THE STRUCTURE OF TRANSFORMATIONAL PRESENCE:
Navigating Polarity with Power and Love
Connected to the Emerging Future

A culminating research paper submitted by

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\(^1\) Taijitu of Zhou Dun-yi from the Song Dynasty, c. 1040 ce
Abstract

This paper explores the territory between what is seen and what is unseen – the place from which transformation emerges. It is also the place from which the future emerges. Resolving conflict by uniting polarities using the forces of power and love is considered as part of the transformational process through a study of Nelson Mandela’s use of these forces in transforming the political landscape of South Africa in the 1990s. Polarity management is considered as a tool for creating transformation through harnessing the forces of polarity, power, and love, and is suggested as an alternative to the polarized thinking inherent in gap analysis. Through an analysis of Mandela’s actions, the structure of the inner state of this transformational leader emerges, as does the importance of interpersonal connections.
The Structure of Transformational Presence:

Navigating Polarity with Power and Love Connected to the Emerging Future

I have been studying transformation since I was a child. When I was three I witnessed my mother’s murder. This is difficult for some people to hear, yet if I do not begin here, I undermine foundational abilities upon which this research is based.

There was a period where I saw my mother’s body empty of life as the room filled with her presence. This experience riveted my attention to the frontier between seen and unseen worlds – the threshold of transformation – and this ephemeral location was indelibly marked in my awareness.

Seeking to understand the mechanics of movement between seen and unseen led me from a fixation on accidents to ministerial studies, to work in a birth center. Studying and practicing mediation developed my understanding of the role polarity plays in the transformational process.

As a visual thinker, my thoughts occur as three-dimensional images in motion. Figure 1 illustrates my understanding of the transformational process using two well-known symbols: The infinity and Yin Yang symbols. The portal between sides is the focus of this research and the term “red vortex” will be used to refer to this mediator of transformation which allows polarities to coexist.

The red vortex draws in that which is separate, turning it inside-out as polar opposites unite.

![Figure 1. the red vortex](image)

The action is similar to running one’s finger along a mobius strip and finding, at the crossing point, that one’s finger moves from outside to inside.

Relevance to the field

A polarized approach remains
embedded in OD interventions; for example situation-target-process asks the client to look at where they are (A), where they want to be (B), and how they might move from A to B. Practitioners are advised to cultivate tension in the form of dissatisfaction with the current state, and a longing toward the desired state as a means to motivate change (Kotter, 1996).

Polarity Management (Johnson, 1996) explains that many organizational problems are actually polarities. Viewed with an understanding of polarities, these problems become a sign of imbalance and curiosity, conversation, and diverse perspectives become the means for restoring balance rather than leaving something behind in search of something better. More about Johnson’s work appears in the literature review.

Polarity plays a role in the current relationship between OD and the business community. Power and Love, (Kahane, 2010) brings to light the underlying dynamics of one important polarity… that of power and love:

In our societies, communities, and organizations, and within each of us, we usually find a “power-camp,” which pays attention to interests and differences, and a “love camp,” which pays attention to connections and commonalities. The collision between these two camps – in the worlds of business, politics and social change, among others – impedes our ability to make progress on our toughest social challenges (p.9).

This is one way polarity plays out in the experience of OD practitioners, and why learning to unite these forces is significant.

Responding to the imbalance above by promoting the benefits of love may be further destabilizing an already polarized issue. Jay Forrester of MIT wrote, “People know intuitively where leverage points are” (Forrester, as cited in Meadows, 1999, p.1), ending with the observation that businesses are usually focused on pushing them in the wrong direction. The “love in the workplace” movement may be an example of this phenomenon.
Searching for a master of transforming conflict through uniting polarities, Nelson Mandela was selected. Posing the question, “How did Mandela navigate polarity, power, and love as he helped a new future emerge,” Mandela’s thoughts and actions were analyzed for insight into how he led his country through transformation. The red vortex was presumed to mediate the process.

**Literature Review**

Polarity and the transformational process were addressed from three important perspectives.

