



Presence in Complexity Series by Doug Silsbee

Presence in Complexity Series #1: Reading Our Context

It's most people's experience that the world we live in is changing rapidly. We experience it as "VUCA," a term coined by the acronym-favoring military at the end of the 80's to describe the emerging post-Cold War world. The acronym stands for Volatile, Uncertain, Complex and Ambiguous, the intensity of which has increased dramatically since the term was invented.

Great. So we have a name for a world we experience as overwhelming! So what?

This is not the world that our education was generally designed to prepare us for, nor the world that traditional narratives about success teach us that we should be able to largely control and direct according to our wishes. It's the world we actually live in. And we need new ways to make sense of it.

In my schools there was a right answer. I thought if I was smart enough I would figure it out. When I got the right answer I felt good, and was rewarded with external validation in the form of praise and grades. When I didn't... well, not so much.

The conventional narrative is work hard, be honest, build our skills, treat people well, and things will more or less go according to our wishes. Now though, we notice increasingly that doing the right things doesn't necessarily produce the results we expected.

In fact, there's a greater and greater dissonance between the world we have prepared to inhabit and the world that actually exists. A growing gap between our reasonable expectations that we can control much of our worlds, and the disturbing evidence that we can't control much at all. This dissonance is part of what is fueling angry anti-establishment political movements.

Further, we can feel that it's our fault. We sometimes think we only need to tighten down. Work harder. Build our leadership or technical competencies. Get more power so we are finally in charge. Then, somehow, the ship would right itself and we'd be able to sail more or less on course to what James Flaherty calls "the island where everything works out."

This is actually wrong. Our internalized and instinctive responses to changing conditions are often wrong. Doubling down to do more what we've always done is usually anti-helpful.



The most useful starting point towards a radically new way of leading is actually a new way of seeing the world. It means being present to what is real, instead of being surprised and reactive when it differs from what we expect.

In a classic [Harvard Business Review](#) article, Dave Snowden proposes four domains. These broad distinctions begin to build a vocabulary for observing and navigating a new reality that is radically different from what we have prepared for. And, they support new ways to organize ourselves as leaders.

These domains are:

- **Obvious** (Snowden uses the term Simple.) This is the domain of predictable, straightforward action. Cause and effect is known, and we can safely assume that if we take a certain action, our desired results will follow. *Changing the tire on the car, delegating a project to a competent direct report, sitting down to a family dinner.*
- **Complicated.** Here, cause and effect is predictable, but we don't necessarily know how to do it. With the right expertise (which we can presumably find) we can create an optimal solution, but there are lots of interrelated elements in a solution that have to be considered for the best results. *Diagnosing a subtle engine problem, prioritizing tasks in a complicated workflow, planning an elaborate menu for a dinner party with multiple dietary restrictions.*
- **Complex.** In this domain, cause and effect are not predictable. There are many interrelated factors that are unknown, and some things in the system affect other things in ways that are not possible to predict. The harder we push, the more unanticipated side effects tend to appear. Others behave in ways that don't make sense to us. *Driving through rush hour when the optimal route is constantly changing, building commitment in a team to a new and challenging project, a family reunion where some of the people dislike each other.*
- **Chaotic.** Here, events are disconnected, and seem to appear at random. There is no apparent cause and effect at all, and phenomena are coming at us faster than we can react or make sense. There's no time to process, and patterns are not visible to us. *A truck runs a red light in front of us and we careen to avoid it, an all hands emergency meeting is called in the middle of our team planning session, a fistfight breaks out at the family reunion.*

If we misread the context, and act from wrong assumptions, we will find ourselves expending lots of energy and getting poor results.

For example, if we log onto Waze to obtain crowd-sourced traffic flow to drive to the store on a Sunday morning with no traffic (responding to an Obvious context with a Complex



solution,) our kids will think we are trying to be cool but are actually being ridiculous. This is low cost but illustrative.

However, if we need to build team commitment to a challenging project (Complex) but treat it as if it were simply a matter of re-prioritizing tasks (Complicated) we will be rightly seen as tone-deaf, controlling and simplistic. Much bigger cost.

In complexity, we find our sense of our own competence challenged. Because we don't know how to navigate this terrain, we tend to double down on what we've always done in an effort to re-establish our inner sense of a competent self. (The effects of this on our own identity are the topic of the next post!)

Building our literacy at staying present, sensing the context, and then acting consistently with what the context is asking of us, is the art of leadership.

- What challenge are you facing that is confronting you with the limitations of what you can control?
- What components of this challenge are Obvious, Complicated, and Complex, or Chaotic?
- How do these distinctions help you make sense of the situation?



Presence in Complexity Series #2: Identity on the Line

We experience situations as difficult when they call into question our sense of who we are.

Among most of the people I know, domestically and overseas, there is a sense of outrage about last week's election. Among others, there is presumably a sense of vindication, of optimism, of finally being heard. Both of those responses are understandable. Both sets of people are equally convinced that they are in possession of the truth. Our response to the election is determined by its resonance with our identity, with our very sense of self.

"Challenging" isn't a descriptor of the situation so much as a descriptor of our perspective on the situation. Our responses in complexity are often determined, in ways that are both debilitating and invisible to us, by our perspective.

We might believe that things should be otherwise. We tell ourselves: "I should have predicted this." "I should be able to control this situation or solve that problem." "I should be up to this challenge."

When we believe these things, we will likely experience our situation as frustrating. Our identity feels on the line. We may tighten down and work harder. Paradoxically, these very understandable responses may make it harder to actually change the situation.

