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## Developing Presencing Leadership Acumen through Five Negative Capability Informed Practices

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## **Developing Presenting Leadership Acumen through Five Negative Capability Informed Practices**

### **Introduction**

Our current historical moment is unprecedented. COVID-19. Extreme weather. Climate change. Political unrest. Institutional breakdowns. Urban and refugee displacement. Digital propaganda. Information warfare and the growing list of concerning global developments unfolds. The widespread reach of these challenges is presently testing leaders in ways we could not have anticipated. The term VUCA (Millar, C. et al, 2018), initially coined by the American military to describe conditions of war and later adapted by management scholars to describe the new culture of business, has become commonplace in describing current unrest and the unsettling degree of uncertainty this entails for everyone. In the past year alone, the COVID-19 pandemic brought out leadership frailties to the fore internationally, humbling leaders across all sectors of society in unexpected ways that continue to call into question our most cherished human ideals of progress and modern life.

Added to the growing list of challenges that leaders are facing currently is how to effectively engage in leadership sense-making practices in a rapidly changing, complex, and uncertain global culture — particularly one that is becoming increasingly vulnerable to contentious, postmodern thinking habits that disparage facts and truth, subvert civil and timeless values, and mindlessly intensify polarizing habits of thinking and communication. This has given rise to new problematic shock and awe-driven media expressions of bullshit culture (Ball, 2017) that indulge “wilful misinterpretation” (Frankfurt, 2005; Kelly, 2014) and unclarifiable unclarity (Cohen, 2006; Pennycook et. al., 2015) with increasing irony and lack of conscience. As a more recent global social phenomena, this controversial specter in its various expressions has introduced new sense-making and meaning-making challenges for leaders and organizations.

With a growing disparity between appearance and reality, particularly on social media where “the strongest appearance passes for reality” (Steve, 2018), this development has had the pernicious collective effect of breaking down our “cognitive immunity” (Levy & Ross, 2021), otherwise known as the age-old ability to discern truth and facts from falsehood. In a number of respects, the erosion of critical norms of evidential argument and reason has further exacerbated our current geo-political climate. The growth of

disinformation and various forms of propaganda has had the unwitting effect of downplaying the authority of scientific consensus and de-legitimizing established knowledge and wisdom in the face of a growing ethos of collective frustration and denial. As a subversive societal and recent political trend of perpetuating false views over established truths, indifference over empathy, and entitlement over basic decency, leaders from all walks of life and culture are facing navigation and sensemaking challenges not previously anticipated. In the language of Theory U (Scharmer, 2007), many of these negative developments reflect an underlying dynamic of “absencing.”

Scharmer (2018) elaborates:

*Presencing means to sense and actualize the highest future possibility in the now. Absencing is the opposite: it means being disconnected from the environment outside your bubble, and frozen in your past identities and intentions. Absencing is based on a closed mind (not seeing the new), closed heart (not feeling outside of your bubble, no empathy), and a closed will (no capacity to let go of the old and allow the new to take its place). What do we call a system that exhibits these three features? We call this fundamentalism (p.1).*

Instead of leaders “presencing” their future leadership from the greatest collective common good, these various absencing dynamics have contributed to a deep fraying of the moral fabric that has held together communities, societies, and cultures since time immemorial.

In the face of myriad local and global challenges that humanity is currently facing, it is becoming clear that the future of leadership depends increasingly on a leader’s capacity to make effective discernments and interventions that confront these deeper complex issues at their very root source. To advance progress towards this aim, this article makes the case for cultivating presencing leadership (Gunnlaugson, 2020; Gunnlaugson & Brendel, 2021, 2020, 2019), which involves connecting with, and leading from, the hidden source of optimal and sustainable forms of action. As a means to realizing this aim, the wisdom approach of “negative capability” (Keats, 1899), which I will speak to in a moment, serves as a reference for cultivating a more robust presencing leadership.

Through the course of developing, deepening, and maturing one’s presencing leadership, leaders uncover a deeper resilient source of transpersonal meaning and purpose (Gunnlaugson, 2020; Gunnlaugson & Brendel, 2021, 2020, 2019) that can be potentially drawn from to develop our ethical compass and moral perception (Bai, 1999) at this difficult time. By practicing an ethic of leadership care (Atwijuka, S. 2017) that aspires to encompass the common good of all of humanity and species in nature (Gunnlaugson, 2020), in looking out for each of us and all of us, presencing leadership presents an approach to leading that is guided by our deeper wisdom and intelligence, both individually and collectively.

Working with developing and refining our acumen for a more robust presencing leadership requires a critical sense-making education and re-education of the traditional role and function of the intellect, as well as a skillful re-integration of the subtle senses, imagination, embodied and other forms of knowing (Gunnlaugson, 2020, 2012; Gunnlaugson & Brendel, 2021, 2020, 2019). By learning how to discern, suspend, bracket, and see through the aforementioned sense-making crisis that is contributing to conceptual and epistemological overload, leaders can work with transforming this challenge at its very source. In this way, emerging presencing-based forms of leadership offer the means to restore the heart, mind, and soul of what it means to be human and to lead from this place. Such forms of post-conventional leadership (Boiral et al., 2013;

Brandt et al., 2019) will require leaders to discover and reclaim for themselves directly, a deeper underlying process foundation of “experiential” rather than static representative meaning that takes root through inner existential and spiritual dimensions of embodiment and outer engagement.

For the purposes of this article, I contextualize the project of developing presencing leadership as finding attentional empowerment through a more in-depth understanding and practice of negative capability. Negative capability (Keats, 1899) was coined by the Romantic poet John Keats in a 1817 letter penned over 200 years ago wherein it was described as a desired state of consciousness in which someone “is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts without any irritable reaching after facts and reason” (Keats, 1899, p. 23). This term has since been taken up in education (Burt, 2014), in social psychology (Cornish, 2011), leadership studies (Bennis, 1989; Handy, 1989) as well as organizational contexts (Simpson, French, & Harvey, 2002).

