforms workplaces and companies, addressing both individual leaders and the teams they are in charge of. There is a gap to be bridged: while literary studies tends to ignore anything resembling How-to-books due to their presumed lack of subtext, business and management circles in their turn rarely consider literary studies as having any practical use<sup>12</sup>, such as an impact on actual social, political and economic processes<sup>13</sup>. Reading texts from both fields, I see that they not only have world problems in common but have evolved comparable and complementary strategies of how to address them. By inviting both kinds of writing to the same table and pointing out some of these overlaps, I hope to perform a small relational and connective act of introduction.

I contend that the crisis of connection and the co-creation of an imaginary of relationality are challenges for the imagination and for a pedagogy that envisions and enables life-long growth and the ability of human minds to change, both on an individual and on a collective scale. They require rethinking our habits of drawing disciplinary and political divides. In other words, these challenges require a collaboration where literature and the arts are central. This is because fostering connection is one of the super-powers of culture and the arts, and of literature in particular. By engaging with narratives, recipients enhance

their capacity for empathy, cultivating Theory of Mind<sup>14</sup>. This not only teaches readers to identify with other individuals, exercising their powers of imagination. It also has political, systemic dimensions. Analyses of colonial and postcolonial literatures have shown that literary texts are effective at getting ideas past direct defences:

literature might be the best complement to ideological transformation. The successful reader learns to identify implicitly with the value system figured forth by literature through learning to manipulate the figures rather than through (or in addition to) working out the argument explicitly and literally, with a view to reasonable consent. Literature buys your assent in an almost clandestine way and therefore it is an excellent instrument for a slow transformation of the mind<sup>15</sup>.

Resolving the crisis of connection must combine direct and indirect forms of communication in order to develop a terminology of change that uses the practical imagination and resists the temptation to dismiss any innovative take on the present as utopian.

### **Life Writing: Becoming Relational**

The two literary texts this essay deals with broadly fit under the umbrella of life writing. Life writing, a term comprising a wide variety of creative non-fiction narratives, ranging from autobiographies, memoirs to journals and travellogues<sup>16</sup>, seems a suitable choice for two reasons: firstly, because of the way in which it

bridges the gap between actual experience and the transformative acts of representation. Secondly, the genre has undergone significant changes in recent years and, as a subject of critical studies, models the relational turn we are in search of. Since the Enlightenment, (auto)biographical writing has been dedicated to the exploration and representation of unique human identities and experiences. From traditionally focusing on exceptional cases in which a prominent individual shaped their *Life and Times*, life writing studies has come to acknowledge that even the most prominent self is not a singular entity<sup>17</sup>. Analytic focus has shifted from the isolated 'I' to a more relational 'We'. This has led to a move away from the exceptional life towards representations of quotidian lifeworlds. No-one better illustrates these developments than eminent autobiography scholar Paul John Eakin, whose *œuvre* maps stages of transformation, as he self-consciously notes:

Self and self-experience [...] are not given, monolithic, and invariant, but dynamic, changing, and plural. Thus, to speak of 'the story of the self' as I did for a good many years, oversimplifies the experiential reality that cognitive studies [...] has helped us to understand more clearly. We do better, I think, to speak of 'registers of self and self-experience,' for there are many stories of self to tell, and more than one self to tell them<sup>18</sup>.

Eakin updates his use of "the self" "for the definite articles suggests something too fixed and unified to represent the complexity of self-experience" and replaces it with "a kind of awareness in process"<sup>19</sup>. Across

genres, studies of identity have abandoned the notion of the self as a found entity. Bruce Hood titles his critical analysis *The Self Illusion*, arguing that "the richness of experience must be made up of a multitude of hidden processes and that the core self must be an illusion"<sup>20</sup>. Historian Yuval Noah Harari performs similar surgery on the notion of individuality:

the theory of evolution rejects the idea that my true self is some indivisible, immutable and potentially eternal essence. [...] [A]ll biological entities ... are composed of smaller and simpler parts that ceaselessly combine and separate. [...] Something that cannot be divided or changed cannot have come into existence through natural selection<sup>21</sup>.

If the writing I is seen as a plural confection, it is only a small step to conceiving of writings about such an entity as relational. Awareness of selfhood comes about through contact with significant others, who shape and affect thoughts and behaviours. Under the influence of feminism and postcolonialism as well as neuroscience, life writing has developed analytic trajectories that include such *influencers*.

Insights into the importance of relations are not confined to life writing studies. Harvard education scholar Robert Kegan pairs his concept of the "individual" with the neologism "embeddual" in order to stress the importance of relations and belonging for human beings to thrive:

The person is an "individual" and an "embeddual." There is never just a you; and at this very moment your own

buoyancy or lack of it, your own sense of wholeness or lack of it, is in large part a function of how your own current embeddedness culture is holding you”<sup>22</sup>.

