

The Heart and Soul of Leadership: A Transpersonally Oriented Examination of How *Quality of Presence* Impacts Leadership

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Abstract: This paper examines the impact of *quality of presence* on leadership from a transpersonal view. This approach applies a notion of *integral* as integrity – of body, emotions, mind, from a view of soul and spirit as primary. The concept of quality of presence is more deeply examined through two primary perspectives related to Scharmer’s concept of *presencing*. First, building on previous presentations/papers, a view of humans as spiritual beings having human experiences is used to frame a variety of research on the nature and characteristics of soul, character and purpose. Second, research on neurocardiology is used to identify specific psychophysiological patterns and their impact on individuals and the energetic fields they create. The impacts of these patterns on cognitive functioning are also mentioned, along with the influence of energetic fields. These two perspectives and bodies of research are used to expand Scharmer’s notion of presencing. Finally, examining leadership theories and literature in light of the presentation material put forward will aim to reframe our understanding of the phenomenon of leadership and place heart, soul and quality of presence firmly at its center.

Keywords: Leadership, neurocardiology, presencing, soul.

Introduction

A friend of mine is fond of saying that leadership is like pornography – you can’t define it but you know it when you see it. There something at the *heart* of leadership that has *soul*. Rost (1991) says that there are almost as many definitions of leadership as theorists who try to define it. The lack of ability to pin leadership down and define it can be seen as resulting from using the

mind to capture soul. My view is that leadership is fundamentally a spiritual act. This view comes from the view put forward earlier (Reams, 1999, 2007) that we are spiritual beings having human experiences. Our human experiences are formed by many factors, but primarily the structure and contents of consciousness. An *integral* consciousness – one that integrates mind, emotions and body from a view of soul and spirit as primary – can enable leadership to be seen from more than the constructs of the mind. It can allow us to not only include, but to come from the transpersonal core of our existence and allow the view arising from here to illuminate the nature of leadership beyond the swamp of mental definitions.

At the heart of this view is that leadership has to do with the quality of our presence and the spaces it creates. Presence is seen here as the degree of coherence between soul and our mind emotions and body. In this paper I will draw on Scharmer's (2000, 2007) concept of *presencing* and reframe it from a transpersonal view. Part of how Scharmer talks about presencing is as a knowing of the heart and recent research in neurocardiology will be used to ground this concept in tangible ways and point to the heart as a conduit for this quality of presence.

Spiritual Beings Having Human Experiences

I began by saying that in my view leadership is an inherently spiritual act, because we are inherently spiritual beings. We exist in this world of human experience and have a mind, emotions and body. In an earlier article (Reams, 1999) I identified consciousness as the relationship between soul and embodiment, embodiment referring to mind, emotions and physical body. In this context, an integral consciousness *integrates* mind, emotions and body. This also implies the notion of *integrity* or coherence between the purpose and intention of soul and the thoughts, feelings and actions of our embodiment.

To begin, I want to touch on the contrast between the current dominant conceptual space around core beliefs on identity and this new (yet also old as for example Plato/Socrates presented this view 2400 years ago) core belief. There have been many descriptions of how the mental, or rational analytical structure of consciousness has shaped our view of reality (e.g. Schumacher, 1977; Gebser, 1985). Coming into prominence during the Renaissance and Enlightenment periods, figures like Descartes and Newton's work led to this mental structure taking on a belief in the material world as the ground of reality. This core belief, fostered by the scientific and technological successes that transformed the external circumstances of our lives, came to be assumed as unquestionably true. As with any deeply seated paradigm, it has tended to filter out any disconfirming data (Kuhn, 1996). Thus materialist science has for the most part disregarded concepts like soul and spirit. We are human beings, composed of complex enough arrangements of physical matter to be able to produce consciousness. That this consciousness sometimes appears to include spiritual experiences leads to a wide range of explanations, from outright denial, to hallucinations, to complex philosophical constructs reminiscent of how many angels can dance on the head of a pin.

