



MIND & LIFE

Mind & Life Podcast Transcript

Theory U: Guiding awareness-based systems change

Original Air Date: May 22, 2026

Retrieved from: podcast.mindandlife.org/jamie-bristow-mini-series-episode-4

Jamie (00:00)

Hello and welcome to the Mind and Life podcast. I'm Jamie Bristow, your guest host for this episode. For the last 15 years, I've been working to bring contemplative practices and other inner transformation approaches into different areas of public life through innovation and policy development. During this time, I've seen a huge amount of change with mainstream politicians, funders and decision makers across sectors really starting to see inner development as a credible or even crucial area to invest in for societal and ecological impact. As that recognition grows, a new set of questions comes into focus. How do we do this work collectively? Which approaches are actually effective in addressing complex systems? What kinds of evidence matter and to whom? And what's needed now to unlock their future potential at scale? In this special mini-series, we've brought together leading practitioners, researchers and systems conveners to explore those questions from different angles. In today's episode, we turn our attention to Theory U and the work of the Presencing Institute. Almost certainly the most widely applied approach to systems change that explicitly integrates contemplative components with collective practice. Theory U offers a way of understanding change that doesn't begin with solutions, but with attention. With how we sense, relate, and allow new futures to emerge through us. These ideas have traveled widely, from government and education, to grassroots movements, leadership development and peace building, often adapting themselves to very different cultural and institutional contexts. And as they've spread, they've also raised important questions about depth, integrity, and how to preserve the essence of the work while making it accessible.

At a time when many institutions are struggling to respond wisely to accelerating complexity, the question is no longer whether inner and outer change are connected, but how that connection can be shaped and leveraged with rigor, humility and care. To explore where this work has come from, how it's being practiced today and what might be required for its next phase, I'm delighted to be joined by three people who each hold a vital piece of the story.

So please welcome to the podcast, Dr. Katrin Kaufer, co-founding member and managing director of the Presencing Institute. She is also director of the Just Money program at MIT's Community Innovation Lab, CoLab, where she also teaches. And her work focuses on values-based finance, leadership, and economic transformation. Welcome, Katrin.

And Martin Kalungu-Banda, a leadership and organizational development practitioner who works across business, government, and civil society. He's visiting fellow at Oxford Said Business School, a core faculty member with the Presencing Institute and co-founder of the

Ubuntu Lab Institute, bringing a strong practice lens on adaptive leadership and systems change.

And finally, Dr. Megan Seneque, an associate with the Presencing Institute and a member of the editorial team with the Journal of Awareness-Based Systems Change hosted by the Presencing Institute. She is also a research associate at the University of Roehampton in London, an honorary fellow with the Crawford School of Public Policy at the Australian National University.

And so I'd like to kick us off, if I may, Katrin, by coming to you first. And to ground us with a bit of context about awareness-based systems change itself. Because we had Otto Schama on the Mind and Life Podcast in the past, and Wendy, the host then, and Otto stayed at quite a high level, talking about concepts and the importance of mindset shift, et cetera. We're going to move now into the detail that they couldn't quite get to in that podcast, looking at what actually Theory U is, where it is in the world and where it's going. But first, briefly, what kind of failure, I guess, of previous systems change approaches or what kind of problem is Theory U trying to address that wasn't really possible before?

Katrin (04:05)

Thank you so much for having us and it's wonderful to see my colleagues here. So I think I could summarize the failure or the challenge we are addressing in a very simple way. We collectively create results that we individually don't want. So nobody wakes up and says, hey, let's destroy the earth. Let's make our neighbors suffer. Maybe some people, but, you know, from my experience, 99 % of people in the world don't want that. And still we do this collectively. And this is really the core of the work we've been doing. So we started off a little bit more simple. Otto and I came as postdocs to MIT. I came from the area of values-based finance. Otto worked a lot with organizations.

Because at MIT, there was a system dynamics group that asked the question, how do teams learn? How do organizations learn? And then Otto asked a really essential question. He said, why are all learning theories looking at the past? And how does this help us in a moment where the experience of the past is not really useful?

And I think, biographically, Otto and I are both from Germany. It came from this experience when the wall fell, the Berlin Wall, where you suddenly overnight had this experience that the whole system changes. And we asked the question, what can you sense in the now that helps you to step into an emergent possibility? So it's not about the future in 10 years. It's about what are the inner conditions that allow me to sense into what's emerging and, maybe even more radically, what is mine to do in this moment? You know, what future does need me?

Jamie (06:10)

Absolutely. It's tough, isn't it, being at a point where the past is no longer a good indicator or guide to the future and having approaches to work in that state of the unknown is freeing, right?