This shift from a simple self to a dynamic multiplicity inspires hope: change is not only possible, it is inevitable. Human beings are naturally more diverse and dynamic than the Enlightenment focus on a sovereign self acknowledges. Arguably current workplace culture contributes to a uniform image of the self. Rather than look back and confect a narrative of solidity and cohesion, life writings invite us to identify past patterns of change in the present in a bid to overcome the stereotypes lampooned in Pratchett’s epigraph.

### Presenting: Change and Personal Development

In slightly different ways, so do leadership books. Many of these deal with the self in terms of improvement and frame the present as a point of action and potential. This is why the second set of works consulted in this essay addresses personal and systems development. Even the most cursory survey of self-help shelves suggests that these are omnipresent concerns: overcoming fears, changing harmful behaviours and becoming fitter and more sustainable are best-selling topics and feature prominently in videos, podcasts and advice columns across different media. Often such processes involve self-narratives, reflection on past decisions and learning to identify underlying commitments that stand in the way of success. Between them, the texts discussed below raise awareness of the present moment as a time of transformation. Writing about

both past and present, they enact hope for a transformative future. In what follows I outline how they reconceptualise the present in order to contribute to a move past the current vocabulary and perception of crisis and towards more collaborative, co-creative ways of learning from individual and collective personal and social histories.

*Immunity to Change* (2009) by Robert Kegan and Lisa Lahey outlines patterns in which human beings continue to develop in adulthood. The education scholars thereby go beyond the socialised stage at which Jean Piaget’s scale of human development ends to convey the hopeful message that human minds do not simply decline from their 20s onwards – as they gleefully announce, “We discovered the possibility of life after adolescence”<sup>23</sup>. They frame habitual behaviours in medical terms, as an immune system evolved to protect individuals against harm, but people need to adapt in order to realise their potential more fully. This involves a process of gaining insight into one’s covert motivations and underlying commitments that may create conflict between the changes an individual is trying to implement and the belief system that maintains the status quo. Kegan and Lahey work with leaders in business in academia because

it is not just individuals who are in the grip of competing commitments and constraining big assumptions. Collectivities—work teams, leadership groups, departmental units, whole organizations—also unknowingly protect themselves from making the very changes they most desire<sup>24</sup>.

What may sound like a utopian project of improving the world boils down

to a set of practical steps of identifying an individual's hidden agenda, reframing and resituating whatever problem they are tackling and prototyping, with the input of others, what new behaviours can bring about sustainable improvement.

Approaching similar challenges from a background of economic analysis, MIT scholars Otto Scharmer and Katrin Käufer diagnose stagnation in the world economy which according to their Theory U needs to move from "ego-system awareness" to "eco-system awareness"<sup>25</sup>: "we cannot solve the current 4.0 type of eco-system problems with the 2.0 and 3.0 egosystem thinking that created them"<sup>26</sup>. Scharmer and Käufer's approach sees "leadership as the capacity of a system to co-sense and co-shape the future"<sup>27</sup>, by which they intend for leadership to become more evenly dispensed: "all leadership is distributed—it needs to include everyone. To develop collective capacity, everyone must act as a steward for the larger eco-system"<sup>28</sup>. Accordingly, they propose "an awareness-based method for changing systems"<sup>29</sup>, directed at the inner condition of individuals on all levels of a system's hierarchy to co-sense and co-create necessary changes in the system, allowing future possibilities to emerge. In this transformation, the present moment has a particular importance: "There are two different sources of learning: (1) learning by reflecting on the past and (2) learning by sensing and actualizing emerging future possibilities"<sup>30</sup>. The title of this paper, which turns presence into a gerund<sup>31</sup>, thereby underlining its active dimension, is derived from Scharmer and Käufer. It refers to step 4 in their methodology, the turning point of the 'U-shape' process where the leader moves from identifying, intuiting and letting go of their

conventional grasp of problems to realising new modes of behaviour<sup>32</sup>:

The present moment is shaped by what is wanting to emerge. That quality of time, if connected to, operates from presencing the highest future potential. The word presencing blends "sensing" with "presence." It means to sense and actualize one's highest future potential<sup>33</sup>.

For my purpose, the neologism underlines action, and the appeal to use the present as a practical acting moment. In *Presence*, Scharmer teams up with English professor Betty Sue Flowers, former Shell business leader Joseph Jaworski and behavioural and policy specialist Peter Senge to illustrate how to establish the capacity for observing and listening to circumstances without immediately giving in to the impulse to react<sup>34</sup>. Prior to the stage of presencing, subjects must undergo a practice of mental and often physical reset in the shape of mindfulness, meditation or a retreat that enables them to change their perspective on their own habits and the system they are embedded in.

While Scharmer *et al.*'s evocation of "a spiritual divide"<sup>35</sup>, "a deeper dimension (the source) from which our actions, communication, and perceptions arise"<sup>36</sup> and "collective awakening"<sup>37</sup> are reminiscent of New Age esoteric paradigms, like Kegan and Lahey, they produce a set of practical analytic and prototyping stages which have been tested and implemented by companies around the world and which they continue to develop further<sup>38</sup>.