Today there are ongoing debates about the merits of spiritual or religious views compared to scientific ones (e.g. Harris, 2004). A view that aims to be grounded in rationality and a belief in the fundamental reality of the material world cannot help but at best marginalize and worst outright deny spiritual beliefs. For instance, the majority of neuroscience research on spiritual or religious phenomenon is grounded in a materialist view (Beauregard and O'Leary, 2008). It has attempted to explain religious or spiritual experiences as an evolutionary genetic predisposition, symptoms of brain malfunctions or even something that can be induced by stimulating the right spot in the brain. However, neuroscience can be approached from a non-materialist perspective. A good example of this is Mario Beauregard and Vincent Paquette's (2006) research on the

neural correlates of mystical experiences of Carmelite nuns. From their research they conclude that “RSMEs [religious, spiritual, mystical experiences] are not the outcome of particular genes or neural disorders, nor can they be created merely by the use of a particular technology” (Beauregard and O’Leary, 2008, p. 277).

This limitation of materialistic science shows up in a far more central issue, that of the “hard problem” of consciousness (Chalmers, 1996). While science can measure all manner of neurological functioning, explain sensory processing and various mechanical aspects of consciousness, it cannot cross the chasm of explaining how this objective brain activity creates subjective, or psychological experience. The above research “also shows that the ‘hard problem’ of consciousness is simply not resolvable in a materialist frame of reference” (Beauregard and O’Leary, 2008, p. 277). Thus the hard problem of consciousness is emblematic of the limitations of a materialist approach to science.

Views that go beyond the materialist approach can offer a way forward in integrating the evidence on spiritual experiences. For instance, in the field of physics, Goswami (2001) frames soul as a context rather than a substantial thing. This avoids a problematic dualism of two kinds of entities needing to exist – a material body and a non-material soul. This also helps to highlight the nature of the changes in perception required to grasp the essential core of our Being. Deikman (1996) equates the essence of our Being or the “I” with pure awareness. He distinguishes between “I” and the self, saying that “this ‘I’ should be differentiated from the various aspects of the physical person and its mental contents which form the ‘self’” (p. 350). He explains that “our sensations, our images, our thoughts— the mental activity by which we engage and define the physical world – are all part of the observed. In contrast, the observer – the ‘I’ – is prior to everything else” (p. 352). When we implicitly think in terms of soul as a “spiritual *entity*” we are

trying to fit a round peg into a square hole. We are implicitly thinking from a view of human beings having spiritual experiences.

The above (as well as other) non-materialist views can enable us to transform our core beliefs about the essence of who we are and how we contextualize our experience. They open up space for a concept of ourselves as spiritual beings having human experiences. The most common term for this is soul, and from this we can create a definition of soul as a *unit of pure awareness*. Why does this matter for leadership? Well, for one thing reacting is not leading. Reactiveness arises from reflexes being triggered. Reflexes are attachments of the human consciousness, mind, emotions and body. As one example of this, many have written about the dangers to leaders of identification with their position, role and so on (e.g. Senge 1990). Human consciousness' deep reflex to defend its identifications (Bohm, 1992) can severely limit our capacity to respond rather than react as leaders. Transforming our core belief about who we are can liberate us from reactivity.

Presencing as Soul's Presence

I will now turn to Scharmer's (2007) concept of *presencing* and frame it in terms of soul's presence. He describes presencing as "the blending of *sensing* and *presence*, [and it] means to connect with the Source of the highest future possibility and bring it into the now" (p. 163). Scharmer does not specifically talk about soul, but I find that his language conveys an impression that the meaning of "the Source of the highest future possibility" could easily be interpreted as soul. As well, his description of an experience when he was 16 could easily be interpreted as an out-of-body experience, or the consciousness of soul viewing the situation. In developing his definition of presencing, Scharmer draws on Ray's (2004) notion of Self and Work (the caps

indicating the higher Self and Work indicting our highest sense of purpose in this world). Based on these elements, I will describe how I perceive presencing to represent a process of tuning in to the call of soul.

Implicit in the view of spiritual beings having human experiences is that soul transcends the boundaries and limitations of the human mind, emotions and body. Thus in terms of both time and space, soul precedes, succeeds and contextualizes human experience. While this has many implications for transforming our thinking about life and leadership, here I want to focus on how it impacts our sense of purpose. Reflecting on Ray's concept of our Work as our highest sense of purpose in this world, I am drawn to ideas coming from the works of people like Plato (1992), Hillman (1996) and Newton (1994, 2000, 2009). They all discuss purpose in conjunction with the importance of character – what we do with what we have in this life. From the vantage point we are looking from here, this also means that what we have to draw on transcends what we perceive as given to us in the human form.

