Experiences of Presence as a Key Factor Towards Sustainability Leadership

Virpi Koskela, Lappeenranta University of Technology, Lahti
Kathryn Goldman Schuyler, Alliant International University

Abstract:

In this paper we describe how individual experiences of presence may be a key factor in giving birth to the kind of leadership that enables deep sustainability. The empirical data come from two studies of the same theme: (a) an international action research project about *Waking Up Moments at Work* and (b) a Finnish phenomenographical study about experiences of presence. Both studies address the generative qualities of *waking up* or presence, suggest the value of such experiences as catalysts for inner shifts in human consciousness, and begin to explore how this may be a core component of developing leaders' potential for contributing to sustainability.

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Many today believe that the only way toward both individual and societal success is economic growth, even if such a focus seems to be ecologically, socially, and economically unsustainable. In contrast, based on our research we suggest that leadership sustainability implies a need for significant change in human consciousness. We do not address the many scientific developments that are needed, as these are already being undertaken in universities around the world (see for example Hond, 2015 on new ways of thinking about water shortage and supply) or the vast political shifts of will that will be required in nations like the United States. Our focus is on the inner shifts that may be easier to attain than people anticipate—but only if we choose to seek them.

Modern technological thinking has its roots in the dominant Western Judaeo-Christian traditions, where nature is considered to exist for the benefit of human beings (Singer, 1993; Varto, 2011). Such thinking, which involves regarding *body* as distinct and separated from *soul*, *mind*, or *spirit*, and rational thinking as distinct from emotional knowing, implies an ontology where the brain is consider to be more valuable than the body, and human beings are considered to be more valuable than nature (Klemola, 2004). Increasing numbers of thought leaders see that such ways of thinking are not conducive to sustainability—particularly those coming out of Nordic cultures (Jakonen & Silvasti, 2015; Sveiby & Skuthorpe, 2006; Valkeapää, 2011). They are actively seeking to create a new kind of holistic leadership grounded in wider perspectives, such as common global values and ecological responsibility toward all beings living on our planet (Fuda 2013; Hoskins, 2010; Jakonen & Silvasti, 2015; Scharmer, 2009; Scharmer & Kaufer, 2013; Senge, Scharmer, Jaworski, & Flowers, 2004; Sveiby & Skuthorpe, 2006; Valkeapää, 2011).

There have been (and still are) civilizations in which people have not lived as we do in Westernized, industrialized, technology-oriented countries. For example, in Australia, indigenous peoples developed a "recipe" for society that lasted tens of thousands of years: a sustainable model where all are connected, where society is in balance with its natural and social environment (Sveiby & Skuthorpe, 2006). Far away, across the planet, Tibetan cultural traditions focused on the development of "enlightened beings," rather than material development (Willis, 1995). Their value system produced a way of life that shielded the watershed of the great Asian river systems from human-induced change for centuries, thereby protecting the overall ecosystem (Goldman Schuyler, Jue, Mitroff, Muckerjee, & Rudisill, 2007). Western societies have exploited natural resources as commodities to be traded, whereas some other cultures have had a strong connection with nature, respecting all living creatures as having the same "value" by sustaining a sense of connection with life as holy (Bopp, 1984; Eisler, 1987; Spiller, 2015; Sveiby & Skuthorpe, 2006; Varto, 2011). Senge et al. (2004) described this as an "earth-based spirituality" (p. 66) grounded in deep relationships with one another, with other species, and with the earth itself: a profound sense of connectedness that is generally not present in contemporary life. We are not urging a look backward to some supposedly happier, simpler times, as Jean-Jacques Rousseau or many fundamentalists might. Instead, we see the value of combining ancient wisdom with the best of contemporary *technes* to allow something new to emerge for our global ecosystem.

To our surprise, many participants in our research studies of presence described experiences of time and nature that were reminiscent of the models of life from indigenous traditions. This paper briefly discusses findings from the two studies that we conducted. Based on our research, we see sustainability leadership as being rooted in a different kind of awareness

of what it is to be a human being than is the norm in post-industrial societies. One way to describe this is by referring to what Scharmer and Kaufer (2013) have called a shift from *ego-system thinking* to *eco-system acting* by "changing the inner place from which we operate" (p. 16). We wonder whether the emergence of a more relational, distributed, sustainability leadership actually requires that such a new mindset be present among sufficient numbers of people, if it is to transform the health of the planet.

The remaining portions of this paper briefly describe our two studies and their findings as they pertain to sustainability leadership. We relate this to ancient traditions of the notion of a "tree of life" and then reflect on the practical implications for leadership development. The extent to which experiences of waking up and presence are core to sustainability emerged for the two of us as collaborators as we analyzed the data: it had not been a focus of the original research questions.