Katrin (06:27)

It's also freeing. It's also freeing because it basically says, you know, we are not just a product of the past, of patterns. The amazing possibility of human beings is our creativity, is our ability to bring the future into the world. And again, again, 'future' often sounds like so far away and abstract. It's really: in this moment, what's mine to do? And maybe that's one of the biggest learnings, and I like to refer to Martin and Megan here, that everybody always tells these big

stories, you know, how they founded Apple and how this movement started. But the start is always very, very small. It's a seed. It's tiny. And we have to take ourselves seriously, and the small potential in order to create the future. It's not about already being out in, know, this is a big thing. And I personally think this is the biggest challenge of today that we all feel we don't have agency, you know, faced with these huge issues. And this is what we are trying to do, create infrastructures that allow people to find their voice, to find their agency.

Jamie (07:50)

And how do you go about it? Could you introduce us to the Theory U framework and approach in broad terms?

Katrin (07:57)

So Theory U is several things. One, it describes different qualities of how I can attend to a situation. So what's my quality of listening? Do I just download or am I curious or am I opening up my capacity to feel and to sense? So Theory U describes these different qualities. And to deepen our awareness and our quality of attention, Theory U suggests also several process steps which start to break through patterns of downloading, sense and and lean into what's really the current reality, step back—you know, we all know this, you know you explore something, you dive into something and you feel stuck—so Theory U suggests at that point let go, you know, just let go of everything, whether it's a walk in nature, whether it's taking a nap, and then let the inner knowing emerge, attend to the resonance. But then I think the power of Theory U is that it argues immediately: 'hey, do something small, you know, don't wait until you feel like you have the whole picture, do something quick and small.'

Martin (09:20)

Mmm.

Jamie (09:22)

I noticed when you started talking about different forms of listening that somehow I sat up straighter and attended in a slightly different way. And I think you also started to speak a bit slower. Beyond having the intention to show up in a different way, do you have practices that people do in a collective group or individually that help them to orient to these qualities in different ways of relating?

Katrin (09:46)

I think this is the strength of the work that Martin, Megan and I are doing. Over the last 20 years, we've developed individual practices, collective practices. Very early on, we decided, no, we are not using this knowledge to privatize this, but it's all open access. So it's all creative commons. And our goal is to democratize access to these practices. On our website, you find processes for groups, you find also artistic practices. So it starts with individual practices like the listening, the quality of listening, it goes to... we have a practice that's called 'case clinic'. We have a practice that's called Presencing Social Theater, which is about embodying and accessing deeper levels of knowing. And these practices are scalable and learnable.

Jamie (10:44)

Great, thank you, Katrin. That's really helpful for us to orient a little bit to this space. Martin, turning to you, I'd love your help in further illustrating what happens when people actually work this way together. What's the experience of individuals going through this process? And what really changes as a result in the way people work together and solve problems?

Martin (11:11)

Thanks, Jamie. And my way to this work comes from the line of traditional organization development. So I trained through the national training laboratories as an ODI practitioner. And when I accidentally, maybe not so accidental in the end, came across Theory U, certain things fell in place. As an O.D. practitioner, I learned how to work with groups, teams, whole systems. And yet I was finding system change, system transformation, extremely elusive. And when I met Theory U, certain things felt like they had landed, because this was not just about mastering so many tools and methods that I deployed on my unsuspecting clients. This was as much about them as it was about me. That when we are talking about system, it begins with system me. So while my focus was out there, the clients, the communities, the teams that I was supporting, as Katrin was saying, maybe even more primary, I needed to bend the beam of observation on the self. It happened to be that I met Theory U when I had the chance, when I had just started working for the Zambian government. And I realized while I could go there and share, I was working in the presidency, I could go there and share all this knowledge and tools and processes I had, but that the conveyor of these important and effective tools needed to work on the self. And I started every morning before I stepped out of my little flat to just kneel down and remain silent for some time. And that allowed me to find ways of connecting to the big office I was working for, which naturally silenced everyone. If you work in the presidency, the office is bigger than any one of us, including the head of state himself. And when I hear people saying, 'speaking truth to power', it's real because in the face of power, we all diminish, we become nothing. And the only avenue left is to say, share what is expected, what is wanted.

But those little moments of kneeling down and stepping into silence. It was like I was awakening something in me that was slightly more courageous than my usual self. Because those moments of silence connected me not to the person I was serving just, not to the physical office I was working in just, but to the intention of the position, of the role of the office.

And that's what allowed me to find, no matter how feeble my voice could be, to say the truth that I was seeing, to ask the questions that were never asked in the presidency. In the beginning, that was annoying and confusing for the head of state who was used to simply receiving words that endorsed his remarks. But eventually he began to appreciate. And I would remind him about the job description he had given me that I was supposed to be an outer ego to him. And this is not always parroting what he wanted or expected. Jamie, this is my way of saying the work was no longer just out there. The work was on me as well. How can I listen more? How can I, the other term that Otto and Katrin and I know Megan also use, is to replace the term listening is attention. That when I attend, I see more than meets the eye because that attention requires more than just the ears and the eyes. I am opening other faculties within me. And that's where we pick the cues, sometimes even levels of clarity about certain realities and certain possibilities. With Theory U, then I found a way of making organization development work more real. And even if we think of or we talk about Theory U as emergent, but it also becomes methodical.