The transcendent sources of this purpose are outlined in the works noted above. Plato's (1992) *Republic* closes with the telling of the myth of Er. In this myth the journey of souls in the afterlife is described, concluding with the meeting with a daimon, or guardian angel who would guide soul in the process of choosing lessons to learn and coming back into this world. Hillman (1996) picks up this myth to base his acorn theory of the psychology of character and calling. He presents detailed biographical illustrations to make clear that we are not blank slates when we are born, but come into this world with a sense of character and calling. Our character shows up early in our lives and he reframes the challenges, traumas and abuses we suffer as means by which our character is tempered and our calling drawn out of us. Newton (1994, 2000, 2009) draws on numerous case studies of hypnotherapy regression to further outline the details of this process. From the view of the human aspect of our existence, our Work, calling, or purpose is how we

perceive what from soul's point of view is the particular lesson or contribution we are focused on at this step in our evolution. Thus purpose is linked to character, both of which we bring into this human life from soul.

Central to being true to our character and calling is integrity. Here I find Palmer's (1993) conception of truth as troth to be useful. He shows that truth is not a noun or objective thing, but a verb, or relationship between knower and known. Troth (as in betrothed) becomes a living pledge wherein we learn how to live in integrity with the truth of the subject of inquiry. If we then frame our human experiences as a subject of inquiry wherein we pursue the uncovering of our purpose, having integrity links our deeper or transcendent character as soul with our human character. The process by which we come to know this can be seen as emergent, and Scharmer describes presencing as our capacity to perceive the future that is trying to emerge. This conception of "emerging" in relation to "highest future possibility" can be viewed as aligning or bringing into integrity our human consciousness with the consciousness of soul. In this context Scharmer uses the notion of an "open will," which can be thought of as being in integrity, not merely with our human impulses, but also with those of soul.

From this presencing can be seen as a process of suspending the tendencies and limitations of the human will in order to be open to the call of soul. It implies coming into integrity with soul's purpose for our human experience. This integrity also calls for us to act on the calling that emerges for us in order to be true to it (Palmer, 1993). This alignment of purpose and action requires intention and choice. As we direct our attention from the kind of inward reflection that this opening of the will to the call of soul requires to the outward movement into action, we need to maintain this quality of presence. The maintenance of our integrity to purpose is central to presencing, and in this context can be understood as the degree of soul's presence.

The Development of Intention and Choice

Leaders make decisions. These can be seen as the result of leaders' intentions and how they analyse them in relation to the factors involved, resulting in choices. In the above, I have described how the quality of presence behind such intentions and choices is derived from integrity with soul. While Scharmer's U Theory and process is grounded in this quality of presencing, it also describes carrying that quality of presence into action – the “success of the intervention depends on the *interior condition* of the intervener” (italics in the original. Scharmer, 2007, p. 7). Thus the quality of a leader's decisions are grounded in the quality of soul's presence.

There is an aspect of leadership related to the importance of our intention and choice which I find to be captured by a phrase: *we give life to what we pay attention to*. This implies that we have a great power of creation and with it responsibility to be conscious of how we choose to direct our attention. The importance of choice is noted by many. Goswami (1993, 2001) noted that it is choice that collapses the realm of quantum potential into actuality. Frankl (1992) is known for saying that no matter what our external circumstances, we can always choose our attitude. Pattakos (2004) builds on this to show how we let ourselves become prisoners of our thoughts by not exercising our capacity to choose. Isen & Klein (1999) illustrate how we choose to believe myths or stories about our lives and the world around us and become trapped into living out these stories. Kegan (1994) points to the developmental transition from a traditional consciousness to a modern one as better being able to choose among the influences surrounding us in order to self-author our identity.