When we see that the situation is inherently unpredictable and uncontrollable, we relax. And, paradoxically, this relaxation can make it easier to see and make new moves. Being present to how our identity is being triggered is a key to this most useful relaxation and acceptance.

Let's explore the notion of identity, and see where this leads us.

Our identity was formed early in life as we sought to discover how to survive and thrive in families of origin that were universally less than perfect. As young children, we navigated this less-than-ideal circumstance. We shaped ourselves to get what we needed from life, and to differentiate ourselves as a person. Successful strategies become embodied in our personality, and eventually come to define us.

(It's fun to watch my four year old grandson, Max, doing this.... the amount of will this little guy possesses, and is willing to assert in pursuit of what he wants or doesn't want at a particular time, is absolutely astounding! He is a force to be reckoned with!)

Identity is how a developing human becomes solidified as a personality. Our deepest drives feed a relentless, unconscious, and automatic life-long process of constructing and defending our identity.



The Buddhist notions of attachments and aversions speak to this. They are the self-correction mechanisms that keep identity in place. They are the underlying drivers of behavior.

Attachments are the pulls towards something (a glass of wine, the admiration of others, solving a problem) that gives us positive experiences. Attachments are what advertisements trigger when they pitch make-up, drugs, vacations, or a candidate that tells us what we want to believe, even if it doesn't make rational sense. As leaders, getting things done is supported by our attachments to action and results, to being successful.

Aversions, on the other hand, are the instinctual mechanisms of avoidance. Originally designed to help us avoid predators, they work just as well as drivers to help us avoid embarrassment, looking stupid, or whatever our particular definition of failure might be.

Bottom line? We seek what we are attached to. We avoid what we have aversions to. Underneath, and preceding, every behavior and action is an attachment or an aversion. Look and you will see them. They are the internal self-correction mechanisms through which we organize ourselves in life to keep our identity intact.

So, back to complexity and suffering. Situations that are VUCA (volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous) challenge our identity as someone who can control events or make things happen.

Complexity activates our attachments and aversions. We are attached to solving the problem or making progress or achieving results (because our identity is linked to those things happening.) And, we have an aversion to looking inadequate or failing or staying stuck (because our identity is linked to those things not happening.)

Our experience of a complex environment is, in fact, directly correlated with the identity we have built over a lifetime, and now finds itself challenged by the very complexity in which we are leading.

Similarly, our view of the election results depends on our whether our identity is being affirmed by the victor's rhetoric. If it is, our attachments are triggered: we feel seen and our energy and optimism increase. Our identity responds to these messages, and we move towards the victor.

If, on the other hand, our identity is threatened by the victor's rhetoric, our response is very different. Our aversions will be triggered if we belong to any of the many groups he has insulted, or if our values and the people and things we care about are threatened.

Unfortunately our biological tendency when our identity is under threat is to tighten down, do more, and work harder. Paradoxically, as we shall see in subsequent blog posts, these may be exactly the wrong things to do when we are operating in complexity. Tightening down and



working harder are the instinctual responses to identity threats, but they can make it more difficult to navigate fluidly and creatively and compassionately in complexity. Acting in complexity with conventional, identity-preserving behaviors often makes the situation more difficult, and real progress more elusive.

When our identity needs, and the attachments and aversions that keep them intact, are invisible to us, they sabotage our effectiveness as leaders in countless ways, small and large. This is true whether the situation is big (like the US election) or small (a difficult conversation with a loved one) or in between (like the teams and organizations we lead.)

We can learn to see how our identity is being triggered by the situations we are in. And, we can learn to stay present with the attachments and aversions that arise in response to our situation, no matter how strong they are. This is the key to resilience and choice.

- How does your current context challenge your identity? What risks do you experience, personally, in this situation?
- How does your current context enliven and invite you to be your best?
- What attachments do you recognize? What aversions? How do you experience these as reactions to complexity and unpredictability?



Presence in Complexity Series #3: What Does the Body Have to Do With It?

Everything, really! Our body structures our interpretations of the world around us, generates our reactions to things around us, and determines the actions we take. Attention in the body is the key to staying resourceful when the world isn't cooperating. It is how we can bring bringing awareness and choice into our reactions to the world.

In the previous post, we saw how our identity gets challenged in complexity. We are constantly confronted by our limits. We know we can get things done, but our project is plagued by delays. People we usually can count on disappoint us, and we find ourselves angry. Something unpredictable happens, and we tell ourselves we should have seen it coming. Or, we are surprised by our over-reaction to a provocation that ordinarily wouldn't seem a big deal.

The person we imagine ourselves to be would sail smoothly through all this. But, the person we actually are isn't sailing smoothly at all!

We find ourselves set back on our heels over and over again by realities that confront us with gaps in our capabilities. Or, call into question the very competencies that give us pride and meaning and a sense of self.

Relax... this is simply complexity challenging our identity! It's normal!

Identity is an embodied phenomenon. Our identity, our reliable sense of self, is held in place by *attachments and aversions*. Attachments are urges towards experiences that are safe and pleasurable and that reinforce who we believe ourselves to be. And aversions are urges to avoid what is unsafe, unpleasant, or challenges who we believe ourselves to be.

Attachments and aversions can be felt in the body. For example, the tightening in our belly as someone gives us difficult feedback is an aversion. The small surge of energy when we see an email in our inbox from someone we made a request of is an attachment. The impulse to eat just one more cookie is an attachment; the resistance we feel to drafting a touchy email is an aversion.