For Kegan and Lahey as well as Scharmer *et al.*, the process of realising

changed behaviours is thus not purely a cerebral one: “The mindset reflected in an immunity to change is not simply a cognitive phenomenon”<sup>39</sup>. Both approaches combine mental aspects of analysing positive data with affective ones of confronting emotional investment in the subjects’ world views and literally ‘hands-on’ practices of enactment and embodiment. Between them, they indicate that current disruptions necessitate a better integration of these three domains, and the strategies they model involve retraining all three. Relationality thus begins at home, with integrating the multitude that is the allegedly individual self, by reinstating an equilibrium of mental, emotional and physical discipline. By pairing the tried and tested cognitive disciplines with affective and physical dimensions, these writings challenge the strict divide of private and professional lifeworlds on which much of western society operates. Given that digital media and the Covid pandemic have already begun to entangle these, a transition might well be under way that might be open to realising innovations such as the ones explored here. This is especially likely because in many fields and professions, ranging from sports to volunteer work, insights similar to Kegan and Lahey and Scharmer’s are already being shared, and workplaces increasingly include courses in mindfulness.

I now turn to two personal narratives which support the argument that life-long learning is possible and improving one’s life is a process which moves along the lines suggested by Kegan and Scharmer, albeit in different contexts, to wit, the garden and poetry recitals.

### Clare Hastings, *Gardening Notes from a Late Bloomer* (2018)

Clare Hastings’ *Gardening Notes from a Late Bloomer* is an open letter in book form, addressed to the author’s daughter, Calypso. It is an unusual will and testament in that the author’s legacy is her garden, and her inheritance comprises a genetic tendency to become a gardener late in life. In small chapters on everything from terracotta pots to crop rotation, pets and flower wishlists, Hastings presents an array of family anecdotes, lists of do’s and don’ts, plant portraits, time- and money-saving tips, and recipes. Hastings introduces herself as a “compulsive tidier”<sup>40</sup>, and the fact that she tries to control the future by way of writing a manual for it is just one of many instances of her comically staging awareness of her own idiosyncrasies: we learn about her need to control others in the portraits chapter titled “Who is Who *in the Garden*” (the latter words are italicised throughout the book, creating a refrain). To use the garden as an excuse to hand over a script for the future is something of a family tradition: in 1990, Hastings’ mother, the late journalist Anne Scott-James addressed a similar publication to her<sup>41</sup>. These epistolary writings re-enact the garden’s seasonal pattern of renewal on the human plane. Writing and gardening for their daughters’ futures, Scott-James and Hastings invest in a posthuman continuation beyond the body, mapping their spirit of human creativity onto nature’s cyclical rhythm. Or, as phrased on Hastings’ webpage: “Some people are excited by constant change. I am excited by moving the familiar forward”<sup>42</sup>. This is not to say she is unaware of progressive disconnection in the world

around her: “why is everyone obsessed with shutting themselves away behind boarded fences? I have lost count of the number of local views that used to be shared and have now gone”<sup>43</sup>. The present from which this lament is posted serves as a relational fulcrum connecting her past and her daughter’s future. While Calypso has yet to reach the age at which the garden becomes more than “the pathway leading from the car park to the cottage door”<sup>44</sup>, a wider public of readers, potentially familiar with Hastings’ work as a fashion journalist and stylist, can enjoy her instructions, both in the garden and beyond.

Part memoir, part handbook, Hastings’ format cultivates a temporal dimension which foregrounds continuity between the past, present and future, raising awareness of the spaces and systems in which a future can take place:

“God dad’ thought the title of chapter 1 (Gardening From Beyond the Grave) rather gloomy. I have considered this and feel absolutely the reverse. I can think of nothing more positive as I wander around the plot, than to imagine it has a future, with the people I love creating their own stories and adventures in the garden. I see you have recently taken up house plants as a hobby. I am thrilled. I saw you considering one of them the other day, and thinking about its well-being and so I know that the journey has already begun”<sup>45</sup>.

*Gardening Notes* frames life as a learning process that extends into the late stages of life. It conceptualises ageing along Kegan and Lahey’s lines, as a pleasant

experience of growth, but it adds the living setting of the garden as a space that makes growth tangible and takes it beyond the human sphere. Connection is established by way of narrative continuity, and this project goes beyond interpersonal human domains: for Hastings, relationships encompass living spaces.