French (2001, p.487) elaborates:

*Negative capability is relevant to organizational change management because it represents the ability to absorb and respond creatively to the emotional turmoil which can both arise from and in turn cause change. It implies the development of mature intuition, of the ability to ‘see’ what is going on and what is needed on the basis of one’s own inner experience. It demands the ability to help others to manage themselves, to see the relation of parts to the whole, and to act on ‘faith’ (Simpson, 1997).*

As the basis for what I am calling “Negative Capability Practice” (NCP), NCP supports leaders in developing their presencing acumen across greater professional and life contexts, where insights have not yet emerged, resources are not yet available, or relationships not yet sufficiently developed – in other words, in contexts where presencing leadership is needed.

At the root of NCP is a way of establishing a subtle and patient relationship with the daily paradoxes, ambiguities, indeterminacy, and complexities of leadership practice, learning to let situations develop rather than rushing to solutions, and being comfortable amidst uncertainty. This includes, in a presencing context, learning to develop an existential rooting in the deeper present, our deeper presence, and the unknown. Where forms of positive capability (Simpson et al., 2002, Grint, 2010) facilitate familiar leadership expressions of quick and effective action, negative capability works with cultivating presencing leadership by apprenticing leaders in the arts of learning to wait without forcing expectations and to creatively hold the deeper tensions, stresses, and pressures to enact solutions or results before their time. This deeper containment and suspension of immediate action and premature judgement create conditions for leaders to indwell the creative process more fully and to aspire instead to enact a more subtle or gentle action (Peat, 2008).

This is not to suggest that other forms of immediate action become less important, rather it is to point out that this deeper contemplative context of subtle action holds an invaluable and potentially transformational purpose for shifting the inner place from which leaders actually lead and influence, moment to moment. In learning how to uncover and sustain a deeper creative perception and effective presencing process, leaders can refrain from prematurely engaging emotionally or reactive forms of action. By learning to serve the presencing process of discerning creative emergence directly, negative capability practice is actually deeply positive to the extent that it fosters a more refined awareness of timing, which is central to leadership effectiveness and mastery. When we act prematurely or too

late on a decision, choice or intervention, we effectively miss the moment. By creating an intermediate or transitional space where leaders can draw and resource their perception, NCP as a whole brings support amidst the turmoil and froth of workplace life and culture, as well as the encroaching collective challenges facing humanity acknowledged above.

In doing this, leaders develop the ability to read between the everyday lines of experience more skillfully, to understand the place from which effective action arises, and to take a stand for stewarding the wisdom of their presencing leadership more effectively. In turn, it becomes possible to see through and beyond our filter bubbles and to learn to lead from a more coherent basis of wisdom sourced and resourced action. Because such forms of leadership are subtle and entail an evolutionary developmental process within leader's consciousness (Boiral et al.,2013), as well as re-orientation of learning through the subtle senses and faculties, this approach requires a different, felt-based experiential and consciousness-guided curriculum to mature and develop a leader's capacities in this direction — hence the five NCPs.

As the moorings of our institutional, professional, and personal lives continue to be seriously confronted for the reasons mentioned at the beginning of this article, leaders from around the world are currently facing the shared existential challenge of finding daily ways to uncover a viable basis for being and orienting not only effectively, but wisely among these emerging life-world conditions that resemble nothing that has come before, historically speaking. Lacking a foundational, clear-cut sense of certainty about what the right thing is and how to go about doing it has brought about a pervasive global climate of uncertainty and contingency that touches upon deeper philosophical questions of morality, identity, and meaning. In place of advocating for a new philosophy, ideology, or set of foundational beliefs, I am making a case instead for fostering a dynamic process of leadership inquiry, discovery, and post-conventional development through the cultivation of presencing-based forms of leadership. Because the NCP leadership curriculum I am advocating here is, at heart, process-based, it centralizes the inner dimensions of being-in-context (i.e. interiorly, intersubjectively, and in the presencing field) as the basis for guiding our sense-making and wisdom-based leadership education from the inside-out.

When this inner shift in leadership takes place, conditions for engaging wisdom-based leadership development become present. From this inner place, a post-conventional mindset or stage of consciousness is potentially enacted. As important as, if not more so than mindset, is learning to shift or deepen our underlying "beingset," that is, developing the ability to lead from a wisdom way of being. When we learn how to be with the essential nature of our experience as we lead and reflect, this connects leaders to the deeper ethical dimension of timeless wisdom and intelligence that is prior to thought, experience itself, and conditioning. Learning to source our actions and thinking from this inner wisdom place is central to the task of presencing leadership.

In an age where our sense-making faculties are mediated through secondary forms of knowledge in online environments of organization, commerce, and community, a return to empowering and enlivening *primary* forms of experiencing based on our direct experience at the root source is needed to guide leaders in uncovering viable and sustainable pathways into the future. As our inherent sense-making and meaning-making faculties are capable of not only directly perceiving this emergent wisdom and intelligence, but awakening into a way of being that is in touch with this living dimension of reality, the current call for effective leadership can be supported by NCP as pathways into cultivating core presencing leadership capacities. As a whole, this NCP curriculum supports philosopher Martin Heidegger's (1962) insight that — the real education lays hold of the

soul itself and transforms it in its entirety by first of all leading us to the place of our essential being and accustoming us to it (p.167).

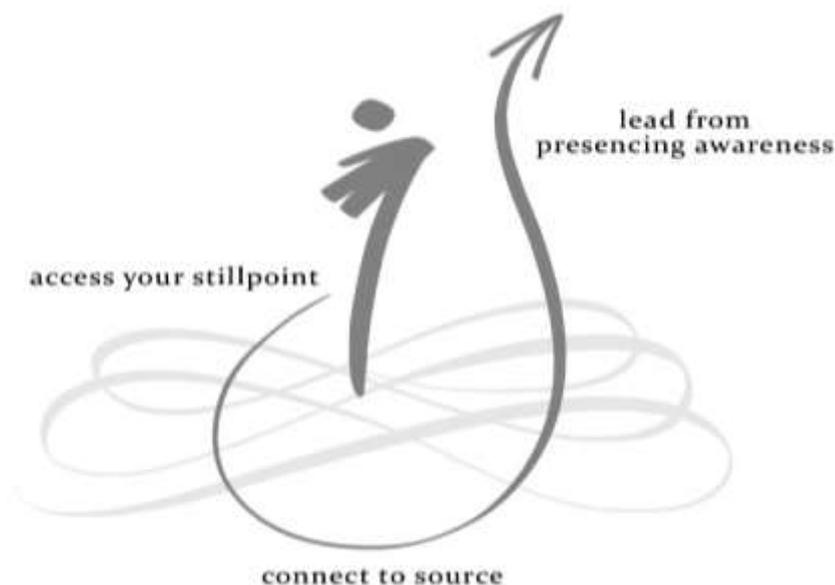
## The Five-Fold NCP Curriculum

*Every age has its own collective neurosis. The existential vacuum which is the mass neurosis of the present time can be described as a private and personal form of nihilism; for nihilism can be defined as the contention that being has no meaning (Frankl).*