In order to make this transition we have to become conscious of the choices before us. The process of developing this awareness helps us take the myths that live us, or what we are “subject

to” and make them objects of reflection (Kegan 1994). As we move through various stages of this development, we gain ever greater capacity to make finer distinctions in relation to ever expanding breadth of complexity. In terms of supporting transformational thinking, we can link this to the concept from Bateson (2000) and Argyris (1990) that a higher order of functioning is required in order to support change at a given level. Hawkins (1991) describes this as the spiritual dimension of the learning organization. He characterizes this transcendent learning as “a higher logical level of awareness, where we have the space to become free enough of our normal perspectives and paradigm constraints to see through them rather than with them, and thus create the space to change them” (p. 177). This can be characterized as our “spiritual intelligence,” or our ability to be creative, change the rules, alter situations, and question why we are here (Zohar & Marshall, 2000). Thus a spiritual or integral structure of consciousness can better support transformation in the mental structure than from within the mental consciousness itself.

All of these perspectives point to what is required for a capacity to choose or make decisions. But what is at the heart of this consciousness? Asked another way, what is the role of the heart in this consciousness? Earlier I highlighted the importance of integrity between the sense of purpose soul brings to our lives and action, leading to the above discussion on the development of intention and choice. Action in the world takes place through our human experience, utilizing our mind, emotions and physical body. It is common to focus attention on the role of the mind in determining our action in the world. It is after all the instrument of rational thinking, choice and so on. I now wish to make a stronger, even more direct link between soul and the physical world through the heart.

Presencing and the Heart

Scharmer (2007) also talks about presencing as “the phenomenon of seeing and thinking with the heart” (p. 160). We commonly associate the heart with both soul and emotion. It stands in as a way to talk about what is not simply intellectual or mental. Goleman’s (1995) work on emotional intelligence has highlighted the importance of one aspect of this for leadership. To understand what seeing and thinking with the heart might mean beyond a metaphor for emotional intelligence, intuition, or non-rational thinking, I will draw on research from the field of neurocardiology.

The discovery of a “little brain” of about 40,000 neurons in the heart has led to research on its nature, functioning and potential. Among the most interesting work in this field, the Institute of HeartMath’s research program has explored the frontier of the heart’s role in our human systems. They have identified a key factor influencing our entire psychophysiological functioning, that of heart rate variability (HRV). Drawing on a systems view of our body’s physiology, McCraty et al. (2009) note that “there is substantial evidence that the heart plays a unique role in synchronizing the activity in multiple systems of the body and across different levels of organization, and thus in orchestrating the flow of information throughout the psychophysiological network” (p. 46). Thus the heart does far more than pump blood – it conducts the flow of information throughout the body.

McCraty et al.’s (2009) analysis of the body’s systems show “how the heart, as the most powerful generator of rhythmic information patterns in the body, acts effectively to bind and synchronize the entire system” (p. 45). In this role for the heart they found four distinct states of normal psychophysiological modes; mental focus, psychophysiological incoherence, relaxation and psychophysiological coherence. Each of these states produces a distinct HRV pattern that can

be measured, and with the aid of a biofeedback mechanism people can be trained to activate the coherent state more readily. The coherent state is shown to have a significantly positive effect on functioning in a number of areas of health and well being.

One of these areas is the physiological impact the heart has on our emotional state. They emphasize that HRV patterns “play a direct role in *determining* emotional experience. At the physiological level, ... afferent input from the heart is conveyed to a number of subcortical regions of the brain that are involved in emotional processing” (p. 38) and thus “the contents of feelings are essentially the configurations of body states represented in somatosensory maps” (p. 39). Thus there is a direct link between coherence and emotional well being (which can also be linked to the notion of quality of soul’s presence).

In addition, they show evidence (described in Appendix C) for positive effects on cognitive functioning resulting from coherent psychophysiological states. “The greater the degree of emotional stability and system-wide coherence, the greater the facilitation of cognitive and task performance” (p. 42). They describe three large scale studies conducted in this area that show positive effects on memory and even academic test performance. “Overall, the evidence provided by the three studies described in Appendix C indicates that a specific macro-scale pattern of cardiac activity—heart rhythm coherence—is associated with significant improvement in cognitive performance” (p.43). From their research it becomes clear that the coherent state of HRV is a desirable one to be able to access, and that the kind of emotional coherence they describe has implications for leadership as well (Goleman, Boyatzis & McKee, 2002).