The garden that is evoked throughout the book is an archive of embodied experiences: “A garden is a wonderful aid to memory and should be filled with memories, not cars. Ours is. Everywhere I look, I am reminded of a day, an event, a lunch”<sup>46</sup>. New memories materialise: “Plants are a great way to create memories. A cutting from a friend’s garden is as good as a photograph and will always spark a reminder of the time of year, the occasion, and sometimes even the weather”<sup>47</sup>. The garden thus illustrates what Scharmer terms ‘co-creation’. It also functions as a relational hub. But the garden is more than just permeated by generations of human lives. Far from being a mere backdrop to human lifeworlds, this garden interacts with them. It is both a stage on which a detailed *dramatis personae* acts out their family life, and a spatial family member, an acting, living composite of non-human players and props. As a responsive and transformative live force the garden teaches patience, helps form judgment about gardening and other trends and induces the writer to reflect on different people’s different needs. It also challenges Hastings to confront her tendency to try and control the world. For Hastings, the garden thus serves as a non-human significant Other: “A garden is life, filled with ups and downs. There are moments when you want to divorce it and other times you can sit alongside it forever”<sup>48</sup>. This is not a mere



anthropomorphising projection, as the relationship evoked here is dynamic and mutually transformative, and there is a dimension of reaching into the unknown that helps the process of becoming self-authoring and a transformer of systems. Hastings' book shows how discovering one's ability to affect and shape one's environment is a discovery of a form of learning that may come later in life and that, whenever it "strikes", it sets in motion a process of relating to place and one's place in the world differently, as an entanglement beyond the present.

Like Scharmer *et al.*, Hastings outlines the importance of first 'downloading' present information by way of observation:

When you take over the garden (I'm loving those words) the good news is that for the first year you can just do looking. Mow the lawn (obviously) and rake the leaves in winter, but really, the best thing you can do is observe, and I mean *really* observe. Watch the seasons and see what emerges when. How does it look? When does it flower? How high does it grow? How long does it last? By looking you will see plants pushing up that you never even knew were there. This isn't being lazy, it's learning<sup>49</sup>.

Hastings overtly scoffs at the presenting practices advocated by the leadership writers discussed above: "Back in the day when the world was practising yoga I wasn't"<sup>50</sup>. But gardening imparts lessons of a kind she can embrace: "if the idea behind the mindfulness movement is to be aware of the present and engage with your surroundings -- then hooray, I am a grand master. [...] As soon as the trowel is in my

hand a weird mystical fog descends"<sup>51</sup>. She finds vegetables "calming"<sup>52</sup> and spots a kindred spirit in other gardeners:

When I sent for my wildflower mix, the leaflet that accompanied the packet advised me to take a pinch of seed, put it on white paper and look at it under a magnifying glass so I could appreciate the diverse shapes in the mix. Only a gardener would think of including that on an instruction sheet<sup>53</sup>.

Her book suggests that even reluctant yogis can experience the benefits of presenting; they just need to find a pathway that suits them.

There are two main ways in which Hastings goes beyond the leadership visions sketched above: first of all, relationality is 'more-than-human', in Val Plumwood's term<sup>54</sup>. The garden can be read as an "embeddual" along Kegan and Lahey's lines, but Hastings' focus on the garden as a space of growth suggests that relationality entails moving past an attitude that assigns places a menial background role. Scharmer's theory draws on images of farming to frame relational development in economic sectors, e.g. when comparing the "social field" to an actual one:

just as the farmer cannot "drive" a plant to grow faster, a leader or change maker in an organization or a community cannot force practical results. Instead, attention must be focused on improving the quality of the soil. What is the quality of the social soil<sup>55</sup>?

Attending to the social soil, the character or personality of people, involves

metaphorical digging of the kind Kegan and Lahey detail. Hastings goes beyond metaphor. Her garden is an acting force, and relinquishing part of her own agency to this vibrant non-human, and to futurity, models a necessary change. Human beings not only influence and are influenced and shaped by other humans, but they shape and transform places in return, and are shaped and influenced and transformed by them. By way of gardening, Hastings arrives at a perspective on non-human others not unlike those advocated in writings of ecocriticism and cultural materialism<sup>56</sup>, that non-human beings and spaces need to be reconceptualised as equals deserving of respect.

Secondly, Hastings' narrative of scripting the future and coming to terms with the need to relinquish control dramatises the need, underlined in writings about the Anthropocene, to think beyond one's individual lifespan. Whether or not we acknowledge it, many current human activities are 'gardening beyond the grave', or digging our grave, as the case may be.

The fact that the garden is ascribed to a late bloomer suggests that the relational qualities of thinking beyond the human sphere and make systemic plans beyond one's demise are mapped onto a maturity continuum<sup>57</sup>: the relational qualities of gardening, of caring for a non-human Other, of moving from ego to eco, can only be attained later in life. It comes about once stages of dependency and independency have been transcended by an investment in interdependency. Lest this serve as an excuse to collectively postpone this process till later in life, I now turn to a millennial's perspective on the importance of creativity as a path towards connection.

**Kae Tempest,  
*On Connection* (2020)**

**K**ae Tempest is an award-winning performance poet, best-selling novelist and playwright. In 2020, they came out as non-binary and trans and published *On Connection*, a personal essay on how their creativity helped them find their identity and recover from mental health challenges. Tempest defines connection in affective terms of presencing: "Connection is the feeling of landing in the present tense"<sup>58</sup>.