**Power and Love**

If all you need is love, what does power have to do with it? According to Kahane, these two forces keep each other healthy; in the absence of the other, both become degenerative. Some doubt that love could have a degenerative face. Kahane (2010) referenced Martin Luther King when he wrote, “Our love is degenerative – sentimental and anemic, or worse – when it over-looks or denies or suffocates power” (p.50). He quoted James Hillman to explain how this could be so, “So long as the notion of power itself is corrupted by a romantic opposition with love, power will indeed be corrupt. The corruption begins not in power, but in the ignorance about it” (Hillman, as cited in Kahane, 2010, p. 48).

Degenerative power is easier to understand and some readers may be familiar with the terms “power-to” and “power-over.” Kahane (2010) used these words to refer to the drive to self-realization in the first case, and the very same drive used with disregard for the desire and right of others to self-realize in the latter. In its generative form, Kahane (2010) wrote, “Power is how we make a difference in the world; it is the means by which new social realities are created. Without power, nothing new grows” (p.13). It is important to note that generative power can also be used to destroy, and Kahane (2010) differentiated between generative and degenerative destruction thusly, “power-to which destroys oppressive institutions and power-over that destroys people” (p.46).
When power and love are united, the red vortex can be accessed as a source of transformation.

**Polarity Management**

Johnson (1996) explained the difference between a problem and a polarity. The problem-to-be-solved is a choice between two or more things, and meets two criteria: it has one right answer, or two or more right answers that are independent. An example of this type of problem is the question of whether or not to merge with another company to increase capacity, or to buy new equipment to increase capacity.

Polarities are ongoing problems that can never be solved and are identified using one criterion: two or more right answers that are interdependent. The goal is to restore balance between two seemingly opposing forces. A situation involving polarity can look the same as a problem-to-be-solved, and applying Johnson’s criteria of interdependence clarifies whether or not the situation is an unbalanced polarity.

A simple illustration of a polarized issue from Johnson’s (1996) book is that of a controlling manager versus a flexible manager. If there is too much control there will be a call for more flexibility, while too much flexibility elicits the desire for more direction and control. Once this interdependence is identified, balance is restored by forming a complete picture of the situation. Co-workers with differing perspectives are seen as resources for forming the complete picture as the whole team works together, spelling out the positive and negative effects of both styles of management. The end result is a map of the polarity. On the way to restoring balance, rather than moving from excess control to more flexibility in a linear fashion (Figure 2), the polarity is navigated along the curving lines of an infinity symbol (Figure 3).
Accessing the Emerging Future

Theory U (Scharmer, 2010) maps out a U-shaped journey along the route to transformation. This paper focuses on the most mysterious part of the journey, which is called presencing. Scharmer wrote, “Presencing is a movement where we approach our self from the emerging future” (p.163). Explaining the mechanics, he pointed to three types of presence: the past, the future and one’s authentic Self. He asserted that when the boundaries between these three presences collapse, our perception connects to the source of our emerging future.

Presencing illuminates what Scharmer (2010) referred to as the Blind Spot; he used the analogy of an artist standing in front of a blank canvas to illustrate the concept. What is the source of the painting? The focus is usually on the result (the finished painting), or the process (how it was created). The source of the creation is the inner state of the artist. Businesses often analyze the finished product, or adjust the process of creating the product, but it is rare that leaders look within, at the source of what was created, to find answers to their problems.

There is a reason this Blind Spot is left unexplored. Source is in the invisible realm; we cannot see it. A threshold which Scharmer (2010) compared to death and to birth must be crossed before the emerging future can be seen.
Methods

Episodes involving conflict, in which Mandela’s response to the situation was atypical, were chosen for analysis. In order to understand the thoughts which guided Mandela’s actions, Mandela’s autobiography was selected as the sole source of data. This created several limitations: only Mandela’s perspective was represented, and his writing was meant for world-wide readership. The matter of readership introduced the conflict between honesty and protecting the famous image Mandela already embodied when his autobiography was published.

Extracting passages in which Mandela acted atypically, each incident was analyzed using a modified version of Coordinated Management of Meaning (CMM) (Pearce, 2007). There were a total of twenty-two episodes for which the following methods were used:

- describing (a turn by turn conversational analysis)
- first commitment (the context that imbued an episode with its’ meaning)
- story analysis (the stories each person held in a given context)

Since Mandela was middle-aged before he began acting atypically, notable experiences from his early life took on more significance. These early experiences were extracted and connections were drawn to his later behavior.