Because this work arises from observing and following and learning from men and women who had facilitated or brought about deep and profound change. As you will find in some of the work of the Presencing Institute, those men and women were not even aware of how they were transforming systems. So this work allowed them to step back, so that they could track and learn from their own journeys. That's what I would say for now, Jamie.

Jamie (17:39)

Yeah. Listening to you speak reminds me of the phrases like 'downloading habits' as being a, sort of, a standard response. And in a way, you were downloading the habit of being an advisor and what was expected of you. And then that's the sort of top of the 'U' on the left, right? That's where we would come from. Acknowledging the roles and the habit energy that is within ourselves, within our institutions. And then dropping into something else and you're, sort of, pointing towards 'sensing' or 'co-sensing'. And what happens in the rest of the U? Because the U shape is like almost a shamanic journey down into something deep and more connected. And the phrase open mind, open heart, open world springs to mind from what I've read. Could you just sketch that for us so we understand what the U shape looks like?

Martin (18:27)

To your point, Jamie, it's a process of indeed opening. Opening to the key question or questions that keep you awake at night that really matter to you, whether you are doing this as an individual or you are doing this as a collective. So when in theory you will say, co-initiation, beginning the journey to explore possibilities for system transformation. It is not about agreeing on the answer. It is agreeing on the question or questions that collectively keep you awake at night. And I love the fact that we talk about core initiation because many of the challenges that are in need of transformation have very little respect for individual prowess and excellence. We pale in the face of the challenges we are seeking to confront if we function as individuals. So core initiation invites bringing other people. Who else cares about this issue?

I quickly learned while doing the work in Namibia at the invitation of the Namibian Prime Minister, then Nahas Angula, who was deeply committed to making a difference on infant and maternal health. And I remember that moment when we were sitting with the Ministry of Health officials and the Prime Minister, and they were producing a list of those who were to be in the room, to walk the journey of transformation. And then Otto said, "And do we have young women who probably gave birth too early, managed to survive, that we can include in the group?" You should have seen the eyes of the experts from the minister of health. And then he said, "what about the traditional leaders?" Because we read in some of the materials that over 50 % of women give birth not in hospitals, but before their grandmothers. Can we have traditional birth attendance as part of the journey? We are used to solving these problems with modern day experts, but who is more of an expert than that grandmother who has helped her 14 grandchildren to give birth, some of them successfully, others passed on?

They somehow understood and accepted this weird way of including a different definition of experts. And then we went into co-sensing. Again, it is together trying to see the system that is in place now. Together, we stand a chance of seeing the different elements of this complex system.

Martin alone is not sufficient. I can peruse through all the literature you can find on infant and maternal mortality. That won't take me far. And then when we went into the system with all these people, including the traditional experts, we spent months listening to local communities, nurses and doctors, the suppliers of medical equipment and services. We went to talk to the people in the mining industry, as you would know, one of the biggest industries in Namibia would definitely be mining. So you can't leave them out when you are talking about what affects society. We went anywhere and everywhere we suspected could be hosting some clues on the future we knew was possible. When we did what was enough sensing, then we retreated to the desert of Namibia and spent time reflecting, talking to one another in a very different way, allowing moments of silence. We were at the stage of co-presencing, meaning doing everything we could, the slowing down you talked about earlier, Jamie.

In order to allow inner deeper knowing to emerge, we were sense-making. But at the same time, we were listening to what life was inviting us to experiment with. After this long period of playing with the information, the materials, the data, the stories we had gathered along the way, then we noticed that there were certain impulses that were stronger than others. We knew that they were calling us for experimentation. That's when now the group moved into co-prototyping.

Jamie (23:54)

And this is coming back out of the U now. So, Co sensing, Co-presence-ing at the bottom to the right side of the U. Yeah.

Martin (24:00)

The right side of the U. Yes, and this is just honoring the stark reality that none of us has a crystal ball in which we can see the future and all we need is to find the Holy Grail. The experiments, the small parts, beginnings that Katrin talked about earlier, so that we can explore the future that is in needed of us, for us, for it to become true, not by talking, but by trial and error, so that we can become wiser through our hands, not just through our heads. But then that stage of prototyping is in itself a mini U process because once you choose an area to focus on, an issue to focus on, you've got to go back and start sensing again. Can we hear more, see more, feel more, touch more deeply? And then you come again to the bottom of the U now having sensed in this way. What course of actions should we be taking? So we for months, and I think for a period of two years, we were prototyping different ways of tackling the challenges of maternal and infant health. After that period of time, there were clear results, signs that this could work. Because when we are talking about transformation of this nature, what works on a small scale only is not good enough. Even if Namibia is a population of less than 2 million, at least at that time, you need to find answers that represent that kind of population. So how do we scale up this work? We had learned enough through the experiments what needed to be scaled up. It is making the distances between where expectant mothers lived and where they could access healthcare or antenatal services. It is also recognizing the fact that at that time, Namibia didn't have sufficient numbers of nurses across the country. So, how else do we, while seeking to train the nurses, not let life be lost? Traditional bath attendants became handy. What if we helped traditional bath attendants to learn a little bit of what modern day healthcare, maternal and infant care looked like, and they incorporate it into their work.