Using accessible everyday language Tempest addresses present day problems and potential solutions that are quite similar to those Scharmer *et al.* and Kegan and Lahey arrive at by way of science. Tempest describes the collective response to disconnection as "numbness" resulting from "a lack of true feeling. Maintaining a surface engagement with whatever is going on while at the same time being entirely elsewhere"<sup>59</sup>. Similarly to Kegan and Lahey, they see this as an immune reaction: "Numbness is a logical response to the onslaught of the age. In order to be able to survive it with any semblance of sanity, in order to be able to function or even to flourish, numbness is required"<sup>60</sup>. They claim knowledge of "this numbness because it is my life. I have sought numbness"<sup>61</sup>. But the problem goes beyond them, this crisis is all-encompassing: "I see that every single person is affected by the violence of existence in different ways"<sup>62</sup>. And without recourse to neuroscience, but with reference to activist Barbara Ehrenreich, they conclude that what is missing is empathy:

We are empathetic beings who feel for each other. Our very success as a

species is rooted in our ability to be aware of each other's needs, to notice each other's pain and to experience deeply felt physiological and emotional empathy<sup>63</sup>.

Media are a large part of disconnection: "We have lost each other under this selfie-system of hyper-competition"<sup>64</sup>, Tempest states, even suggesting that it is in part due to digital connectivity, along with other "trappings of success"<sup>65</sup>, that "we have grown far from ourselves [...] And we have grown far from each other"<sup>66</sup>:

The internet seems to me to be the ultimate expression of the spirit of the times; it is the multi-voice of the collective conscious. But it cannot represent the collective subconscious; the spirit of the depths speaks through poetry and music, through fiction, image and myth. It is offline<sup>67</sup>.

Also flying in the face of modernity is Tempest's take on the discipline needed to enable this creative spirit to get through to the surface:

When I am numb, how can I make myself connected? I can't. But I can try to create an environment that is welcoming for connection if it should turn up. Abstinence helps. Taking a full day's break from my phone helps me rediscover the pace of my own mind, which is useful for feeling in full possession of my senses. Fasting helps. Tasting food after a day without helps me give due importance to the everyday acts of living. Reminds me of how lucky I am to eat a meal<sup>68</sup>.

Tempest's personal response to the crisis, after seeking numbness through substance abuse, is through creativity as it is evoked here. *On Connection* (2020) suggests that poetry recitals constitute a way out of numbness: "Naked language has a humanising effect; listening to someone tell their story, people noticeably opened up, became more vulnerable, and let their defences down; the rooms got less frosty, less confrontational"<sup>69</sup>. Tempest takes poetry off the page and into the interactive event of the performance. Their way of moving from the ego- to the eco-dimension of creativity is to recall their own multiple roles as writer, performer and reader or listener, allowing the poetry to dynamically develop from static text to a living creative venture into the unknown:

I wrote the poem over a period of many months, in week-long bursts of intense creativity, and once it was finished and on its feet touring, I saw first-hand that there were things that Tempest-the-writer never knew about the writing that Tempest-the-reader discovered each night with increasing clarity. Themes emerged to me, the reader, once I had committed the text to my body and was delivering it to rooms of people<sup>70</sup>.

Tempest thereby not only shares an insight similar to the multiplicity of human selves neuroscience discovered, it goes beyond, not only because of the easy integration of emotion and embodiment but also because of how it synthesizes fragmentation with a new experience of unity and connection:

the words spoken in sequence at the right depth of feeling became bridges between emotion and experience. Between audience and stage, between venue and crowd. [...] When the connection is made, everything is linked and moving towards a moment of mutual feeling, a creative connection that binds the entire room into a unified present<sup>71</sup>.

This culmination or epiphany indicates that connection is not a static end-goal but an affective sharing that melts community and event into an act of co-creation that embraces its own temporary nature. The poet is merely one player in this; creativity is to be attained through listening, too:

To really be useful to the connective power of the text, rather than interrogators, we must be the conductors. We, the readers or listeners, are crucial to the text, story or song becoming powerful. We are not impartial observers; we are a fundamental part of the circuitry; if we are not connected, the charge will not be able to flow<sup>72</sup>.

Tempest is careful to stress that poetry recitals are merely their way, they are by no means the only way to attain this sense of flow. Their suggested pathways are myriad and varied:

Creative connection is the use of creativity to access and feel connection and get yourself and those with you in the moment into a more connected space. It could be that connection to another, deeper world is most easily

experienced by artists. But really, anyone who's ever meditated, prayed, studied the stars, cooked an important meal for people they love, thrown a punch, received one, built something with their hands, learned a skill because they had no choice, been in service to others, volunteered their time, found themselves at the edge of their sanity or at the edge of their experience, accepted a difficult truth, put themselves second, genuinely gone out of their way for somebody else, has felt it<sup>73</sup>.