Victor Frankl reminds us of the necessity for leaders to embrace approaches that involve carving out an actual ground of viable meaning in and through being and the deeper dimensions of our direct experience. For the current edge of 21st century leadership to rise to the challenge of co-creating sustainable and ethically-desirable social realities that offer a real basis for hope by making a difference for their organizations, their members, and the world at large, this article makes a case for presencing leadership to offer not only direction and focus but a foundation from which to skillfully direct one's perception and attention. Meaning comes alive through our "why," and today's leader needs a viable process to support this discovery and foundational empowerment of their purpose.

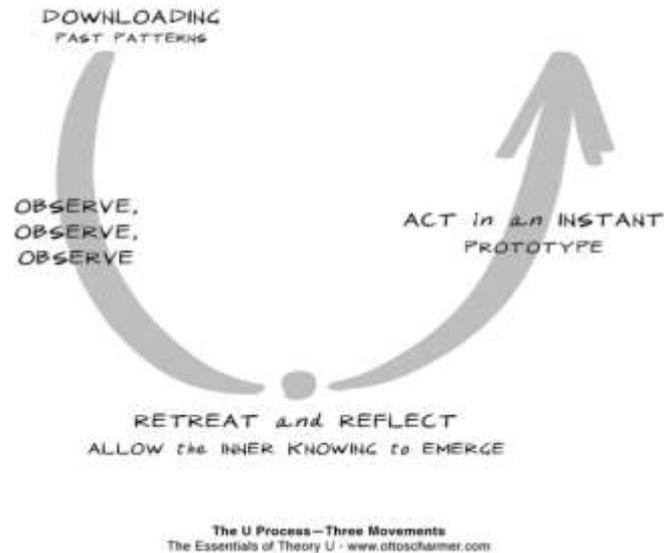
Towards this end, I propose a five-fold NCP curriculum to support the emergence of more robust and advanced forms of presencing leadership that are informed by two principle presencing approaches.

First, the leadership approach of Dynamic Presencing (Gunnlaugson, 2020):



**Figure 1.0: The Core Movement of Primary Leading**

And secondly, the practice of presencing as articulated in Theory U, at the bottom of the U:



**Figure 2.0: The U Process – Three Movements**

Working from both of these presencing lineages, this NCP curriculum consists of five key practices. Each practice fosters a renewed overall presencing leadership and way of perceiving the heart of the creative and ethical challenges currently facing leaders. Each NCP practice uncovers a particular inflection or dimension of negative capability in the context of supporting and developing a more integrated and robust presencing leadership. By learning a more in-depth form of suspension, leaders develop the ability to reconnect and become attuned to the emerging heart of reality itself. In developing the staying power for a sustained suspension in one’s existing presencing leadership practice, with the support of these NCP practices, leaders are able to stay in contact with the underlying source of their perception, effectively bracketing out the noise and uncovering a deeper sourced signal to orient their presencing leadership in our work and lives.

**Negative Capability Practice #1:**

**Embracing darkness as a fertile path into *presenced being***

Broadly speaking, the subject of darkness, in its associations with suffering and negative or destructive shadow realms of human experience, tends to be overlooked as a context for leadership development. This is problematic in that certain forms of darkness (i.e. as the interior fertile state of being and inner experiencing) are richly connected with world wisdom – existential philosophical and romantic poetic traditions from East and West alike (Huxley, 1945). Within the Buddhist lineage, darkness is encountered as the inner milieu of being through the subtle senses as we explore our consciousness interiorly in practices such as meditation and contemplative inquiry. From the existential lineages, darkness is the inner bedrock of our root experience wherein philosophical insight is hewn. And in the romantic poetic traditions, darkness is embraced via negative capability as a chief means through which the imagination finds its most potent hour of expression. Calling forth an exploration of the fertile forms of darkness to assist our deeper leadership purposes here, in learning to enter into the womb-like depths of our ground of being through practices like meditative and contemplative practice, philosophical reflection or poetic reverie, possibilities for encountering a deeper underlying personal and shared interior context of being await us. Here it is possible to not only nurture, but effectively transform and birth

new forms of presencing awareness, depths, and sensitivity in ways not typically explored in conventional leadership development contexts.

As our knowledge and information age continues to accelerate, there is a corresponding need for leaders to both speed up and decelerate and learn the ancient ways of pausing, slowing down, and stopping (Applebaum, 1995). To effectively engage this latter curriculum of presencing leadership, the professional development project of learning how to effectively manage our experience can be deeply supported by the inner milieu of being and its respective forms of darkness. Whether in stillness by candlelight reading late at night, on an extended solitary meditation retreat in nature, or in the twilight hours of dreaming before waking at dawn, the multi-faceted forms of darkness connect us to the older, cave-like fireside imagery and wisdom lineages of our ancestors.

Rumi (Whyte, 1992, p.35) elaborates:

*You darkness from which I come,  
I love you more than all the fires  
that fence out the world  
for the fire makes a circle  
for everyone  
so that no one sees you anymore.  
But darkness holds it all...*

In learning how to “root down ascendant, like trees” (Whyte, 1992), we, in turn, open ourselves to a deeper source of wisdom nourishment. Learning to let go of the habituated movements and rhythms of our conditioned, discursive minds, this negative capability practice calls us to descend into the groundless ground of presence and being to uncover another inner movement of being. Darkness invites us to make contact and rest in and from this deeper form of healing quiet and presence, which when sensitively attended to, stirs subtle discoveries and realizations from the depths. The descent into darkness shifts us into an inner place of felt receptivity towards what is not yet known, and in this coming-to-know through a deeper coming-to-be process of negative capability, the possibility of beginning to re-connect with the subtle interior landscape of our being, that underlying felt horizon and dark ground itself awaits. With the inner journey of embracing darkness comes a deeper timeless wisdom ground from which to steward our presencing leadership.