So it was not shunning the old. But what if we worked with the old and allowed their wisdom to be enriched by new science and practice? And that's how elements of infant and maternal health began to show different results, that we could save mother's life, that we could save the infant's life.

Jamie (26:53)

Hmm

Martin (27:09)

But all that came from an eclectic group of people we didn't suspect would have all the answers.

Jamie (27:16)

Mmm. That's super helpful, Martin, for grounding that in a really rich case study there. I'd like now Megan to take a 10,000 foot view and look at the landscape ~ as a whole, if we may, and have a look at awareness-based systems change. You've been an editor of the journal on the subject. Where do you think this family of applications is sort of robust?

Where is it still a bit nascent and just starting to be applied? And where do you think we should be taking its claims a little bit more modestly? What broadly do you think we know at this point?

Megan (27:55)

That's a big question. Look, I mean, I think that the field is a relatively new field and the field itself of awareness-based systems change, awareness-based action research. And maybe just to give a little bit of context for myself, I would call myself a pracademic. So for those of your researchers in your audience and PhD students and others, I think that the emerging field is very much one of praxis. In other words, it's bridging theory and practice. It's seeking to bridge what has become, I suppose, an implementation divide as well, amongst all the disconnects we face that have contributed to the crises that you talk about, Jamie.

I think that the theory-practice divide is a very... is not one that is helpful to us because it divides researchers and the field of research itself. It's both a contested field and not a particularly well understood one. So, I mean, my baptism of fire back in South Africa many years ago was in embarking with the university on becoming a learning organization because our vice chancellor had met Peter Senge at a conference.

And of course, working with a bunch of academics who said, "but Megan, organizations can't learn", you know, so the whole notion of what is learning, what is systems change? Can you change systems? Can organizations learn? Those were all highly contested things. And it was really useful for me, Jamie, to get an understanding of how discipline-based people see the field of knowledge.

So my very early motivation was working in a medical faculty where we only admitted African, Indian and so-called colored students. We had an all black medical faculty in an all white university. And it was the classic problem fixing that you named in the beginning. Well, Megan, you're the applied linguist. So just teach these disadvantaged, poorly prepared, second language, underprepared, difficult, disadvantaged students, just give them academic literacy skills and then we'll all be fine. They just need to be able to deal with our wonderful first world curriculum. So that was my journey around how do you engage people, particularly in a context of medicine where knowledge is not relative, how do you release people from the kind of certainty and control that we like to believe we have with systems. You know, that we can actually construct knowledge, we can impart knowledge as information, and that will be transformational. I think that real shift of creating problem-based, learning-based, community-based programmes with specialists, with people who were discipline-based experts, and suddenly realised that students had a capacity for learning and for creating knowledge, for understanding, for tapping into their lived experience, that these academics had never had even an inkling of.

So that early work of building the capacity for learning and knowledge creation, I think is still some of the foundational work for awareness-based systems change. Because until people have that lived experience, personally and collectively. So you talk about the inner and the outer coming together. So whether it's inner development, outer systems change, they're integrally related. They are actually inseparable. And you have to take people, as Katrin and Martin have said, on a journey of change.

I could lecture them about problem-based learning, pedagogical principles and practices, epistemology, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera. But until we actually sat for a year with 15

specialists and co-designed a curriculum together, which included profound learning experiences on buses out into rural KwaZulu-Natal to visit patients with TB—because that was the first theme we did—And these specialists were terrified because they couldn't teach anatomy or physiology. We had a content list of things that they needed to be covered, but that wasn't the organizing principle. So when Martin talks about medical specialists who are very bound within their silos, within particular ways of thinking, within particular problem solving methodologies or discipline based approaches, they don't believe that you can have rigor. They don't believe that you can actually have impact and effect on human beings unless you actually are following discipline-based methodologies.

Jamie (33:09)

Can you just unpack discipline-based methodology?

Megan (33:12)

So for example, the psychologist at the university said, “but make an individuals learn, there's no such thing as organizational learning.” People are very siloed in their thinking, Jamie, so I think what I'm noticing about the Journal of Awareness-Based Systems change, if we take that as an entry point at the moment: we are now preparing the 11th issue. So we have two issues a year.

Jamie (33:20)

Mmm, right.

Megan (33:40)

We are now into issue number 11. We're an open source journal, which is free access, free to publish. A lot of journals you have to pay to publish. And we've just been Scopus listed, which is extremely unusual for a relatively new open source journal. Now, if you don't know, Scopus listing, it's listed and indexed on Scopus, which is incredibly important for PhD students and researchers.