When we begin to look, attachments and aversions are everywhere. They are the direct experience of the urges within our body as it constructs and defends our identity. These urges drive our relationships, our connections with what's important, our curiosity, and our avoidance of danger.

These urges are constant and vigilant. They steer us automatically towards what strengthens identity and away from what threatens identity.



How is this pragmatic?

In our coach training and our work with leaders in complexity, we practice awareness of our interior experience. We slow ourselves down. We pay attention. When we focus on our experience, there is lots of information. We miss it when we are running fast, but the information is there for the reaping. We just have to learn how to look.

We can use this information to guide us as leaders and humans. Sensing attachments and aversions reveals our body acting to strengthen or defend identity. We can learn to stay present to our body's precursors to action, intervening and choosing before it is too late to choose.

Five minutes ago, as I sat here writing this blog post, a text message arrived. A close colleague was inviting me to collaborate on a choice piece of work overseas, three weeks from now. I could feel my attachments. My heartbeat quickened. My energy rose. I sat up straighter. I watched my thoughts began to race as my nervous system automatically began to figure out how to fit this into an already packed calendar. I watched myself generate stories to justify doing so: this work would pay well, it's overseas in a cool place, it's with a high profile client, it would be fun and gratifying to work with this colleague, etc, etc...

All true. And, I recognized the feel of this pull. I saw clearly how the opportunity tugged at my identity by triggering multiple attachments. I saw that these strong identity-driven urges to say Yes were leading towards a commitment that would require abandoning several other promises that I had already made to my family and to another project that is very important to me.

In the past, I would have found a way to make it work, and cleaned up the messes later. Now, I am able to see that my attachment was hijacking me. I replied to my colleague that I appreciated the invitation but couldn't make it work. And, I came back to writing this blog post, sitting on a rainy morning next to my wife and my dogs, writing what is mine to write.

It is the body's job to keep the organism safe. The mechanisms to do so are elegantly designed to handle this, reliably and below the level of awareness. Our nervous system is designed to avoid dangers like hungry lions, and operates fundamentally the same with the creation and preservation of identity. Like angry spouses. Or, people with power who want to give us feedback. Our body is constantly organizing itself, through attachments and aversions, to navigate the world in ways that construct and protect our identity.

Unless and until we bring awareness to illuminating the inner workings of these drivers, they run us. We can learn to recognize the experience of our identity being challenged by unpredictable circumstances. We can bring awareness to, the precise physical sensations that indicate our personality is involved in our reactions. We can do this long before our slower and more deliberate thinking processes can figure it out.



We can use this awareness in many ways in order to become more fluid, creative, and resourceful when the world doesn't show up in the ways we wish it would.

Consider, in relation to some significant aspect of your current conditions that you experience as challenging:

- What is important to you in this situation? How does this situation contain opportunities or threats for your identity?
- What are you attached to? What aversions are at play?
- How do you experience these attachments and aversions in your body? In your emotions? In the stories that you tell yourself about what might happen?



Presence in Complexity Series #4: Resourcing with Presence in Challenging Times

Complexity, for leaders who are accustomed to making things happen, is an uncomfortable space. Lack of predictability can trigger us in ways that reduce our resourcefulness when we need it most.

As a ready example, note your own reaction to the recent US election. What has been your mood? How are you reacting to breaking news? How do you feel this in your body?

Whatever your belief system, we live in very unpredictable times. And, this has profound effects on our moment-by-moment experience.

Complexity triggers our attachments and aversions. Where we sense opportunities to reinforce our identity, our energy ramps up and we act to build ourselves up.

Conversely, when we feel under threat, aversions arise. We naturally act from fear when our sense of who we are is put at risk by circumstances we can't control. Both attachments and aversions are likely to cause us to respond in ways that are less than helpful.

Awareness of our internal experience, and specifically of the physical sensations that are always present within us, turns out to be a powerful doorway for resilience and creativity.

Please try this brief experiment.

Take a brief break from reading. (I know, I know... it's a cliffhanger and you're super busy and you just want to get the takeaway and move on. But, consider right now, you're actually either avoiding doing something you don't want to do. Or, you're seeking to learn something new. Either of these will be well served by your taking an actual break. Pausing is a win either way. Trust me on this!)

Now, read this paragraph. Then close your eyes. With awareness, take a full inhale, hold it briefly, and then allow a *very long, slow and complete exhale* through your nose. Be fully present. Sense the breath exiting your nose. Feel your chest and torso settling. At the end of the exhale, notice how you feel different. Specifically, what changed? Identify three words that describe how you feel different. *Now, close your eyes and do this....*

– Pause for experiment! –

These three phenomena did not happen because you took a breath. You take many thousands of breaths every day. Whatever changed did so because you directed your attention to your breath, and more generally, into the sensations that are constantly present in your body.



The experiment asked you to shift your attention from cognition (like the reading and meaning-making you're doing in this moment) to the present-moment sensations that arise in your body (like during the breath pause.) You could repeat the breath pause, and if you do it sincerely and with attention, you will get very similar results.

By experimenting in this way, we can discover many amazing things. Here are just a few; there are many more. All come factory-loaded in the world-class performance package included with your precious human body!