When leaders learn to effectively discern and decode darkness as an inner quality of stillness, of creative void-like emptiness, through deeper released forms of surrender and letting go, among other presencing expressions, here, darkness embraces us as support. Here, darkness is an ambient inner environment where it becomes possible to not only encounter the realms of being and source that comprise who we are, but also the navigational possibility of learning how to orient one’s inner nature and being from these levels of reality directly. In this sense, darkness can assist presencing leaders in finding a deeper trusted source of inner light from which to orient and learn to lead. As leaders learn to connect to this deeper causal dimension of being, philosophical bedrock, or poetic imaginal place, from this spacious yet subtly embodied state of wisdom, darkness becomes core to the place which source is contacted and experienced in our presencing leadership. By entering into a deeper union with source directly via the presencing experience, leaders restore an essential wisdom foundation from which to presence. Here, darkness becomes the unknown inner surround from which the impulse of life itself springs forth and leads us forth. From this essential void, new possibilities in the form of directing our presencing leadership are accessed. As leaders learn to cultivate a subtle relationship and inner receptivity to darkness from their own self-sourced depths via

negative capability with colleagues, clients, and their followers, this in turn develops their capacity for a more in-depth sourced presencing leadership.

Following from this point, the first negative capability practice of embracing darkness in our presencing leadership practice helps us hear through the noise of the more problematic developments outlined at the beginning of the article. As our capacity for presencing deepens and matures by learning to relax our attention inside the ambiance of this deeper wisdom-supporting ground, we can in turn begin to reconnect with the depth-dimension of timeless truth of who we really are and the core values and sense of purpose that awaits us there. Embracing inner as well as outer environments and experiences of sacred darkness assists our journey of presencing leadership as a deeper supportive ground through which we can uncover new ontological and consciousness-guided ways of resourcing our presencing leadership.

In encountering the regenerative, creative, and healing realms of both inner darkness (within our own rested states of inner calm and being) and outer darkness (with the seasonality of winter, and the collective hibernation happening during this COVID-19 period with social distancing and working at home), our presencing leadership can mature and develop through a deepened form of inner guidance. By uncovering a new negative-capability informed source of self-understanding, this fosters the possibility of having our lives, work, and leadership be resourced from the unknown as a way of being alive to the very fabric and foundation of one's experience. Embracing darkness is thus needed to reach a level of trust within our own deeper nature, as well as a trust in the deeper shared universal human ground of being of which we are each inseparably a part — both of which are foundational to developing a more robust presencing leadership. It is, in fact, the case as Rumi points out in his above poem, that “darkness holds it all,” leaders need to reconsider the implications of learning the negative capability practice of embracing darkness as a core life- and support-line for developing their presencing leadership.

## **Negative Capability Practice #2:**

### **Anchoring in our Ground of Presence as a pathway into *presenced knowing***

*Discard your memory; discard the future tense of your desire; forget them both, both what you knew and what you want* (Bion, 1980, p. 11).

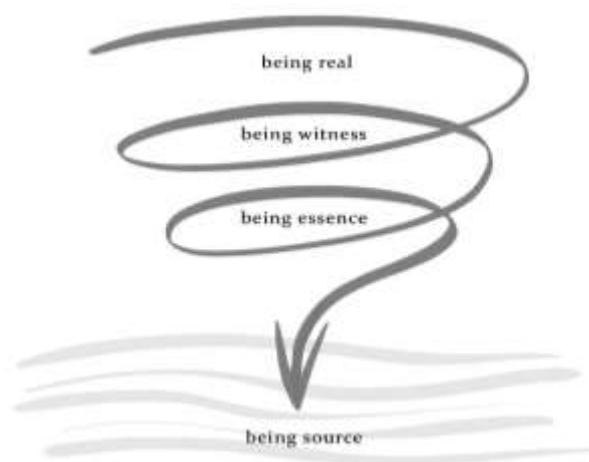
For the second negative capability practice, the focus is letting go of the past and future to anchor into our ground of presence phenomenologically through an embodied felt contact with our inner body in the deep present. NCP #2 cultivates our presencing leadership by maturing the quality of our presence by learning how to anchor it somatically in our inner body in a sustained way amidst action and reflection. The research on presencing leadership to date has emphasized learning to access the presencing field rather than the underlying ground of presence that sustains our presencing self (Gunnlaugson, 2020) as the site or context out of which presencing-based knowing and leadership unfolds. This has created a blind spot where our ground of presence, a powerful negative capability foundation and resource, tends to be overlooked.

In the work of Dynamic Presencing (Gunnlaugson, 2020), I make a case for contacting and then uncovering this deeper ground of presence. Learning to anchor our presencing awareness in our underlying ground of presence (i.e. there are four in total) via our inner body develops an embodied inner nexus point through which we can then effectively engage the presencing field. The addition of uncovering and learning to abide in our presencing ground provides an inner infrastructure to leverage our presencing awareness from directly. Without this leverage point, leaders are vulnerable to the assumption that

presencing takes place or originates in the social field. In practice, however, uncovering this ground of presence serves as a buffer against a premature presencing knowing or quick projection that is not-yet sufficiently embodied. By learning to anchor our attention in the subtle non-verbal dimensions of presence, leaders can deepen the foundational roots of their presencing knowing.