Researching Waking Up and Presence

Nature around me is waking up the authentic mind of myself, the authentic mind of the homo sapiens, the mind who is born millions years ago in the path of evolution as a reflection of the surrounding environment. I believe that the moment of presence is the waking up moment of that authentic mind. (EP#4)

We conducted two research studies over several years that led us to suspect that being present leads to or is part of being committed to sustainability. Goldman Schuyler developed a two-phase international action research project on moments of *waking up at work*, while Koskela carried out presence studies in Finland to study the implications of being present for innovation and creativity (Goldman Schuyler, Skjei, Sanzgiri, & Koskela, 2015; Koskela, Forthcoming). Whereas *waking up* refers to those moments when people notice they are more present to what is happening within or around them (Goldman Schuyler, Skjei, Sanzgiri, & Koskela, 2015),

presencing means more than simply being present. Scharmer (2009) connects the term, which he created, with Indo-European linguistic roots that mean goodness, truth, and "the beings who surround us" (p. 166). Building on the research of cognitive psychologist Eleanor Rosch (2007), Scharmer sees presencing as a way of moving from conventional analytic knowledge to wisdom awareness. We suspect that waking up moments are entry points to experiences of presencing.

The research on *Moments of Waking Up at Work* was carried out from 2011-2013. The project was designed to explore whether simply intending to be present could make a difference in participants' quality of experience at work and also to find out whether this would impact people with whom they worked. The collaborative action research study included a phenomenological analysis of contemporaneous notes taken for four weeks by 15 people from North America, Europe, Asia, Africa, and South America (Goldman Schuyler, Skjei, Sanzgiri, & Koskela, 2015).

Koskela's study of presence was carried out in Finland between 2011- 2014, with data collected through innovation workshops, free-written narratives, and interviews with 134 people. The data were analyzed thematically using phenomenography (Khan, 2014; Richardson, 1999) to find out how the individuals' experiences varied and manifested with regard to common themes (Marton, 1986) and whether the experiences were linked to sustainability.

Results With Regard to Sustainability

> *When I am in nature, when I live in those moments, the world is not somewhere "far away" but it comes to me. I can't say that I would be the part of [the] nature or [the] part of the universe or anything else in those moments, but I feel like being at home. (EP#4)*

According to both sets of data, experiences of presence involved individual moments of gradually or suddenly becoming aware of oneself in the context of interaction with others or with

the natural or built environment. The ability to be aware appeared as a capacity to observe and find new points of view for seeing the current situation, even when the experience came from becoming present to discomfort or awkwardness. Some participants described how it became easier to interact after such moments, whether with pleasant, neutral, or "irritating" people. Although the other had not changed, the shift in one's own experiencing changed one's experience of the other. In these moments, participants found themselves able to leave behind their comfort zones.

Many participants across both projects experienced moments of uniting with nature that seemed like a reviving of their connection with the earth in ways that are reminiscent of descriptions from aboriginal peoples before the advent of colonialism (Sveiby & Skuthorpe, 2006; Varto & Veenkivi, 1997). "Connection" (one of the words used most frequently by participants) appears to have generated improved individual awareness of, and empathy with, other people or nature. Connecting with nature seems to be an important path back to our inner nature and to a higher ecological awareness, through inner understanding of our human interdependence with other life and our mutual responsibility. Such "inefficient" moments, when we leave behind our analyzing and goal-directed mind by coalescing with nature, change our perspectives and help us find new insights and flow.

> *suddenly, I looked out through my study window, and saw a gorgeous tree, decked out in flaming autumn colors: red, orange, gold. The tree just stood there, splendid, adorned. My spirit was deeply refreshed, and I completed my grading, energy renewed. Suddenly, the work I was focused on spoke meaningfully to me, and my spirit was restored. (WU#162)*

Nature includes time, so experiencing time or timelessness is an intrinsic part of exploring one's space alongside other elements and forces of nature (Valkeapää, 2011). In the aboriginal recipe of sustainability, the All (ancestors, people, animals, plans) live together

equally in timelessness, in a spiritual world, the landscape of which is mirrored on earth everywhere (Sveiby & Skuthorpe, 2006). Similar elements of almost mythical nature-connectedness are seen in our data. Nature helps people forget their egos, tolerate volatility and change, sense the "bigger picture," and intuit "right answers" and paths to follow.