- in any moment, we can choose where to direct our attention
- we have an attention selector. Neuroscientists call this “executive control.” It is like the channel selector on a TV, that can be used to direct our attention where we choose
- inside us is a wealth of constantly changing and dynamic experience
- sensations provide rich information about ourselves, including how we are reacting to our context
- directing attention itself changes, and regulates, the condition of our entire nervous system
- attention brings us into the present moment, making us immediately more aware, creative, and resourceful.

There is a lifetime of fascinating things about the workings of human consciousness to explore here. Please don't take these claims on faith. Investigate for yourself. Verify, from your own experience, how these claims hold up.

Complexity is a feature of our context. We are constantly being buffeted by events, many of which are unpredictable and therefore triggering. This requires different ways of leading than we are prepared us for.

Leaders are trained to observe the world, collect data, and base decisions on that data. It is crucial for leaders to recognize the dynamics of complexity in our context.

However, if we focus our attention exclusively on what's happening in the world, we will gain important information. And, we will miss essential information about our internal condition, as we are reacting to this context.

Attention practices are essential. We must learn to sense, within our own aliveness, how our context is affecting us. This is revealed, with immediacy and clarity, in the rich tapestry of sensation-based information within us. It is revealed only in the present moment.



From this foundation of awareness, we can build the capacity to cultivate inner conditions of our choosing. We can learn to lead in complex and dangerous times with creativity, resourcefulness, spaciousness, and choice.

This is not futuristic. This is now. The exponentially increasing risks and complexity as we face a very uncertain future require this of all of us.

Here are some questions for reflection:

- How, specifically, do you experience triggering inside yourself in the current context?
- What do you sense is being asked of you now?
- What are you doing to resource yourself in order to respond creatively to this context?



Presence in Complexity Series #5: Embodying Congruent States

Wow, what a world we live in!

It's a New Year. And, we face a level of risk and uncertainty that I've not experienced since the Cuban Missile Crisis. My father is in the hospital, facing difficult decisions about surgery. My plans for the next weeks are completely subject to events. It can feel that there's not much ground to stand on.

We are all constantly sensing and reacting to what is going on around us. When things are difficult or chaotic, this can be triggering in many ways. Our inner condition is sometimes completely invisible to us. More often, we just believe that our impatience, urgency, fragmented attention and tight shoulders are the inevitable results of our circumstances. We tell ourselves that we'll take some time off when the project is complete. Or when our new team member gets up to speed. And, we endure.

We miss the fact that our taking on the condition of the system makes us part of the problem. To the extent that the system around us being chaotic or fragmented means that we are chaotic and fragmented internally, we have lost the boundaries that distinguish us from the system. Our nervous system has become inseparable from the organizational culture and the system dynamics around us. We have lost our perspective, and with it, our capacity to be useful.

This, from a client engagement a few years ago:

I worked with a leader a few years ago who had established an audacious business goal with her team. Ruth was a brilliant and charismatic leader, but in spite of her stellar track record in a very specialized role, also harbored inner doubts about her qualifications, and feared that she'd be "found out." The stakes were high for her whole team.

In an unconscious effort to prove herself and accelerate the initiative, Ruth often dominated her tense and fast-paced team meetings. She interrupted, taking over others' ideas, creating re-work, and disenfranchising team members in the meantime. This hyper-driven results orientation was adding to the stress in the system, and incurring significant costs in performance, workload, and team members' ownership of the business goal.

One of the great discoveries of the human condition is that we all have the capacity to direct and organize our attention in ways of our own choosing. We can de-link our inner condition from our outer circumstances.

De-linking our inner state from our context gives us the freedom to represent and embody something entirely new within the systems we intend to influence. We can become an antidote to reactivity. We can be both a symbol and an instigator of a different way of being.



De-linking provides the freedom to choose an organizing principle, an inner state that is in fact helpful and supportive of the future we intend to invite. We become internally congruent with a value, a cause, a destination that matters to us. This freedom gives us the possibility of becoming ever more intentional about what we take a stand for.

It is crucial that we embody what matters to us. Embodied leadership is how we turn minute firings of neurons into dams, books, trips to the moon, lasting relationships, financial success, and social justice. A future we care about. A culture of curiosity and experimentation. Relationships that are compassionate and supportive.

As I write this, I am awaiting a call from the hospital in New York where my father is facing a difficult treatment decision. There is no question about where my embodied commitment lies. I have a very busy couple of weeks ahead of me. And, if he chooses to have surgery, I'm going to be with him.

I am fully congruent in this. Sure, there are complexities that will need to be managed, events rescheduled or cancelled, and consequences. But, for me, that's just details. My priorities are clear. I am going to be with my father.

Holding the focus of what we care about is not simply a matter of a mental picture, or a set of words that describe what is important to us. It's a matter of taking these things in so that we experience them as a felt state, as an inner condition, as an organizing principle.

Ruth was prime for coaching. She intuitively knew that she had become part of the problem and recognized that she needed to shift something. Over time, she began to see how she was adding stress to the system. She experimented with replacing the old narrative that it was "all up to her" with a new narrative that her "team had the chops to deliver" on this goal. She began to organize her attention, and actions, around the assumption that her team could solve most of the big strategic and resource deployment issues that they faced. She didn't have to provide constant motivation.

Embodying this new narrative took time and practice. Ruth increasingly saw her urge to interrupt, and let it pass. As she held back more and more, she also explicitly communicated her confidence in her team's resourcefulness. She settled her own internal state, which in turn helped team meetings become more relaxed, productive, and creative. She asked questions, sat back in her chair rather than leaning forward, and allowed pauses and silence where previously every moment had been pressured and packed.