With the inner body and felt-sense guiding our enactment of presence, this second NCP asks that we reorient our attention from the “cognitive” dimensions of mind to attending somatically to the “felt-embodied” dimension of being and the source of our presence arising there. By relaxing a focus on the “external” environment out there in the social field, anchoring in our ground of presence asks that we redirect attention through our felt-awareness to the “internal” sense of being. This bending the beam of cognitive awareness back to connect with the subtle felt somatic awareness of our own presence sensed inwardly is a necessary preliminary step for leaders to uncover a viable negative capability-informed pathway into presencing knowing. Instead of searching or seeking contact with the presencing field outside or beyond ourselves, we connect with the internal locus of presencing awareness that is arising from our ground of presence within. By learning to contact via the felt-sense, the immediacy of our own presence acclimates leaders to establishing an embodied inner reference point for our presence to take root in us and *as* us.

Grounding initially in our inner bodies gives our sense-making faculties the chance to reset and resource from embodied stillness and the unknown source within. In cultivating a state of presence which enables leaders to let go of their need for security in the known, the threat response of not knowing is mitigated through subtle contact with the inner physiological points of presence. This opens our somatic attention up to the particular ground of presence and well-being that is supporting and anchoring us inside our presencing self. Here we are able to make the journey into the four grounds of presence, as illustrated via the core movement of Primary Presence (Gunnlaugson, 2020) in *Figure 3.0* below:



**Figure 3.0: The core movement of primary presence (Gunnlaugson, 2020)**

From here, we establish roots inside the somatic landscape of our ground of presence, which is essential to supporting our presencing self. By relaxing the self’s need for security and trusting instead in the felt connection to our ground of presence, leaders become more capable of connecting to the existential truth in each leadership encounter. By returning to this ground of presence, leaders mitigate prior levels of uncertainty and anxiety, which threatens fresh presenced knowing. Instead, leaders can suspend the pressures to go on

existing knowledge or to adapt new ideas too quickly and instead put their attention on becoming a generative space of grounded presence that when skillfully engaged, supports the emergence of new thoughts, perceptions, and insights from which to lead.

This alternative routing from cognition with the leader as *separate*, to anchoring in our ground of presence with the leader as *connected*, shifts our presenced knowing to a dynamic, embodied, and interconnected place of engagement. In turn, our presencing leadership benefits from establishing core essential embodiment conditions that reconnect us to the sensory nature of reality that precedes our thought, analysis, and interpretive structures, referred to throughout the work of Dynamic Presencing (Gunnlaugson, 2020) as *what-is*. Through contact with the sensory dimension of reality via *what-is*, before it is made into a concept, leaders learn to rest *in, from, and as* our ground of presence, which, in turn, becomes the principal gateway for leaders to bring ourselves more fully into contact with the whole of the situation and essential reality wherever we are, whatever we may be doing.

Grounding our presencing self through our inner bodies in this manner opens a form of presencing knowing that is more permeable, flexible, and interconnected, helping leaders access a more fluid form of presencing leadership. By developing the capacity to access a presenced knowing or ability for fresh thinking in the present moment despite the complexity of conflicting or ambiguous demands experienced at work, this NCP uncovers a sound foundation to draw from in the otherwise frothy sea of disinformation that threatens to mislead or engulf leaders. The anchoring of our sense of who we are in our actual ground of presence opens up a powerful somatic foundation for internal leadership support that builds upon the first NCP of embracing darkness.

Overall, exploring our ground of presence via the wisdom approach of negative capability brings additional support through a resourceful and distributed felt experience of inner stillness. Assisting us in aligning with embodied stillness and presence interiorly then spills over inter-interiorly into the presencing field, creating core activating conditions for discerning the “emerging future” (Scharmer) or “arising new” (Gunnlaugson, 2020). By dissipating excessive or non-sourced mental activity, our attention becomes well grounded through our inner bodies as we engage the presencing field. With this deeper nexus point restored and supported, the second NCP plays an essential role in empowering our presenced knowing, which is foundational for a viable and robust presencing leadership practice.

### **Negative Capability Practice #3:**

#### **Staying-with ambiguity as a path into *presenced seeing***

By suspending our deeper resistance to the unknown or not-knowing, the third NCP “staying-with ambiguity” plays a role in helping leaders unhinge their perception from existential anxiety or fears that may otherwise lead to projection or moving away from being with reality as-it-is. Learning to connect with *what-is* and perceive the fullness of reality that lies outside the constructs of our mind and experience, the practice of staying with ambiguity offers a path from which to stay open and suspend the arising content of our immediate experience and access a more discerned presencing leadership. Developing the capacity to stay with the multiple dimensions of reality more effectively helps leaders cultivate the ability to be in an open and curious state when encountering forms of ambiguity at work and in their lives, understanding this to be a precursor to learning, insight, and deeper discovery. When ambiguity is present in a leadership situation, learning to stay with it develops our tolerance of ambiguity by helping leaders better understand

the nature of mind and how it can assist as well as obstruct the creative process depending on how skillfully we relate to and engage it.

When there is a sufficient surrendering of our ordinary separate self-sense or egoic self into making contact with reality-as-it-is via our immediate perception, the third NCP fosters the ability to relate more constructively and creatively with ambiguity, in turn helping leaders relax past their fears as a precursor to presencing leadership and effective action. From the perspective of staying with ambiguity, there is a reframe from ambiguity as being the cause of intellectual or cognitive distress to ambiguity as a creative pathway into insight, revelation, and discovery, enabling leaders to embrace the hidden constructive features of ambiguity that contain valuable information, knowledge, or wisdom. Here, uncertainty, unpredictability, conflicting information, multiple demands, and perspectives are noticed and worked with in a manner of curiosity, learning, and discovery. Process-wise, practicing staying with ambiguity involves resting in and from an underlying somatic grounding in stillness, establishing rooting from the deeper unmoving, unchanging source of reality, and being with what-is where presencing awareness awaits. By connecting with their deeper source ground of presencing awareness (Gunnlaugson, 2020), leaders develop the negative capability skillset of resourcing their perception from a place of presence, stillness, and equanimity.

This form of inner resourcing requires a more fluid relationship to our ordinary sense of self and identity. In presencing leadership, leaders become adept at shifting their self-sense from a place of individuality where they may experience themselves as separate from their followers to an essential ground of authentic self-expression where they experience themselves as fundamentally interconnected, serving their followers from a place of “inter-being” (Nhat Hahn, 2000). From the perspective of interbeing, we radically coexist and are fundamentally interrelated with what is “other” unlike the Cartesian dualistic account of human experience, in which we exist independently in and for ourselves. Staying-with ambiguity potentially gives us a glimpse of what it means to connect with others from this underlying process-oriented dimension of reality, helping us experience how our leadership is richly interconnected, interdependent, and interrelated with our organizational culture.