In Finnish culture, the forest has always been the place where you find both your daily food and living, and your inner self, "homecoming"—through peace, silence, and contemplation (Hyry, Pentikäinen, & Pentikäinen, 1995). Finland and the other Nordic countries seem to have more of a partnership orientation, as described by Eisler (1987, 2007). In contrast with Anglo-American cultures and their domination-style cultures, where fathers take their sons hunting or fishing—connecting with nature while killing other beings (also see Chawla, 2007)—Finnish parents teach their children to listen to the forest. As Louv (2008) wrote, people's experiences as children in nature are a vital step towards awakening a sense of *ecological self*. This suggests ways that child-rearing practices may impact sustainability leadership cross culturally (see also Fogel, 1993).

Discussion

> *I looked [at] the trees, long firs, understanding my place on the Earth. … I could understood what is a tree, what is the "attitude of a tree." The "Attitude of a Tree" is just breathing the universe and light, giving away "my best" through the roots, leaves, and fruits… (WU#142)*

The ability to be aware in the present moment brings a comprehensive shift of perspective, which often occurred for our participants through their connection with trees. In reflecting on these experiences, seen in both the Finnish and global studies, we recalled the widespread symbol of the Tree of Life. This is an ancient symbol of common descent and resilience in human life across civilizations in religion, mythology, philosophy, and biology

(Thiaw, 2015). For example, in Islamic traditions the leaves of the Tree contain the names of every person on the Earth; in the Kabballah the Tree of Life holds all the names of God and the qualities of human life; and in Nordic traditions, Yggdrasil is at the center of the life of all beings, including the gods (Bonelius & Linder, 2004; Thiaw, 2015). This symbolic representation of the sustainability of life and the structure of creation is found in many parts of the world (Bopp, 1984/1989; Sveiby & Skuthorpe, 2006). Most recently, it is seen as core to the popular film *Avatar* (Cameron, 2009).

Looking at participants' first-person comments, it seems that by taking time to reflect on their experiences in the midst of ordinary life, people found time and space to be present to their inner potential wisdom. Our data suggest that contemporary men and woman also find insight when they look for moments that they are present, and these moments often connect them with nature—with trees, earth, or water. In the aboriginal recipe for sustainability, all time is the same—timeless, without a descriptive word for time:

> *…Aboriginal people, on the other hand, conceived time not as a movement from past to future, but as a continuous channelling of consciousness from an intangible to a tangible and explicit expression…---…All were both in the sky world and here on earth simultaneously and they had always existed. In this sense, the Burruguu (Time of Creation) was not in the past; it was always present, always 'here'. (Sveiby & Skuthorpe, 2006, pp. 6–7)*

In this context, sustainability leadership can be understood as rooted in the idea that organizations are part of the natural world, not free of the laws of nature, and that leaders cannot ignore the impacts of their companies on the world by labeling these "externalities" and disregarding them when tallying up profits. Such a paradigm shift means becoming aware of how a mechanistic approach towards the outer world is fed by a sense of separation from, and exploitation of, nature, rather than respecting its presence (Bopp & Bopp, 2011; Varto, 2011). This echoes what Senge et al. (2004) wrote about the "importance of place" in conducting

meetings intended to shift people's mindsets: "I don't think we can underestimate the importance of place…. We need to rediscover the importance of sacred space, those places that are rich in life energy and potential for connection" (p. 123). In a story they tell to describe how natural places become sacred, they emphasize that it is both physical nature and human awareness that makes such spaces sacred: the sacredness emanates from qualities in nature that are sensed, blessed, and dedicated (using Senge et al's language) by humans who recognize and honor this special quality of the earth (p. 125).

Concluding Thoughts

The experience of waking up or presencing is not easy to describe or investigate with words, because of its silent (tacit) nature and its capacity to connect us with something larger than ourselves. As Goldman Schuyler, Baugher, and Jironet (Forthcoming) discovered in developing a book on creating a healthy world, health may be "that which silently reverberates in the background amidst all the chaos, suffering, and noise" (Jironet, personal communication). Waking up and being present are also silent, and yet echoing. Perhaps experienced-based silent knowledge birthed in repeated aware moments is a door into some type of original "blueprints for organizing," a way to appreciate deeper and more natural ways of organizing human societies, comparable to the Indian and Tibetan notions of *mandala* or *kyilkor*.

Unless leaders bring such deep awareness into meetings with their executive committees, boards, and shareholders, actions to create sustainability risk remaining superficial. The capability of being present could be a fundamental element of human capital, one that is completely replenishable and can never be used up.

> *It was a beautiful summer's day; the air was fresh after the rain. I stopped to admire a drop of water glimmering on a birch leaf. I looked at the drop and suddenly I realised that I was seeing the structure of the whole universe in that drop. I realised that the pattern repeated itself and extended everywhere..." (EP#6)*

Perhaps the singular experience of presence may be a seed for awakening the cooperative and complementary elements of the Tree of Life inside of us? During this challenging period for human societies, the ability to be aware could be one of the most important ways to sustain life on Earth-—together.

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