She extended calm confidence into the team environment. They in turn stepped into this new space in astonishing new ways.

Here's the key. The behaviors that become problematic for us as leaders were acquired previously in our lives in conditions that no longer exist. But, because these behaviors worked at the time, they became embodied as tendencies that tend to emerge under pressure and stress now, decades later.



We can harness the same mechanisms of neuroplasticity and embodied learning to develop and integrate new congruent states, organized around commitments, futures and values of our own choosing. When we practice in this way, we cultivate useful and resilient states that are available to us both now and in the future.

- What habits do you engage in that actually reinforce unhelpful dynamics in your relationships?
- What resourceful internal state do you wish was available when this happens?
- What conditions produce this state? And, how might you practice it when those conditions are not present?



Presence in Complexity Series #6: Leadership Presence in Complexity

Leadership presence is the means by which our internal feeling states are shared into our relationships.

Consider this thought experiment. You are walking down the sidewalk alone, at night. Someone is coming the other way on the same sidewalk, a hundred yards away. There's nobody else around. How does this feel?

Well, how it feels depends on a lot of things. If you are a woman, and the other person is a man, it's likely to be different than if it's the other way around. We sense the race, gender, age, manner of walking of the other person. Our nervous systems, unbidden, manufacture stories about the other person and the situation that may be wildly inaccurate but which we believe to be factual. As our two bodies sense each other from a distance, we each assess the relative power and risk in the situation. By the time we are within 50 feet of each other, both of us know who is going to step off the curb and defer to the other. No language is needed. This is an example of a relational field.

Another example. We sit through a keynote with a compelling speaker. The speaker looks around the room, sensing the audience. She takes her time, changing her voice and cadence, injecting humor to shift the feeling in the room, using both animated movement and stillness in her body to produce affect and dynamism in the audience. We are spellbound, riveted. We feel our own energy and aliveness, knowing that the moment is special, and that the whole room feels it.

We could analyze what she is doing in terms of presentation skills and non-verbal communication techniques, which is part of the truth. However, it is more precise to say that she is attuned to the audience that the audience senses this connectedness with her, and that collectively, we are experiencing a relational field within which something remarkable is happening.

Consider that our relationships are, in large part, interactions between biological systems. To pretend that communication is simply a matter of speaking the right words ignores millions of years of biology and a lifetime of accumulated experience. Relational fields are the invisible, yet palpable fields of energy that connect us when we are present with someone.

Skillful leadership has this kind of attunement. Presence can unite. Presence can build relatedness and connection.

Rather than the traditional heroic model of leaders acting on the world, and shaping it according to our intentions, we begin to experience leadership as a deeper process of acting with the world.



Why should leaders in complexity be concerned with this? In short, our internal condition is a significant factor in the dynamics of complexity. Our nervous system is a component of the feedback loops that build or undermine a system's resilience. Anxious, driven, and over-focused leaders reinforce teams and organizations that are themselves anxious, driven, and over-focused. Settled, open, creative, and optimistic leaders foster the same traits in the human systems around them.

In complexity, much is unpredictable. However, when we learn to de-link our internal state from this unpredictable context, we begin to embody states that are congruent with what we care about.

Because of the relational field, our internal state is transmittable and palpable to others. (The examples in this post illustrate this principle.) Through presence, our state of creativity, optimism, settledness, and resourcefulness becomes available to others. Our nervous system becomes a resource for others. We often can't know solutions to the complex, intractable problems we are facing. Yet, we can reduce the pervasive anxiety and stress within ourselves, and through our presence, in the system around us.

A striking example was shared with me by Charles Casto, the Nuclear Regulatory Commission's senior executive in Japan during the Fukushima disaster. [According to Casto](#), the remarkable leadership of Naohiro Masuda was a significant factor in avoiding catastrophe.

Masuda was the superintendent at Fukushima Daichi's sister nuclear plant 10 miles up the coast. The sister plant, Fukushima Daini, faced similar conditions after being overwhelmed by the 2011 tsunami.

Barking orders and jumping into crisis problem-solving would likely not have worked in the immediate aftermath. Faced with rapidly changing and terrifying realities (magnitude 7 aftershocks, power out, sharks in the parking lot, uncertain fates of loved ones, potential nuclear meltdown, etc.) Masuda was calm and measured. He provided updates on aftershocks, and simply waited until the immediate chaos had settled down, allowing staff members' own sense-making processes to catch up to the realities, and then to move fast when needed. What might have seemed to some a slow reaction to a crisis situation actually became crucial to moving fast and efficiently when it was time to do so.

The more resourceful and congruent we become, the more our energy and presence begins to shape the relational field in which we are interacting. Our organizing principle as an individual becomes an organizing principle in the system. Our inner state becomes an attractor in the complex system of our context.



We are living in unprecedented times. The cross-currents of unpredictability are disruptive and, for some, terrifying. The humans with whom you live, work, and share benefit from the stability of your presence.

In fact, your presence is an important part of your response to what is happening around you.

- Who around you is stressed and anxious and ungrounded?
- How are you stabilizing yourself, in the face of what's going on in your world?
- How might you extend your presence through the relational field around you in order to be a resource to others?



Presence in Complexity Series #7: Resilience: De-Coupling State from Context

We live in extraordinary times.

It is a new form of agency to begin to discover that we can affect our mood, our sense of ourselves, our outlook on life, and our thoughts simply by directing our attention where we choose.

What do you mean? No drugs, no therapy, no decades of self-improvement reading? Really? Just directing our attention? That sounds too good to be true!