In learning how to engage, lead, and reflect from this place of underlying interconnected wisdom, the leader working with the NCP of staying with ambiguity begins to develop an instinctive familiarity to this underlying source ground of presence through the discovery of who they are in the most fundamental sense. Here, leaders begin to awaken to the possibility of letting ambiguity be an integral part of shaping the “seeing” or perceptual part of the presencing process. Instead of trying to control or mitigate ambiguity, it can now not only be tolerated, but acknowledged as a stage in the complex unfolding of the multi-faceted interwoven nature of reality and day-to-day organizational life. By learning to lead via presencing from our deeper authentic natures and source itself, leaders shift into a clearer seeing and capability for working with ambiguity as a creative precursor to discovery rather than a problem to be managed or solved. This gives way to a new appreciation of ambiguity as a preliminary stage in the presencing process, a stepping stone to effective leadership.

For this to be possible, the third NCP facilitates an inner shift in our perception from resisting or trying to control the ambiguity to being with it from a place that allows it to unfold and be what it is, without premature resolution, projection, or interference. In other words, a deep suspension (Gunnlaugson, 2014) of initial conclusions, premature judgements, and assumptions is typically needed. This activates a process described as “proprioception of thought” (Bohm, 1996) or what is referred to as an awareness-based

engagement of thought or embodied mindfulness of one's thinking process. As we think, we become aware of the content of what we are thinking and we become mindful of the thinking process as it is happening. This reduces reactive and habitual tendencies of thinking and opens us to a more creative relationship with the thinking process itself.

Learning to witness, see, and bracket our own consciousness in action and to be able to engage ambiguity from this place of skillful, self-managed perception in turn facilitates a presenced seeing. In learning to be with and apprehend the fullness of reality, which includes more of its ambiguous nature, we practice observing and dis-identifying with our prior thoughts and conditioning that invariably arise. This bracketing via deep suspension opens a clearing or generative space for a direct presencing seeing of what is emerging as it is emerging in the moment. Because our discernment of emergence arises out of a deeper generative contact with the present moment (Gunnlaugson, 2020) as described above, staying-with ambiguity reveals a more complex and nuanced presentation of reality.

Reducing our emotional reactivity and discomfort with ambiguity opens up a way of relaxing into a more curious and non-defensive apprehension and trust of it. Staying with ambiguity makes it possible to be with contrasting or even conflicting positions that may not present us with a simple either-or choice or set of conclusions. Instead, a presenced seeing of reality unveils it, allowing our understanding to be carried beyond our initial preconceptions, which tend towards being misconceptions when premature conclusions are drawn. By suspending premature tendencies to manage ambiguity, leaders instead focus on managing themselves and their own perception to develop a capacity for a presenced seeing from this ground source of not knowing and the unknown.

As this underlying ground source is the invisible site wherefrom new creations, insights, and breakthroughs emerge, learning to draw our presenced seeing from source directly (as a way of being) is a crucial redirection of our awareness here. Initially it requires a certain courage to befriend the anxiety and to hold the pressures evoked by a deeper underlying uncertainty that comes with not knowing in the face of certain forms of ambiguity. However, learning to entrust ambiguity as a precursor to a richer presenced seeing cultivates an openness to being influenced from the ambiguity directly, again as a pathway into a filled-out, presenced leading. From this third negative capability practice, there is a subsequent releasing from the anxieties and fears of not-knowing with the realization that this is precisely what we need to embrace to arrive at a more intelligent and wiser acknowledgement of our situation and presenced seeing of reality as its unfolding. This, in turn, empowers our presencing leadership from the inside-out.

#### **Negative Capability Practice #4:**

##### **Becoming a generative holding environment as a path into *presenced communicating***

Negative capability supports the deliberate and skillful holding of presencing awareness in one's moment-to-moment communication as well. To attend to the creative process of leading in a way that subtle insights, discoveries, and hunches can emerge fruitfully opens up a powerful negative capability skillset that is useful to leadership communication. Dispensing with both a fixed personal identity and arrogant certainty about the nature of life and the creative process, Keats drew important attention to an open way of relating with the unknown by stressing the fluid nature of a poet's identity. For our purposes, this fluidity reflects the deeper nature of the presencing self, both of which are connected to a hidden, emergent source of creativity.

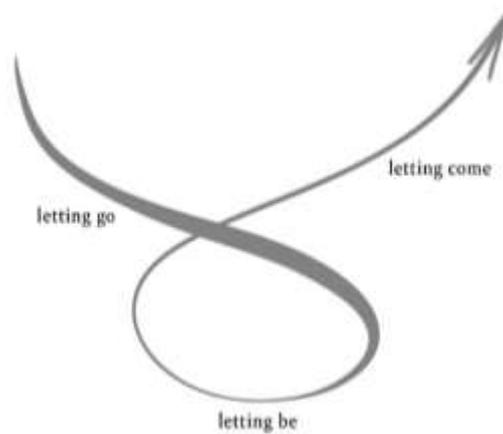
In communication contexts, the effective management of our egoic self and its problematic tendencies towards absencing acknowledged at the beginning of this article is a necessary precondition to generative communication. As the egoic self is enmeshed in the immediacy of its own prior conditioning and habit structures, it lacks the ability to be aware of thought, our position, and various perspectives we inhabit as they arise. Typically imbedded in the default mode of “downloading” (Scharmer, 2007), the egoic self is unable to be meta-aware of its own viewpoint and perspective. As such, it is fused to the conditioned workings of thought, feeling, and self, which closes down the possibility of presencing creative possibilities that lie within leadership situations.

Following from this point, leaders practicing presencing leadership work with letting go of this default setting of the self and learn instead to access their true voice, which opens a path to listening from a deeper authentic self-location informed by their presencing nature. This creates negative capability conditions for a generative holding environment within and between leaders. For our purposes here, a holding environment is a conversational milieu, clearing, or container that is being held and related to from a place of deeper presence and presenced awareness.