You know, so it's good for your academic record, for publication, for promotion, grant proposals, all of that kind of thing. And what we're attracting is the most extraordinary range of, call them publications, but people doing exploratory work in the field of awareness-based systems change. So if I just look at the current issue, for example, the indigenous perspectives on systems change from working in an Australian context and bringing different knowledge systems and relational systems thinking into practice. East Arnhem Land, a group actually using metaphor as a methodology. So indigenous scholars and researchers working with local communities in conversation with government using metaphor. So of course, myself as an applied linguist, languaging is a very core part of Theory U.

Jamie (34:44)

Mm.

Megan (35:06)

Very core part of the work. So how we language things together, how we come to know together in the way that Martin has described. All the sensing in the field, the co-sensing, the presencing, we're shaping new identities together. We're shaping new understandings, new ways of languaging ourselves in the world. And Martin can talk more about the Ecosystem Leadership Program in Africa, but I've been involved in an ecosystem leadership program in Asia Pacific.

And we've got multiple languages. So you ask about the state of the field. It's quite interesting. It's both nascent and new and emerging and evolving and very sophisticated.

Jamie (35:56)

So as it's emerging, I'm hearing it's a little bit difficult to say exactly where and how it's being applied and what are the best practice examples, et cetera. So how do we explain this to skeptics? How does this best show up in an academic domain? How is it captured and articulated in that context?

Megan (36:18)

I'll get Katrin to talk a bit more about metrics as well, but I think what people are coming to understand is that what constitutes rigor needs to be reconsidered. Relational rigor, spiritual rigor, political rigor, all of those are just as important as traditional scientific rigor, which is following a particular methodology in order to uncover a particular body of knowledge.

But if you're wanting to bridge across knowledge systems and ways of knowing, which at this time is absolutely critical, then we need other forms of data. And a lot of that data is emerging from the work of dialogue. A lot of that data is working from the arts-based practices that are foundational to Theory U. Visual scribing, levels of listening, levels of conversation, the use of music, sound, all the arts-based practices are about the opening that Martin described. So you can't will an open mind and open heart and an open will. You can only create the conditions for that to happen. And I think academics are increasingly realizing that, if they want transformational work.

So there's a lot of work being written about transformative systems change. Siloed scientific knowledge is not going to get you onto a transformational path. And we know that from climate change, we know that from all the attempts to address problem symptoms at a symptomatic level rather than a systemic level in the way that Martin and Katrin have been describing.

And I think that there's growing recognition in academia that just talking about subjective experience as though it doesn't count as real knowledge is no longer a valid point. And so there are amazing traditions coming out of the Global South and the Global North. I'm thinking of people like Erin Manning. There's the major research creation. So as Martin says, you're not just talking about research, you're actually creating new bodies of knowledge through the very practice of research itself.

Jamie (38:41)

Action research... I once sat in a UN seminar on trying to define transformative in the context of adaptation and systems change. And it did, it included like mindsets and some of the subjective stuff that you're talking to, but came up with the most complex multi-dimensional model. And we do need a bit of a paradigm shift to try and process that kind of view of knowledge creation.

Katrin, could you help us to understand the ecosystem around this approach? And so how does it live in the world? Who takes this to people and where's it got to?

Katrin (39:24)

Yeah, thank you. So the work we've been doing sometimes I describe as democratizing access to social tools and social technologies. So in a way, the way you use your software or you use an Excel technology, you know, Theory U tools, you can apply to any sector, to any project.

And that's maybe where you asked about indicators, how can it be measured? How do we prove the success? We have thousands of case studies that show applications. Martin and I have worked for 10 years with financial institutions that use finance as a tool for change. And there are hundreds of bankers that we've worked with that create amazing solutions.

Credit scores for people that are illiterate and never had a banking account, to scale up of fintechs. So how does this work in the world? I think the biggest decision we've taken as a Presencing Institute is open access. So everything we do is creative common. Everybody can use it. And the second biggest was probably when we launched about 10 years ago on the MIT website, an open access program that by now has had over 260,000 users worldwide who can experiment with these tools, who go through programs with us, who then meet in small coaching circles in hubs in person and apply this to their localized situation.

And we often lose track of, you know, they go through the program and they do their local solutions. But sometimes people come back five years later and send us, you know, this case study and say, this was seeded in this moment. So, organizationally, we work with a very small core group and a huge group of volunteers.

We have three core areas: One with Megan and Eva and the team on research, one on capacity building, and one on concrete applications across all sectors. So that's how we are organized. We are a nonprofit. We need to raise funding for this work. And our intention is really to create broad access.

And maybe as a final note, you asked, how can we prove this? How can you believe in this work? And I think why you are asking this is because if our work is really successful, it's not visible. And my father-in-law transformed his family farm when he was in his twenties to regenerative farming. And he always said, everything you see is a function of something you don't see, which is the quality of the soil.

And we believe that everything we see in our society is a result of something we don't see, which is the quality of our awareness and the quality of our relationships. And this work gives very concrete, easy methods to transform the quality of our awareness and our relationships.