Well, yes and no. Yes, directing attention instantly and directly modifies our inner condition. And, with practice, we can build increasing fluidity at accessing new perspectives and greater resilience through our factory-loaded capabilities.

And, no, it's not always that simple, and, even when it's simple, it's not necessarily easy. Let's break this down a bit.

The cognitive portions of our nervous system (most frequently represented by the brain) are working constantly to make meaning of the world. We rehash prior experience in order to learn from it. And, we plan for the future by anticipating problems and opportunities and preparing for them.

The nervous system is exquisitely designed to ensure the survival of the organism in order to perpetuate the species. Most often, in our contemporary world, this is more about perpetuating identity and a pervasive sense of self than about physical survival, but in marginalized groups, in war, in poverty, with refugees, physical survival is indeed what is at stake.

The brain engages in identity-preserving "survival" activities relentlessly and automatically. Seeing our thinking processes from the balcony perspective reveals an obsessive pre-occupation with re-living the past and preparing for the future. Triggers range from the mundane (a mildly irritating email, or something we suddenly remember we forgot to attend to) to challenges to our identity (a professional public failure, a conflict) to the traumatic and overwhelming (the experience of a car accident, violence, racism or sexism.)

Obviously, these are very different scales of triggering, but the fundamental processes of disruption of what we experience as "normal" are related. Our stress hormones go up, our heartbeat increases, our thoughts become rapid. We are triggered and reacting. Our inner condition has been disrupted by the outer context.



In many leadership contexts this experience of disruption, reactivity and disorganization is pervasive and continuous. We get caught up in the mood, pace, and intensity of what is going on around us. We “take on” the state of the system.

The more responsibility we feel for what is happening around us (and clearly this is the case for most leaders) the easier it becomes to be in a continual state of reaction. Our inner state becomes entangled with our context as we react to events unfolding around us which are not predictable and over which we have little control.

Sound familiar? You, like I, live in a complex world that is continually challenging your identity. You experience this complexity as triggering precisely because you can't master and control what is happening. And, you have been trained to believe that you should be able to do so.

The good news is that you can begin to cultivate the capacity to de-couple your internal state from the context. The cognitive function of “executive control” can be harnessed to direct your attention to something of our choosing. For example, per a previous post, directing your attention into sensation instantly changes your experience of yourself.

Here, the Subject to Object move of adult development becomes visible and pragmatic. You learn to step outside yourself and take a profoundly liberating balcony view. These four small shifts add up to big resilience:

1. Sense, and name, what is happening in your context. This naming makes it visible and knowable. It puts you on the balcony, seeing clearly what is triggering you or what feels overwhelming.
2. Sense, and name, your own reactions to this context. Bear witness to how your identity is challenged, how you are taking on the stress of the system, how your thoughts are racing and shoulders hunched and attention span decreasing. Take a balcony view of our own experience.
3. Consciously direct your attention in order to interrupt the automaticity of your own nervous system's response to triggering. This begins to reveal agency in self-regulating your own state. Your balcony view here is that your state reacts to, *but is not determined by*, the context.
4. With practice and sustained witnessing, you may arrive at the transcendent realization described by Viktor Frankl. After years in a Nazi concentration camp, he wrote that “the last of the human freedoms is to choose one's own attitude in any given set of



circumstances.” This is the essence of resilience: the de-linking of our internal state from the context around us. This is liberation.

I don’t claim that this is necessarily easy. The four shifts described above may take years of practice. Old and deep wounds heal slowly and may always remain triggerable.

Yet, this de-coupling of state from context is crucial for leaders. We can’t lead if we are entangled with the system around us: overwhelmed by, and therefore undifferentiated from, our context. Our internal state has become part of a self-reinforcing feedback loop. The actions that arise from this state are likely to perpetuate or exacerbate the prevailing dynamic.

Leaders must learn to de-couple their state from the context. We must embody optimism and creativity and boldness and kindness even when the system around us is overwhelmed and reactive and chaotic and mean-spirited. This resilience is key to leading in a way that is transformative.

Begin by cultivating your executive control of attention. [Well-grounded research](#) demonstrates that as little as 8 minutes a day of consistent meditative attention practice produces long term increases in well-being, the capacity to take new perspectives, and to sustain equanimity in the midst of disruptions. That’s a pretty big ROI for learning to de-couple your state from your context!

Of course, Frankl was a remarkable guy. It’s patently unrealistic to expect to attain his liberating realization after a few 8 minute meditation sessions. We performance driven perfectionists naively think we should be able to make anything happen, and happen on our timeframe. This belief is a toxic recipe for suffering when operating in complexity: things really don’t work that way at all.

Relaxing, being present, and engaging in our worlds in new ways is both liberating and calls for more patience than our driven world easily supports. Baker Roshi said, “Enlightenment is an accident; practice makes us accident prone.”

Start now.

- How does your inner state reflect the outer conditions in which you lead?
- How are you taking on the conditions of your context?
- What exceptions have you noticed? What is an experience of your state being very different from what was going on around you?
- How might you experiment with de-coupling your state from your context?



Presence in Complexity Series #8: Scaling Awareness

Complexity is unpredictable. Our world responds to good intentions and common sense actions with perverse and unintended consequences. Our noblest efforts fail to accomplish what we believe we should be able to accomplish. This is of course a huge challenge to our sense of self!

And, it's not personal!

Complexity is actually normal. Even when cause and effect relationships are invisible. And, even when people with different motivations, and our own competing commitments, derail what we intend.