This fourth NCP practice, which I describe as becoming a generative holding environment as a path to *presenced communicating* is paradoxically activated when we move into the inner posture of letting be (Gunnlaugson, 2020). Letting be is the hidden central dimension of presencing knowing, where we enter into a receptive state of orienting from inside the dark “negative” space of the unknown. Inside the posture of letting be, it becomes possible to discover an underlying creative basis and ground for presencing communicating to begin to take root. In presencing leadership, as attention is redirected away from the emerging future temporarily, there is a suspension of our practical and action driven reflexes. Instead, via this NCP, we let our curiosity openly explore the nature of the ambiguities, uncertainties, and complexities of the unknown rather than tolerating them or trying to control them. By holding our desire to communicate as a creative tension point with the unknown, this moves us into a communication clearing where new emergence can be experienced through this polarity.

The presencing movement of “letting be” (Gunnlaugson, 2020) in between the Theory-U based presencing movement of “letting go” and “letting come” (Scharmer, 2007), develops our presencing knowing to function more like a generative holding environment or container where we can hold and behold the tensions between the known and unknown in a more constructive manner, as well as resource our sense of self from the presencing state of being directly.

When this creative tension is ontologically held well via presence, and somatically held and embraced well from the allowing spaciousness of letting the process be, letting our sense of identity be, we provide an occasion for the fullness of reality to open. Such subtle expressions of letting be help us become a generative holding environment in our way of being and communicating with others. This puts us in service of discerning the truth of the overall situation as the principal stimulus for learning and discovery in the moment. Given that the gesture of letting be is neither a determined nor fixed mode of being, as a negative capability practice it is openly responsive to the particular as well as contextual aspects of what-is, making it helpful in supporting the germination of our presencing awareness as leaders. In turn, becoming a generative holding environment in how we engage with others serves our communication as leaders in several ways.



**Figure 4.0: The core movement of primary knowing (Gunnlaugson, 2020)**

The receptive and allowing posture of letting be supports the development of a presencing communicating that is born from immersive contact with the known coming into contact with the unknown. As we let go of our preconceived and known self and ideas, we surrender into an embodied not-knowing from our presencing selves. This is the heart of the presencing state that informs presencing leadership. In deepening into the dynamic ground of our presence through letting be, this subtly embodied form of not-knowing (which within it contains a receptivity and openness to a subtler order of disclosed primary knowing) supports core ground conditions for revealing wisdom from a place of negative capability that is currently obscured or hidden from our general awareness. With practice, there is a growing sense of being enfolded into and guided by this not knowing and having it directly inform our presencing awareness as we listen and as we speak. Letting be also assists us in staying in contact with the unknown amidst complex challenges and situations, but perhaps more importantly, offers a tangible and with sufficient practice, “felt-guided” means to fruitfully experience and be comfortably led by the unknown inside the presencing process as we learn to lead from this place.

Inside letting be, we rediscover a form of primary communicating from our deeper presencing nature and life, further freeing our participation with the emerging future in a way that is less restricted and more wisdom-oriented. As this movement begins to unfold us, letting be develops and strengthens our capacity for coherence and non-dispersal of our energy and attention. Letting be also develops and coheres a kind of staying power with what-is. Again, this helps us become more skillful in our subtle holding of whatever tensions, anxieties, paradoxes, and dilemmas may arise amidst the communication process. This develops our capacity for engaging the presencing field in a more immediate, discerned, and comprehensive way by honing our ability to access and navigate our communication from presencing awareness directly in both individual and collective contexts, as well as arrive at a more nuanced understanding of the subtle nexus of our presencing self as it engages the presencing field.

In learning to become a generative holding environment, we explore communicating from presencing awareness directly, both listening and speaking in a way that integrates our presencing self in the presencing field. Navigating our presencing awareness in this way opens us into contact with dimensions of presencing reality that were previously not possible with the social field alone. Without this communication holding environment present, different blind spots tend to develop in our presencing practice, creating imbalances in how we work with the presencing field as a whole. When it is presumed that our individual presencing capacities are being developed indirectly through our collective

presencing practice in the social field, key embodied capacities to discern, ground, and access presencing intelligence directly in our experience tend to be overlooked.

Our presencing communication practice requires a grounding and rooting at the very core levels of our inner experience. When our presencing selves are bypassed as we engage the presencing field, we overlook a foundational part of the presencing process. Instead of subverting the wisdom and intelligence of our presencing nature, the presencing self is brought into a new symbiotic role with the presencing field with the second NCP. This opens up new ontological leadership territory of presencing knowing for us to become a generative holding environment that is capable not only of substantive presencing awareness without, but more importantly understanding the interior basis and means for learning to lead and live from that very presencing awareness as a way of being and communicating. Overall, this fourth NCP brings a critical update to the practice of presencing leadership by being relationally-attuned and contextually-precise in its overall orientation and service in stewarding the arising new in one's presenced communicating.

### **Negative Capability Practice #5:**

#### **Stillpoint indwelling as a path into *presenced leading***

The heart of the fifth NCP is learning to indwell and lead from our stillpoint (*Figure 1.0*, above). Indwelling from our stillpoint involves cultivating the ability to suspend immediate action and rest in deeper underlying stillness. Resting and holding our awareness from stillness opens up a negative-capability path into presencing leadership. With stillness becoming co-extensive of our inner bodies and presencing field, as leaders, we can become conduits for presencing awareness in action. Stillness, when contacted somatically, provides a felt-bridge to our deeper presencing nature. Our stillpoint is the felt inner region of stillness within our ground of presence within the presencing field. When approached as a negative capability practice, leaders are attentive to the paradoxical nature of stillness that co-exists amidst activity. Upon this subtle inner activation, our stillpoint serves as an inner GPS that keeps us in synch with a core condition for enacting presencing leadership. By establishing subtle felt-contact with our presencing nature from the inside-out, learning to indwell from our stillpoint serves as an embodied negative capability support system that can be accessed in any leadership situation.