Where *Tempest* takes this investigation beyond the leadership visions outlined above is in the way they take away the need to present results and achieve fixed stages or results. For them, finding connection is less a progressive narrative of improvement than a continuum of finding and letting go. Connection is not something which is constituted by humans, it is an ongoing more-than-human current or vibrancy, or resonance: "There are many ways to access a more resonant place. It starts by acknowledging that everything is resonating"<sup>74</sup>. And, as is to be expected, *Tempest's* book ends in a poem that gives readers both absolution and a list of choices:

You can't be present all the time.  
But the closer we focus on our experience, the greater the awareness of the experience will be, the greater the immersion, the greater the possibility for connection.  
So  
Put your phone down.  
Listen to the birds.  
Build a fire in a quiet place.

Pay attention to the details when you kiss your lover.

When you have a conversation with your neighbour about their health<sup>75</sup>.

## Conclusions

According to an inspirational aphorism variously attributed to Eleanor D. Roosevelt and Alice Earle Morse and popularised by the *Kung Fu Panda* franchise<sup>76</sup>, “yesterday is history, tomorrow is a mystery, today is a gift, that’s why it’s called the present.” In this essay I have attempted to unpack this gift with the help of writers from different disciplines – and with care, given the thorny nature of its discontents, disconnections and disruptions.

Change is key in all of the life and leadership writings examined here, and reassuringly, change is both natural and inevitable. “The old ways have to end,” Kae Tempest states in their earlier poem, “People’s Faces”<sup>77</sup>. In order to prevent this change from being for the worse, however, it appears that a number of simplifications of modern life are in order. What is striking about the insights into how to regain connection discussed above is that they are not restricted to the social human sphere but encompass and activate space and place, in the case of Hastings, the family’s garden, and in the case of Tempest, the communal space in which recitals occur. In both cases, these spaces are alive and active, and they enable a sense of connection beyond the self, beyond the group, into something more than human, or outside human control.

In the collective search for connection, a wide variety of pathways can and need to be attempted. Many different fields follow

similar pathways in their attempts to improve our situation, to enhance their systems awareness. Ironically, they might not be aware of their similarities and shared strategies, because all work with vocabularies and horizons of their own.

It is reassuring to consider how much work is already being done across different fields to remedy the current crisis of connection. Individuals and groups now referred to as “essential workers”, from healthcare professionals to volunteers and permaculture gardeners, continue to shoulder most of the burden and none of the recognition. By comparing writings which explore the close connection between individuals’ private lives or home lives and the world of the workplace, this discussion has demonstrated that changes are underway that bridge some of the schisms that lead to disconnect and anxiety. Hastings and Tempest and the many individuals whose life-stories are narrated and analysed by Kegan and Scharmer reach a heightened sense of connectivity and meaningful relation with who they are and what they do by overcoming life on autopilot, by listening and observing and taking the time to connect their cerebral lifeworld with more material, sensory and affective dimensions. What both Kegan and Lahey and Scharmer refer to as the triad of ‘the head, gut and hand’ refers to an integration that does not so much complement as correct an imbalance which keeps individuals from fully making use of the potential of the present. On closer inspection, success education may be closer to utopian modes of viewing the world than is often appreciated, whereas literary narrative modes contain a more hands-on dimension of activating the imagination. However this may be,

both ways of improving how we relate to the present could do with becoming better acquainted with one another's strategies and achievements in balancing individual and collective narratives of self-growth and systems awareness. The recent Covid crisis is proof positive that it is possible to enact a large-scale paradigm shift in how the relations between individuals and communities are conceived and practised. After all, without a crisis, there would be no narrative.

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## NOTES

1. Terry Pratchett, *Wyrd Sisters*, London, Transworld, 2008, p. 7.
2. Niobe Way et al., *The Crisis of Connection: Roots, Consequences, and Solutions*, New York, New York UP, 2018; Johann Hari, *Lost Connections: Uncovering the Real Causes of Depression - and the Unexpected Solutions*, London, Bloomsbury, 2018; Simone Drichel, "'The Most Perfectly Autonomous Man': Relational Subjectivity and the Crisis of Connection", *Angelaki*, vol. 24, n. 3, 2019; Robert Cooper, "Peripheral Vision: Relationality", in *Organization Studies*, vol. 26, n. 11, 2005.
3. Way et al., *Op. cit.*, pp. 1-2.
4. Claus Otto Scharmer and Katrin Käufer, *Leading from the Emerging Future: From Ego-System to Eco-System Economies*, San Francisco, Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc., 2013, p. 1.
5. John T. Cacioppo and William Patrick, *Loneliness: Human Nature and the Need for Social Connection*, New York, W.W. Norton, 2009; Louise C. Hawkey and John T. Cacioppo, "Loneliness Matters: A Theoretical and Empirical Review of Consequences and Mechanisms", in *Annals of Behavioral Medicine*, vol. 40, n. 2, 2010.