Guess what? There really are alternatives to working longer, pushing harder, concentrating more, or finding just the right experts to advise us (all of which are brilliant and useful strategies in certain contexts.)

Leadership techniques such as project management tools, performance management systems, outcome-based planning and complicated strategy development also have their place. However, in complexity, traditional tools often fail to produce the desired results, distorting our view and assuming a level of cause and effect correlation that simply isn't there. And, they ignore feedback loops, polarities, competing commitments and other inherent complexities that derive from the human condition.

Action in a complexity context is less about directing and engineering a process towards our desired outcomes. It is more about establishing an overall direction, discerning the present state of the system and the dynamics as best we can see them, stabilizing our internal condition, and facilitating a collective exploration of this context along with others who can help with the discernment of what we might invite to come forward.

In complexity, a different approach to leading is more likely to provide learning, build resilience, and to evoke new responses from the system around us.

Leaders can cultivate spaciousness within themselves, focusing on the creation of conditions that make desired futures more likely.

Probing, taking multiple perspectives, experimenting, questioning and embracing "not knowing" can often both gather really useful information about how the system behaves as well as actually tweak the system in useful ways.

Consider these strategies for acting in your complexity context:



- **Normalize complexity.** Have real conversations about how complexity is different. Share experiences and feelings. Engage the people in your system about their experience of unpredictability and uncertainty, and normalize it. It's astounding what a relief it can be when people begin to understand that nobody actually *could* know what the solution is! We are right where we should be, and we can engage together to explore and discover what's next.
- **Center yourself.** Having done the inner work to be able to de-couple your own inner state from the stresses of your context, act in ways that support the others in your system in doing the same. A group of healthy, smart, creative people who are able to maintain a pocket of sanity and perspective in the midst of a crazy system can accomplish great things. Leadership is largely about building a culture; culture starts with what we embody and model.
- **Design and conduct safe-to-fail experiments:** Conduct small scale, cheap, interesting experiments that are designed to explore how the system works, and that can be amplified if they do something worthwhile, or recovered from quickly if they don't work. These experiments reveal things about the way the system works. Examples: hold the Monday meeting standing up for a month. Encourage a set of employees to work from home one day a week. Crowd-source logos for a new business, offering a small prize for the winner.
- **Organize around direction, not goals.** Specific, measurable goals can drive organizing and planning. They also tend to narrow possibilities to one track towards the future. They become standards against which we measure ourselves in ways that actually reduce creativity and blind us to complexity dynamics. It is helpful to articulate an overall direction (e.g., better responsiveness to customer complaints, increased competency at delegating key tasks, more innovative product pipelines) and then to hold the focus on this overall direction while we experiment and amplify what seems to be working.

The usual ways of leading are often ineffective or even counterproductive in complex environments. It actually can be tremendously liberating to be able to name this, to recognize that we've been spending too much energy in approaches that actually don't work, and to play with a more spacious and wise way of leading that recognizes the dynamics of complexity. What if leading could in fact be both easier and more successful?

Consider these questions. Then change something, take some new action, or have a different conversation:

- How are you seeking to drive or engineer change in ways that, if you're really honest with yourself, aren't working so well?



- With whom could you have a conversation about these ideas?
- What simple, “safe-to-fail experiment” might you try in your system? Who would play? What might you learn?



Presence in Complexity Series #9: Investing in Embodied Capacity

The problem is, our lightning-fast cognition says “good enough” way before our nervous system has embodied a new capability. Physiological change and cognitive processing proceed at very different timescales.

A sound strategy for development requires components for both. We must feed our agile and impatient cognition. And, include somatic practices that build embodied, physiologically supported ways of being. There is no way to shortcut the latter, and the former will not produce the same results.

Ben, the newly promoted Director of Quality Control, was in trouble. Ben cared deeply about the organization. However, as smart and knowledgeable as he was, he was like a bull in a china shop with the operations people over whom he had authority. He alienated them with his brusqueness, and they understandably resisted. Morale and performance were suffering.

Faced with the very real possibility of losing his job, Ben was committed to learning a new way of leading that would allow him to work more effectively with operations. As part of a coaching engagement, and really wanting accelerate his learning, Ben joined a ballroom dancing class with his wife.

Accustomed to making things happen his way, Ben clumsily man-handled his wife around the dance floor, producing quick and painful results! With feedback, willingness, and guidance from the teacher, Ben began to experience in his body what it was like to lead. He practiced sensing his wife, joining with her, and moving gracefully together. This worked much better (and was fun and very good for their marriage!)

Dancing showed him the essence of what it could be to partner with the operations people at work. He brought these experiences back into the workplace and experimented with this new sensibility. Over time, Ben’s experimentation led to real partnering with the folks on the line. Coupling this embodied learning with parallel development strategies, Ben was able to turn his situation around and went on to become quite successful in his role.

Faced with a challenging job, Ben did what he’d always done: Focused on results, being direct. He was well-intentioned, but the results his actions produced were far from what he intended. This is what often happens in complexity.

Like Ben, our marvelous nervous system is adept at encoding life’s experiences into long term



memory. We learned well who we should be, and the habits that supported this identity over time. However, complexity challenges our identities in sometimes painful ways. Complexity asks much of us. We need new ways of sensing, being, and acting. We can't create a different future from the same body – remember the popular definition of insanity? When we face challenges, we need new capabilities NOW.