And what happens if we have a multi, a trillion dollar business model? It's called social media that destroys the quality of our relationships: Democracy can't function. We begin to hate each other. You live in societies with polarization. If there is not a minimum quality of relationship, we don't function as social entities, whether it's a society, whether it's an organization, whether it's a family. But we don't take this seriously because it's not visible.

So that's why we just launched a research project which was actually inspired by the Mind and Life Institute. You probably remember, I think, Mathieu Ricard and the Wisconsin team, University of Wisconsin, when they invited practitioners to meditate in MRIs. And you could see there is something happening in your brain when you go to this deeper state of awareness. So that revolutionized how the public talked about awareness. Why? Because it was visible. So what we think is the next step in our work is what we call a collective MRI. And this is published in the journal that Megan co-leads.

We think there is something that's called the fourth person, which is the quality that we collectively create. So if you have a team or what Martin described, you know, have some minister and you have this young woman who is about to give birth and you create a space

where they collectively go through a journey. You create more than just a group of individuals. You create what we call the fourth person or a social field. And we think the next step in this work is to set up a research project that makes, like Mind & Life did, this social field visible with variables, bringing people through a process and make this, you know, with the help of neuroscience and qualitative and quantitative research, makes this visible because together we are more than just a sum of individuals. And this is the leverage for transformation. And we see this in the U.S., you know, if the social fabric collapses, society collapses.

Jamie (45:30)

Mmm, yeah. I know in German you have the word Gemeinschaft in Korean, they have I think Je-ong or something similar, which speaks to the kind of the affective or the emotional fabric of societies and how important that is. In English, we struggle a little bit for language here, going to your point, Megan, about the languaging around understanding, co-sensing and the field, etc. And Katrin, it's difficult to find something you don't believe exists.

And I suppose giving it that name, fourth person knowing and social field helps us.

Katrin (46:03)

Social soil, social field.

Jamie (46:05)

Social soil helps us to take it seriously and to look for it.

Katrin (46:09)

I think we all have some personal experience of that.

Jamie (46:13)

Right, yes, exactly. It's very intuitive and in some languages it's just taken for granted, right? It's just we struggle with it maybe in our paradigm, in the English speaking world. So the Presencing Institute, I'm hearing, has a kind of education component where you've had hundreds of thousands of people go through public access programs, as well as quite involved leadership trainings, right? That they can join for a week or so. And you have the research program you've mentioned.

And the Presencing Institute also works as a kind of consultant group, you and Martin going to work with financial companies or with the UN, etc. Yes. Where has that work got to? Could you give us some sense of the sectors you've covered and the kind of results that you've seen?

Katrin (46:56)

We've worked with all kinds of sectors, from farming to banking to international businesses to the UN, to communities. And we've been called in for different challenges, whether it's about how do we future-proof—how do we step into a strategic process that allows us to learn in moments of disruption—or whether Martin does a lot of leadership development where the challenge is how do you really lead in these disruptive moments? How do you develop these skills of resilience? And we don't come in with this passport, hey, do you want to learn Theory U? We always are in service of a challenge that the organization or the community faces. And whether it's about innovating, about strategy, about developing the skills to deal with high complex situations, whether it's a concrete project around... I had the project the other day: access to free media in moments where you have AI and kids no longer use any of the traditional media. So what's the future of media? As I said, Martin and I do a lot in finance.

Jamie (48:22)
Small questions.

Katrin (48:23)
Yeah, so it's in these moments where you are stuck, you know, so learning from the past doesn't help you.

Jamie (48:31)
Yeah, great. And what are the tensions around being open source and around sort of integrity and training and how it lives in the world? I know there are hubs, there are communities, like how tight-knit is the ecosystem? How do you maintain some sense of, you know, rigor?

Katrin (48:50)
So the fun part about open source is you enable. And our current question—and Martin and Aggie, you're doing amazing work across Africa with the Ubuntu Institute—is what social infrastructures are missing in our society so that people feel the agency and can step into their work? The downside is how do you finance this whole thing?

You know, so this is if you don't put a price tag, I mean, Wikipedia and other open sources also have this issue. The journal is free. So, you know, we have some overheads through projects and through capacity building, but a third of our budget really requires gift money. And then the last challenge obviously is you see consulting firms picking up some of our methods and, you know, you pay \$4,000 for two days and you are a theory practitioner then, and they've never met us. And they do the mechanistic part of the work, but not the inner part that Martin and Megan described.

Jamie (49:59)
And Martin, what does it require to do this work sensitively and deeply as it travels around the world?

Martin (50:11)
We are running a global classroom, we have 15,000 participants, and on one of the breaks, I asked the lousy question, which was probably intended to fill in time: "How many of those 15,000 were from Africa?" And a qualified person with technology said, Martin, that's easy, checked and said, three. One from Egypt, Cairo, and two from Johannesburg.