Yet the actual role and impact of the heart goes well beyond these psychophysiological phenomenon and into the energetic realm of holographic electromagnetic fields. McCraty et al. (2009) describe how “data about *patterns* of organization are actually enfolded into the waves of energy generated by the body’s activity and distributed throughout the body’s electromagnetic

field” (p. 55). These patterns are best explained through the use of “information processing principles of holographic theory” (p. 55) drawn from the work of theorists like Gabor (1948) Bohm (1980) and Pribram (1991). One key aspect of this holographic domain is that “the actual processing of information occurs in the spectral domain of energy frequency—a domain outside space and time” (McCraty et al., 2009, p. 48). The mathematics involved in this processing turn out to be “the same mathematics that Gabor (1948) used to describe the quantum-holographic principles involved in the physics of signal processing” (p. 57). The patterns of information that will have the most influence on the body will be those with the strongest field. McCraty et al. note that “the heart generates by far the most powerful and most extensive rhythmic electromagnetic field produced in the body,” (p. 55) with 60 times greater electrical voltage amplitude and 5000 times stronger magnetic field than those produced by the brain. This magnetic field “can be measured several feet away from the body with sensitive magnetometers” which provides “a plausible mechanism for how we can ‘feel’ or sense another person’s presence and even their emotional state, independent of body language and other signals” (p. 55). From this it appears that HRV states will not only have a significant impact on the body and brain, but also generate a field that can be detected by other people.

Thus when we talk about the quality of character of leaders creating an aura or field, we may be referring to a measurable electromagnetic phenomenon. I want to phrase this as the *space* that leaders’ create through their *quality of presence*. While there are a number of factors that can contribute to the nature of this space, the above research focuses on these subtle, energetic qualities. Yet it also goes beyond explaining how we can sense the field of another person. Perception of future events is also within the realm of explanation.

Central to Scharmer’s concept of presencing is the notion of sensing and connecting with our highest *future* possibility. Having perception of the future would appear, from a materialist

scientific perspective to be impossible – how can we have a perception of something that has not happened yet? This materialist perspective implies a linear order to time (and space) where such future perception is relegated to marginal domains such as clairvoyance. However, the ordering of reality in a linear fashion has been challenged by quantum physics and in particular the principle of non-locality (that there is a domain of reality beyond time and space. See for example Bohm, 1980; Bell, 1964; Aspect et al., 1982; Aspect, 1999). It is within this perspective that we can examine a notion of intuition as future perception. The evidence described above from McCraty et al. indicates that the energy field of the heart operates not only within the range of our everyday perception, but also in the non-local domain. They also describe (McCraty et al., 2004a, 2004b) a rigorous experimental study they conducted and report that “certain electrophysiological indicators respond to a future emotionally arousing stimulus prior to individuals actually experiencing the future stimulus” (2004b, p. 334). Thus sensing the future is possible.

They also note that “this suggests that the heart is directly coupled to a subtle energetic field of ambient information that surrounds the body which, in turn, is entangled and interacts with the multiplicity of energy fields in which the body is embedded” (McCraty et al., 2009, p. 58). They go on to emphasize that it is the heart which again plays a central role in the working of intuition. “Even more tantalizing is the evidence that the heart appears to receive intuitive information *before* the brain” (p. 58). Research by Bradley (2007) shows how linking the scientific principles of the hologram, quantum non-locality and quantum coherence (that subatomic emissions from macro-scale objects are not random but exhibit coherence at the quantum level) allow for intuition to be explained without resorting to meta-physical postulates or a sixth sense. Thus presencing, or sensing the future may be much more than an abstraction or metaphor. It can also be describing a specific activity of the heart that can be cultivated.

The Knowing of the Heart

The phenomenon of “thinking with the heart” that Scharmer points to implies something qualitatively different than thinking with the mind. To better integrate integral consciousness with thinking with the heart, I will now turn to some ideas on what could be called the knowing of the heart.

It is important to point out that grounding this knowing in the heart does not mean regressing to a purely emotional or pre-rational mode of consciousness. I find that what Wilber (1996) calls the pre/trans fallacy is relevant here. This distinction helps to clarify that an integral mode of consciousness transcends the rational or mental structure, but does so in a way that enables it to integrate aspects of the previous structures into a more comprehensive whole.