The good news? The beautiful thing is that we know how to train our nervous system to organize itself around what matters to us. An investment in embodied learning can become a life-long practice in the continual renewal and restructuring of our psycho-biology.

We direct our attention towards what we care about. Then, we cultivate inner conditions that are aligned and congruent. We invite this aligned state to take up residence in our nervous system, knowing that we are actually, literally, changing the neural networks that shape and define us. In so doing, we are intentionally becoming a different person, a different body, for the sake of effectively leading towards the future that we care about.

Our development accelerates a natural process that has its own intelligence. We naturally move towards greater capacity, greater complexity, and an ever-larger circle of care. And, there are many methods that accelerate this natural process. Here are some that are particularly powerful:

- **Somatic practices:** Like the ballroom dancing example above, we can find ways to practice in our body the capabilities that we need. Tai chi to practice settling our state, tennis to practice delegation and being in conversation, parachuting to practice trust while jumping into the unknown, conscious breathing to practice settling ourselves in high pressure meetings.
- **Community of practice:** Find, or create, a community of people who share your interests and who are committed learners. Build regular structures for engaging with these people and practicing together. Be with people who are on a path of development, who are committed learners, and who have some discipline about learning.
- **Who you hang with:** Find some conversation and thought partners with whom to have regular exchanges of ideas and support. Find people who are inspiring, who are intellectually nimble and able to take multiple perspectives, who will be direct and honest with you, who can be compassionate and incisive. Be with people who challenge and energize you; with whom you feel more alive and more yourself. (You can trust this feeling.)
- **Challenges:** Say Yes to commitments that you don't know you can fulfill on. Take on projects that demand you be someone other than who you've been so far.



- **Out of the box:** Disrupt what you normally do in order expand your perspective. Begin small: take a different route to work, change something about how you structure time, write with your left hand, listen to music when you ordinarily wouldn't. Then, you can travel outside your home country, look through a telescope, visit a national park, visit with people who live a very different life than you live and see the world through their eyes.

Consider these questions:

- What complexity challenge do you face?
- What new capabilities do you need for this challenge?
- What practices might build your capacity?



The Hand of the Unseen

When we are living and leading in complexity, we often experience the *effects* of complexity. We experience the unseen hand of governing dynamics. But, our narrow view focuses our attention on the effects themselves and how they threaten or create opportunities for us. Our narrow view actually precludes seeing the workings of the system itself.

We might notice, for example, that someone completely misinterprets what we said. Or that some well-intended action that has worked a hundred times over our history backfires. Or that, over and over, we find ourselves in a kind of dynamic that has a gravitational pull: we can't see the pull, but notice that we keep re-creating the same situation over and over ourselves. These are cues that there is something invisible, under the surface. The hand of the unseen is shaping what we experience.

A place that this happens for me is in my efforts to care for others. I learned this early in life: it was good to be thoughtful and considerate of others. It was ugly to be selfish, boastful or to put my needs above those of others. I wanted to be good, I didn't want to be ugly. So I learned to present myself as thoughtful and considerate, and to overtly subsume my needs to those of others. (Good reason to be a coach, right?)

At the same time, I would often indirectly and unconsciously pursue my own needs, of which I was ashamed. I would find myself startled that I felt resentful, others felt patronized, or my needs weren't being acknowledged. Sometimes, I didn't even know what they were! (Coaching is actually deeply satisfying, for both healthy reasons and for others I must be mindful of!)

This, of course, creates complex system dynamics. These patterns of thought and behavior are embodied within me, in my Soma. I express them as the Identity I have worked so hard to produce and maintain (which is sometimes painfully incongruent with what I actually want!) And, the way I show up (thoughtful, sensitive, indirect, and sometimes needy) affects the Contexts of my marriage, client relationships, professional collaborations, and relationships with friends and kids.

I find myself pulled into certain roles: configurations in my relationships that occur over and over. And, I can be blind to how this happens. In the language of adult development, when this happens I am "subject to" the underlying dynamics of the system in which I am living.

One of the key means through which we help our clients, and ourselves, to live and lead more



authentically is to learn to see the underlying dynamics that shape us. These underlying dynamics are both with us (in the body) and outside of us (in the ecology of requests and relationships that shapes our external context.) Making these dynamics explicit (or “object”) is the first crucial step towards resourcing ourselves differently, and negotiating with the pulls of these dynamics so that new options become available.

We can introduce daylight between us and these underlying forces. We can make visible the unseen hand that, left unquestioned, shapes our behavior and limits our possibilities.

Here are just a few ways to do this:

- “Seeing the system” using polarity mapping, elements of complex systems, or other distinctions that make the functioning of the system visible. These perspectives create a balcony view, and allow us to detach from the dynamics and understand why things might be so.
- Somatic work that brings us into the present. Then, we can actively and directly experience our own internal system as it interacts with the system around us. We self-regulate and cultivate more resourceful inner states that produce resilience and choice.
- Systemic constellation work is a powerful approach for “dimensionalizing” a system so that we can gain perspective and negotiate with it in new ways.
- De-coupling our inner state from the conditions around us. We can easily take on the stresses of the system around us. Differentiating our inner condition from what’s going on around us is key to cultivating resilience. Sure, what’s going on around us influences our experience, but it does not determine our experience. This is liberation.

All of these approaches enable realization. Realization is the present moment felt clarity of how reality is actually working (which often stands in painful contrast to how we think it *is or should be* working!)

Facing reality as it is creates immediacy, and releases energy that is then available for the hard work of being human.

Welcome to complexity.