And that's when my stomach churned. True to this work, the knowing is not just there. I knew three, but that was not sufficient to move me into anything. It was when something in my tummy moved. And I remember going to the next meeting we had in Berlin and I announced to my colleagues, we are going to set up Ubuntu Lab Institute, so that we can take care of the learning needs of my people on the continent of Africa. For a period of time, Jamie, I kept saying the same thing each time we met. Even to my own ears, I started sounding like a broken record.

It wasn't until another moment when a Western consulting organization wanting to learn Theory U, changed its mind short notice. We are supposed to meet in two weeks time face-to-face with the 32 senior executives, but no, we are not traveling. You have to run this program online without losing the quality of the program. It was almost like telling us they don't want this program, but one of my colleagues said, let's dance with this. And we crafted an online program, originally intended to be face-to-face. Their feedback was so overwhelming about how

transformational this was for them that the same feeling I had when only three people participated in a 15,000 global classroom came back. And I knew this time that the next move was to take action.

Then there was a little bit of niggling, doubting thought. Colleagues on the continent of Africa believe—and that's the poverty of some of the regions of the world that experienced colonialism—that you have to have this ticked off by Western education. If you are asking people to see where are you feeling the discomfort, can you please follow that discomfort and see where it leads you. That almost goes back to Africa's way of doing things. But we spite that in the face of Western education. How I am feeling what my body is telling me? Africa has always known that that is part of knowing. But if it doesn't pass through a checklist of Western models of thinking, identifying problems and solving them, then it is not education.

Jamie (53:36)

And it gets excluded. Yeah.

Martin (53:38)

But somehow we still went ahead. So my wife mobilized the little money, and our son, and they traveled to six countries across Africa, meeting friends and talking to them: 'colleagues, there is this notion. We suspect there is a very intimate connection between Theory U, and how we learn and do things in Africa or what we used to do as our approach to learning or the learning that is happening in our families and communities, but not recognized by modern-day education system. Jamie, that travel, Katrin is talking about, investing own resources. That's what we have been doing. We are passionate about it, but in order to begin something, you have to stake yourself into it.

When my wife and son met small groups of people, everybody recognized that all the important life lessons about how to relate with one another, how to treat elders, how to work with babies, how to keep a relationship, they were never just words or written texts. They were always embodied. You didn't learn about respect, love and care intellectually. If you like, you acted it in your physical existence. You inhabited the lesson. Every little bit I learned about marriage, not because it's successful, but every bit I learned and I ignore sometimes, I learned it by embodying, not because of the words that were used. My body registered the lessons. So it's working against mainstream, the Western approach, Western world approach to education is very strong. And when you ask people that feelings are data, they almost think you must be hallucinating. Feelings are data. And that follow through your discomfort here, lean into your discomfort, because that's where things will come through. Indeed, all the technologies we are talking about, they arise out of someone experiencing some discomfort with something. They don't shy away. They lean into that and then something opens up. The quality of relationships that Katrin talked about as, that which when we work on, gives us this additional fourth person knowing, is something again people recognize when we began our programs on the African continent.

So it was for me this fight between wanting to sound educated because I'm producing everything Western or to lean into that and maybe theory is helping us not just to awaken traditional wisdom, but also giving us ways of how to build on that. What does Ubuntu in the 21st century look and feel like? So in short, my own learning, my own orientation in terms of what is education and what is not, what is modern, what is ancient lies within me. And the more I overcome that, the more I open up to the wisdoms that lie in many different parts of the world, including the Africa region.

Jamie (57:32)

Right. Thank you, Martin. And as we start to move towards the end of our time, I'd like to think about where this work could be going. It's obviously, as you say, moving into very different places and cultures and quite some scale. But Katrin, what are the priorities for the organization at this point? Because I know actually going deeper with some people would be valuable, continuing that growth would also be valuable. And as an open-source nonprofit organization, what are your funding priorities? If there's a philanthropist listening here who has \$5 million to spare, what would you do with it?

Katrin (58:14)

Yeah, thank you. Yes, we need to fundraise for this work to keep it free. And I think I would do three things. The first, I deeply believe we need to experiment and innovate with social infrastructures that allow this social soil to reach a certain quality. So we've done, as Martin shared with the Ubuntu Institute, amazing work across the continent of Africa. We have a large group in Latin America that convened last year in Mexico over a thousand change makers across Latin America. So we have successfully shown that it is possible to create spaces for people to step into their potential. And I believe, as society, we need these spaces that are without an agenda, just serving people who want to solve their local challenges.

And you need community to step into your agency. So if I had the money, I would do this on five different continents. We have the infrastructure for that. We are just missing the funding. The second thing refers to what we discussed earlier. This work is often invisible. So setting up a research project that was a robust research methodology makes social soil work visible.

So that would be the second priority. This will probably be a six-year project that needs an alliance of different research institutions. So that would be number two. And then lastly, to create spaces for people who want to step into this work and help facilitate deep transformation to gain the skills and the capacity. So programs that are... And they obviously would also financially contribute as a participant, but these programs really need a depth that needs some initial grant funding to be pulled off, ~ especially in countries that have a weak currency and it's harder for people to access this. So that would be my dream scenario for the next five years.