6. Yuval N. Harari, *Homo Deus: A Brief History of Tomorrow*, London, Harvill Secker, 2016.
7. Simone Drichel, "Preface: Relationality", *Angelaki*, vol. 24, n. 3, 2019, pp. 1-2.
8. See: <https://sdgs.un.org/goals>. Last accessed: 5 January 2022.
9. Claus Otto Scharmer, "Theory U: Leading from the Future as It Emerges", in *The Social Technology of Presencing* (2nd ed.), San Francisco (CA), Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc., a BK Business Book, 2016, p. 72.
10. Simone Drichel, *Op. cit.*, p. 2.
11. *Ibidem*, p. 2.
12. Fiction especially is often equated with deception, lies and cognitive distortion, as the pejorative use of fiction in "commodity fiction" by Scharmer implies: "We run a 1.5 planet-footprint economy in a one-planet ecological reality. Why? Because of commodity fiction. In all modern economic theory, nature is thought of as a commodity. This is, as we learned from reading Karl Polanyi's book *The Great Transformation*, a fiction" (Claus Otto Scharmer, *Op. cit.*, p. 80).
13. That being said, recent initiatives within the new EU's Horizon programme indicate a more central role for the Humanities/Arts, cfr. [https://ec.europa.eu/info/research-and-innovation/funding/funding-opportunities/funding-programmes-and-open-calls/horizon-europe/strategic-plan\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/info/research-and-innovation/funding/funding-opportunities/funding-programmes-and-open-calls/horizon-europe/strategic-plan_en) and <https://crowdhelix.com/>. Last accessed: 12 January 2022.
14. Lisa Zunshine, *Why We Read Fiction: Theory of Mind and the Novel*, Columbus, Ohio State UP, 2006; David Comer Kidd and Emanuele Castano, "Reading Literary Fiction Improves Theory of Mind", in *Science*, vol. 342, n. 6156, 2013; Lisa Zunshine, *Introduction to Cognitive Literary Studies*, Oxford UP, 2015.
15. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "The Burden of English", in Carol A. Breckenridge and Peter van der Veer (ed.), *Orientalism and the Postcolonial Predicament. Perspectives on South Asia*, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993, pp. 136-37.
16. For a comprehensive list, cfr. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, *Life Writing in the Long Run: A Smith & Watson Autobiography Studies Reader*, Ann Arbor, Michigan Publishing, 2016.
17. Many core works have usefully been collected in Ricia Anne Chansky and Emily Hipchen (ed.), *The Routledge Auto Biography Studies Reader, Routledge Literature Readers*, London, Routledge-Taylor & Francis Group, 2016. Recent relational developments are compiled in Ina Batzke, Lea Espinoza Garrido and Linda M. Hess (ed.), *Life Writing in the Posthuman Anthropocene*, Cham (Switzerland), Palgrave Macmillan, 2021.
18. Paul John Eakin, *How Our Lives Become Stories: Making Selves*, Ithaca, Cornell UP, 1999, p. xi.
19. *Ibidem*, p. x. Eakin reaches similar conclusions about the nature of human consciousness to those contemporary neuroscience has arrived at; Sam Harris, too, frames human consciousness as a "process": Sam Harris, *Making Sense: Conversations on Consciousness, Morality, and the Future of Humanity*, London, Bantam Press, 2020.
20. Bruce M. Hood, *The Self Illusion*, London, Constable, 2012; Jonah Lehrer, "The Self Illusion: An Interview with Bruce Hood", Interview, in *Wired: Science*, 2012.
21. Yuval N. Harari, *Op. cit.*, pp. 103-104.
22. Robert Kegan, *The Evolving Self: Problem and Process in Human Development*, Cambridge (Mass.), Harvard UP, 1982, p. 102.
23. Robert Kegan and Lisa Laskow Lahey, *Immunity to Change: How to Overcome It and Unlock Potential in Yourself and Your Organization, Leadership for the Common Good*, Boston (Mass.), Harvard Business Press, 2009, p. 10.
24. *Ibidem*, pp. 125-26.
25. Claus Otto Scharmer and Katrin Käufer, *Op.cit.*, p. 2.
26. *Ibidem*, p. 14.
27. *Ibidem*, p. 13.
28. *Ibidem*, p. 13.
29. Claus Otto Scharmer, *The Essentials of Theory U: Core Principles and Applications*, Oakland, Berrett-Koehler, 2018, 10.