Slowing down and becoming present to the essence of reality via our stillpoint brings us into attunement with the underlying source dimension of any conversation or leadership situation. The experience of accessing our stillpoint through our inner body varies from practitioner to practitioner. For some, it is a felt core region of stillness that is dropped into, helping us access the ground of our presence and presencing nature. For others, this felt experience of stillness is activated in a more subtle and distributed manner that connects us with the presencing field. Regardless of how one accesses their stillpoint, learning to approach it as a negative capability practice helps us appreciate the importance of sustaining a felt continuous contact with our own embodied presence.

In practice, connecting with our stillpoint is a way to touch stillness through to the depths of our presencing self. In other words, it is vital to allow our stillpoint to actively shape and unfold our presencing nature through our ground of presence, not only sensing stillness at the surface level of sensation alone. In doing this, we strengthen our ability to hold and anchor ourselves from the ground of presence as well as the greater presencing field. This makes it possible to uncover a new stillness-centered foundation within which our presencing self may take root. By locating the activation of our presencing nature via our stillpoint, presencing grows to become accessible at the very subtle energetic and

structural levels of our being, helping us actively integrate our presence as a leadership stance and commitment to who and how we are.

It can be helpful to view our stillpoint as an inner negative-capability inspired sensory dock where our presencing self and field connect. This has the effect of reconfiguring the boundaries of our presencing nature to include the presencing field. If we move into the presencing field without connecting to our stillpoint, there is a tendency to overlook this nexus point between the presencing self and field and to put our focus exclusively on the field. With our stillpoint active, we are able to hold our individual presencing self-sense in fluid relation to the collective field-space we are in.

As discussed above, there has been a tendency in presencing leadership discussions to conflate our presencing nature with the interior of the presencing field. For some practitioners, this has had the effect of externalizing our presencing nature onto the presencing field and displacing us from our presencing self. To correct this oversight, the fifth NCP works with establishing a seamless integration and dynamic coupling of the interior dimensions of our presencing self and presencing field via our stillpoint. The aim here is to help us access a more cohesive, integrated, and robust presencing experience in any leadership situation.

Learning to rest in and from a place of inner stillness as the main vehicle and container for our presencing leadership grows to become the prevailing inner environment by which we access presence in the presencing field. In presenced leading, felt inner stillness from our stillpoint becomes a conduit for generativity by keeping our presencing awareness refreshed at its source. From indwelling in our stillpoint as an NCP, we develop the subtle energetic capacity for a more resilient presencing leadership. In turn, our capacity to rest with surface disturbances and stressful situations amidst action in life and the workplace grows, again making it possible to lead more effectively under such conditions.

Connecting to source via our stillpoint becomes an energetic ground zero to resource our presencing attention from inside any leadership situation. In doing this, as leaders we can more effectively manage the conditioned psychological and social habits of relating and communicating that otherwise draw our attention elsewhere in the moment. By discovering how to keep our attention rooted from source at our stillpoint, we develop the negative capability-based staying power to sustain presencing as a way of being. Indwelling from our stillpoint fosters a deepened trust in our ability to handle leadership challenges that were previously not possible before by helping us be more fully available and resourced to the situation at hand. Again, this is due in part to the activation and increased capacity of our presencing self that operates outside the limited parameters of the egoic-based mindset.

By learning to engage with emergence from a place of source calm, presencing impulses, hunches, and sense-making movements are revealed with greater clarity and ease. Overall, stillpoint indwelling opens our presencing perception and leadership to a broader and deeper range of possible moves that empower our presencing nature in the field through a refined felt-sensing, increased sensitivity to resonance, integrated embodied attention, among other qualities of presence and well-being.

## **Closing Remarks**

The above proposed fivefold NCP curriculum serves and supports the development of a more discerned and actionable presenced leadership, which holds the potential to play an invaluable role in supporting leaders in addressing the sense-making and meaning-making challenges that accompany our current historical moment. By developing the key

capacities to work with this growing array of complex problems at their root source, leaders become capable of effectively handling and transforming these VUCA situations from the inside-out. The notion of a more negatively capable leadership developing through skillful containment and working with the deeper nature of our experience is entirely consistent with the wisdom of presencing. Particularly inasmuch as a more developed suspension, acuity of deep seeing, relatedness with one's self and others, and the leadership field bridge access to creating viable shared meaning with others insofar as leaders are able to stabilize presencing at the level of their perception and action.

In apprenticing with the above five practices of the NCP curriculum, leaders will find support effectively navigating our global information ecology and its sense-making challenges. This, in turn, cultivates supportive sensory, physiological, and embodied-based approaches to presencing leadership. Working with the NCP curriculum at the level of our presencing faculties – that is, of our being, thinking, perception, communication, and leading – supports an unfolding self-management process that ultimately builds capacity for presencing-based forms of leadership mastery.

Negative Capability is, in this respect, a deeper form of *positive capability* in disguise in that it provides and supports key subtle conditions for the eventual transformation of leader's consciousness and perception at its very root. In today's VUCA world, approaches that work at this source-level of intervention are becoming an increasing imperative to address these aforementioned challenges. By coupling NCP with presencing leadership, generative pathways open into becoming the desired change and wisdom-based values we know in our heart of hearts are needed to optimally engage and transform our lives, organizations and world at this time.

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Olen Gunnlaugson serves as an Associate Professor in Leadership and Organizational Development at Université Laval (Canada) where he journeys into the human dimensions of business with his students through MBA courses in leadership, management skills, and group communications. With an eclectic research background in leadership growth, development, and consciousness-based approaches to transformation, as well as contemplative and generative practices of communication, he received his SSHRC funded Ph.D. at the University of British Columbia and did his Post-Doctorate at Simon Fraser University, Vancouver. To date, his work has been published in 13 books as well as 35 articles and chapters in academic journals and books. He has presented and keynoted at numerous international conferences, received five prestigious faculty level awards for excellence in teaching from universities in Canada and the USA, and taught several thousand emerging leaders, managers, and executives at leading schools in Canada, USA, Austria, Sweden, and South Korea. Over the past several years, he has been researching and developing Dynamic Presencing. As the focus of his recent book, Dynamic Presencing is an in-depth process for developing advanced presencing capacity and mastery in leaders, coaches, creatives, and change agents.

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