Jamie (1:00:35)

Megan, if we have any hungry post-docs listening who are thinking about their next research project or grant application, are there any smaller than perhaps a six-year study of the social soil? Is there any gaps that spring to mind that you'd encourage people to look at?

Megan (1:00:53)

Yeah, think the social innovation space, there's a beautiful paper in the last issue of the journal on public sector innovation and working in the liminal space, you know, working in, as Martin was saying, outside of the traditional log frame-input activities-outcomes, so a much more organic approach to public sector innovation.

Yeah, I think that there's been some really interesting work around how you need to build transformation systems in order to transform systems. And I think that that's sort of an area that is really interesting is, you know, working, how do you release the capacity and build the capability to lead broader transformation work? And it's always, as Katrin and Martin were saying, it's starting small. I think that people have a notion that systems change means you start with the whole system. And I think that these research practices in this research paradigm are

asking us to start much closer in and they're actually recognizing that the way in which we actually practice research shapes new worlds. So it is world shaping. And I think that there's an increasing interest in transformational work as world shaping.

Jamie (1:02:06)
Mm-hmm.

Megan (1:02:15)
There's a lot of interest in the kind of things that Martin's been talking about. What is, you know, rethinking the development paradigm and looking at pluriverse as practice. So looking at post-development paradigms, so challenging traditional development and the way it's been done, particularly in the context of the Global North and Global South. So there's really interesting research and practice around, yeah, new paradigms for public sector innovation, for development work, for civil society participation. The next issue of the journal is a special issue on presencing the future of governance and democracy. And we've got some beautiful pieces. So one of the people participating in the ecosystem leadership program in Asia Pacific, a couple of them are writing a paper on the program that has emerged for women parliamentarians across the board in Australia.

So there's really interesting, innovative stuff to Katrin's point about making visible all the seeds that are being planted through the ULab work, through the ecosystem leadership program work that is starting to become visible and appear in the journal. So I would encourage students to really expand the paradigm. It's also not throwing the baby out with the bath water. So yes... But it is bringing traditional forms of rigor and new emerging forms of rigor. And that's very now common experimentation in the context of higher education, reimagining the role of higher education in civil society, Jamie.

Jamie (1:03:57)
Wow, yes, in order to create new worlds.

Megan (1:03:59)
In order to create new worlds indeed.

Jamie (1:04:03)
Again, no small thing. There's something in what you were saying also about creating the contexts within which change can happen rather than sort of trying to drive change itself. That's what we need to have a kind of meta view on how change happens. And as you were saying, how do we study that context creation within which new worlds can emerge? Martin, where could all this be going? Awareness-based systems change, the broadest terms in the longest time frame?

Martin (1:04:35)
In a very general way, it is the renewal of society. Maybe it is to allow ourselves as humans to rise to our next vector of evolution. We can evolve even higher. I mean, it's not just the fact that we are getting good at technology. Look at what AI has produced. But what is the AI version of our awareness? What is the AI version of the quality of our relationships? What my ancestors would call, why every being human and otherwise is your relation, and therefore you can't wage war. And therefore you can't go to sleep when there is a child on the street who hasn't got a classroom and they don't have their next meal. That level of evolution is the new AI for awareness, for quality of relationships.

Jamie (1:05:55)

Thank you, Martin. And any final thoughts from you, Katrin and Megan, to close off the episode? Katrin, how about you first?

Katrin (1:06:04)

Thank you for having us. And I really enjoyed the four of us also thinking together here. Yeah, I deeply believe we need to transform the social soil. It's the biggest leverage point for addressing the challenges we face.

Jamie (1:06:22)

~ Thank you. I'm Megan. Final word.

Megan (1:06:27)

I do think it's the work of our time, and we've been readying ourselves, as Martin says, for a long time now. We need no proof of concept. And I know this is hard for people to understand when you look for evidence of a traditional kind or impact of a traditional kind. But we have case stories, narratives, a lot to show for what it means to bring inner and outer development together, you know, what is possible with awareness in terms of bringing about and creating the conditions for systems change.

Jamie (1:07:06)

Katrin, Megan, thank you so much. We'll put links to everything that's been mentioned in the show notes as well as some other ways in which you can find out more. But if there's one place to send people now, if they're not going to look at the show notes, Katrin, is it the Presencing Institute website?

Katrin (1:07:20)

Exactly, presenting.org.

Jamie (1:07:22)

Thank very much. And am I right in thinking there's a Harvard Business School case study coming out in coming weeks?

Katrin (1:07:29)

Yes, we feel very mainstream.

Jamie (1:07:31)

Yeah, stamp of approval. You got the Harvard badge. Well done. And everyone, thank you for listening. We'll hope you join us again for the next couple of episodes in this mini-series. For now, go well.