30. *Ibidem*, p. 26.
31. Scharmer acknowledges drawing on Martin Heidegger's writing in conceiving the term, see Scharmer, *Theory U: Leading from the Future as It Emerges*. He does not draw on the version of the concept developed by Leanne Simpson in the context of Canadian postcolonialism (Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, *Dancing on Our Turtle's Back: Stories of Nishnaabeg Re-Creation, Resurgence and a New Emergence*, online resource, 2018), nor the one by geographer Paul Simpson ("What Remains of the Intersubjective?: On the Presencing of Self and Other", in *Emotion, Space and Society*, vol. 14, n. 1, 2015). These separate coinages can be read as confirmation for a need for greater connectivity.
32. Scharmer is not the only one to bend grammar in his search for a language to account for the changes he envisages. Kegan, too, challenges conventional constellations of verbs and nouns in an earlier book when he describe the "human being as an activity" and pinpoints his focus as: "It is not about the doing which a human does; it is about the doing which a human is", Kegan, *Op. cit.*, p. 18.
33. Claus Otto Scharmer, *The Essentials of Theory U: Core Principles and Applications*, p. 27.
34. The practice of experiencing a stimulus or problem and learning to withhold an immediate response to it as a means of enabling a profound change of behaviour, or "evolution of the self" also constitutes a fundamental step in the F.M. Alexander Technique, cfr. F. Matthias Alexander, *The Books of F. Matthias Alexander*, New York, IRDEAT, 1997.
35. Claus Otto Scharmer, *The Essentials of Theory U: Core Principles and Applications*, p. 22.
36. *Ibidem*, pp. 24-25.
37. Peter M. Senge *et al.*, *Presence: Human Purpose and the Field of the Future*, Cambridge (Mass.), SoL, 2004, 1st ed., p. 11.
38. E.g. through conferences via the Presencing Institute, cfr. <https://www.presencing.org/>. E.g. Last accessed: 8 January 2022. Reviews show that while Scharmer's innovation is cautiously welcomed, here, too, 2.0 and 3.0 systems are in place as reviewers call for more empirical testing to provide more evidence of the factors that enable the emergence of the new system he envisages, e.g. Markus F. Peschl and Thomas Fundneider, "Theory U and Emergent Innovation Presencing as a Method of Bringing Forth Profoundly New Knowledge and Realities", in Olen Gunnlaugson, Charles Baron, and Mario Cayer (ed.), *Perspectives on Theory U: Insights from the Field*, Hershey, Business Science Reference, 2014.
39. Robert Kegan and Lisa Laskow Lahey, *Op. cit.*, p. 279.
40. Clare Hastings, *Gardening Notes from a Late Bloomer*, London, Pimpernel Press, 2018, p. 8.
41. Anne Scott-James, *Gardening Letters to My Daughter*, New York, St. Martin's Press, 1st U.S. ed., 1991. In contrast to *Gardening Notes*, the older book consists of a series of actual letters and brief replies by daughter Clare. In 2020, Hastings published a book compilation of some of her mother's columns: Clare Hastings, *Hold the Front Page!: The Wit and Wisdom of Anne Scott-James*, London, Pimpernel Press Ltd, 2020.
42. See <https://www.clarehastings.com/>. Last accessed: 7 January 2022.
43. Clare Hastings, *Gardening Notes*, p. 49.
44. *Ibidem*, p. 6.
45. *Ibidem*, p. 120.
46. *Ibidem*, p. 11.
47. *Ibidem*, p. 12.
48. *Ibidem*, p. 7.
49. *Ibidem*, p. 103.
50. *Ibidem*, p. 40.
51. *Ibidem*, p. 40.
52. *Ibidem*, p. 41.
53. *Ibidem*, p. 41.
54. Val Plumwood, *Environmental Culture. The Ecological Crisis of Reason*, London-New York, Routledge, 2002.

55. Claus Otto Scharmer, *The Essentials of Theory U: Core Principles and Applications*, p. 31.
56. Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*, Durham, Duke UP, 2010.
57. Stephen R. Covey, James C. Collins and Sean Covey, *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People: Powerful Lessons in Personal Change*, New York, Simon & Schuster, 2020, 30<sup>th</sup> ed.
58. Kae Tempest, *On Connection*, London, Faber & Faber, 2020. "Set Up", p. 5.
59. *Ibidem*, "Sound Check", p. 15.
60. *Ibidem*, pp. 16-17.
61. *Ibidem*, p. 17.
62. *Ibidem*, "Support Act", p. 33.
63. *Ibidem*, p. 47. Barbara Ehrenreich, *Blood Rites: Origins and History of the Passions of War*, London, Virago, 1997.
64. *Ibidem*, "Feeling It Happen", p. 110.
65. *Ibidem*, p. 106.
66. *Ibidem*, "Sound Check", p. 15.
67. *Ibidem*, "Doors", p. 40.
68. *Ibidem*, "Feeling It Happen", p. 106.
69. *Ibidem*, "Sound Check", p. 22.
70. *Ibidem*, "Support Act", p. 52.
71. *Ibidem*, p. 53.
72. *Ibidem*, p. 50.
73. *Ibidem*, "Set Up", pp. 5-6.
74. *Ibidem*, "Feeling It Happen", p. 113.
75. *Ibidem*, p. 115.
76. See <http://yesterdaytomorrowtodaypresent.blogspot.com/2015/08/yesterday-tomorrow-and-today-phrase.html>. Last accessed: 19 January 2022.
77. See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mpy9OGVFJ1I> . Last accessed: 25 January 2022.