To understand this knowing of the heart, a leader must have an *adequate* depth of knowing. In relation to this, Schumacher (1977) discusses the principle of *adequatio*, stating that “this is the Great Truth of *adequatio* ... the understanding of the knower must be *adequate* to the thing to be known” (italics in the original. p. 39). Isaacs (1999) describes a similar view, saying that “for us to perceive something, it must somehow be in us, or it literally would not connect to anything in us” (p. 125). Similarly, Braud and Anderson (1998) note that “we can perceive and know only that for which our sensitivities have prepared us, and these sensitivities depend on aspects of our being” (p. 22), and Osborne (1993) states that “we cannot inductively derive an essence from examples unless we can already intuit that essence” (p. 171). Thus knowing is not a static process of a subjective knower coming to grasp some objective facts, but a fluid, dynamic process of relationship between the knower and known. It is this kind of relationship that is necessary to know the essences of crises being faced today, and this relationship is an aspect of the quality of knowing of the heart.

If we take a moment to look at the limits of the mental structure of consciousness, we can identify some of the elements of it that have created the crises faced now. For instance, while we can recognize that the (mental) map is not the territory, at the same time our thinking subtly inserts these maps into our perception, leading to incoherence (Bohm 1992). We think we are looking at “reality out there” but are more looking at the maps projected by our minds. We also do not see the connection between our thinking and the impacts it has out in the world. Thus these “crises” come to us as if they are something separate from us, something we need to think about more in order to “solve.” This creates a spiraling cycle of ever more complex unintended consequences that outstrip the mental structure of consciousness’ ability to gain perspective on them.

The limits of the rational analytical mode of consciousness can be seen from a number of angles. What is of interest here is that all of these views aim to go beyond the mind, but often appear to take the perspective that to transcend is also to disavow, detach, or disengage from mind, emotions and body. From the above examination of the heart, a possible way to integrate these perspectives appears if we take the knowing of the heart as not a mere metaphor but also as being grounded in physiology, psychology, the integration of bodily functions and the energetic relationship with the environment around us. In this way an integral consciousness integrates all of the domains and structures of our existence and experience.

Leadership as Opening Space

Today, leadership is being asked to transform our thinking and lead in new ways. In order to do this I pointed out that we need to examine both the contents and structure of our consciousness. By reframing our core beliefs about who we are and cultivating an integral

consciousness we can begin to lead in new ways. Soul has a mind, emotions and body and uses these to realize its purpose in human experience. The heart is the main conduit for soul to orchestrate the activity of our embodiment. The essence of our success in realizing our purpose is through the coherence of the heart and quality of soul's presence. This quality of presence emanates from us and can be sensed energetically by those around us. It is in this context that I perceive of *leadership as opening space*.

Our ability to create *space* through the electromagnetic field of the heart can go in different directions. We constantly create space through the quality of our presence and consciousness. We can create space that Owen (2000) characterizes as “soul pollution” (p. 1). This leads to closing space, constricting the spiritual, mental, emotional and physical area others have to work in. We also have what Carey (1992) calls a “fundamental option for self transcendence” that opens these spaces. In terms of leadership, I would propose that the creation of the former kinds of constricted or embedded spaces is not actually leadership, but something posing as leadership. Implicit in my view is that leadership only truly occurs when space is opened in a way that enables self-transcendence.

Looking at how the “success of the intervention depends on the *interior condition* of the intervener” (italics in the original. Scharmer, 2007, p. 7), this interior condition is the quality of presence explored above. This provides a leverage point for examining leadership theories and practices. Differing ideas about what makes for good leadership may arise from looking not at this interior condition, but from multiple manifestations of it arising in differing contexts. Thus differing theories about leadership can each reflect a partial truth, but seldom go deep enough to touch this inner core.

Taking a transpersonal view of spiritual beings having human experiences, or soul having a mind, emotions and body, can enable the deeper understanding of leadership as opening space to

give better access to this inner core. While we may not be able to “define” it in a conventional sense, we can come to know it when we see it.

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