Mandela’s atypical behavior exhibited a predictable pattern to which even the famous Truth and Reconciliation Trials conformed. Setting aside all episodes which followed this pattern, three from the original twenty-two remained. Due to space limitations, only one of these was analyzed in even greater depth using the modified tools from CMM.
Analysis

The data was divided into three sections:

- Early experiences
- Atypical incidents
- Three most unusual incidents

The timeline below (Figure 4) illustrates the interrelationship between these sections.

Figure 2. timeline

Early Experiences

Four significant early influences, as shown in Figure 4, were identified:

- Culture of Connection
- Conversational Practice
- Awareness of Highest Commitment
- Understanding Systems
1. Culture of Connection

Mandela’s autobiography told of growing up in a culture of connection: to extended family, to the pack of village boys and girls, to the natural world that was his source of food, shelter and entertainment. Here’s an example:

We have no half brothers or half sisters. My mother’s sister is my mother; my uncle’s son is my brother; my brother’s child is my son, my daughter (Mandela, 1994, 1995, p.8).

2. Conversational Practice

Mandela was steeped in the conversation-based practices of his culture. As a young boy he observed the regent’s court sessions (the regent raised Mandela from the age of nine). He said of these early experiences, “My later notions of leadership were profoundly influenced by observing the regent and his court” (Mandela, 1994, 1995, p.20).

Upon learning of the regent’s death Mandela (1994, 1995) wrote:

The passing of the regent removed from the scene an enlightened and tolerant man who achieved the goal that marks the reign of all great leaders: he kept his people united. …all remained loyal to him, not because they always agreed with him, but because the regent listened to and respected all different opinions (p.84).

Later Mandela engaged in conversation with the brilliant, diverse minds he met during his privileged university education and his subsequent political activities.

During his 27 years in prison, Mandela had vast amounts of time for conversation with his fellow political prisoners. Mandela (1994, 1995) stated, “Talking and discussing issues were the only things that made the work at the quarry tolerable” (p.436).

Explaining the value of all this conversation, Mandela (1994, 1995) wrote, “During our years on the island [Robben Island] we kept up a continuing dialogue about our beliefs and ideas; we debated them, questioned them, and thereby refined them” (p.502).

3. Understanding Systems
As one of a handful of black lawyers in South Africa, Mandela experienced the effects of different systems. At the national level he was a black man in a prejudiced country and experienced the cruelty and injustice doled out by that system. At the society level, Mandela belonged to the society of lawyers which afforded him respect. When the two systems collided, the lawyer’s code of mutual respect often won and exposed Mandela to contradictory treatment by the same people, depending on the system from which they were operating.

Defending himself against an order to bar him from practicing law on the basis that his political activity constituted unprofessional conduct, Mandela (1994, 1995) wrote about the offers of assistance he received from white lawyers who belonged to the oppressive National Party which was behind the order to bar him:

Their [the white Nationalist lawyers] response suggested to me that even in racist South Africa professional solidarity can sometimes transcend color, and that there were still attorneys and judges who refused to be the rubber stamps of an immoral regime (p.163).

4. Awareness of Highest Commitment

Mandela acknowledged that his highest commitment was to the struggle for freedom of his people.

Mandela (1994, 1995) reflected, “There was no particular day on which I said, From hence forth I will devote myself to the liberation of my people; instead, I simply found myself doing so, and could not do otherwise” (p.95).

These early experiences created the capacity for the atypical behavior in Mandela’s later years.

Atypical Behavior

After naming each episode of atypical behavior, the following information was identified: context, time span, primary system of influence, and Mandela’s first commitment. A turn-by-turn analysis of action and response elicited was then described. All of the information was considered in
relation to the literature review which led to the theme for each episode. The themes were distributed as follows:

- Building bridges of understanding – 8 episodes
- Balancing power and love – 7 episodes
- Understanding the System – 7 episodes
- Feeling the future – all-inclusive

Fifteen of these episodes named relationship as the first commitment. “Understanding the System” was an unexpected theme. “Feeling the future” appeared to be a way of being. For example, when Mandela went toward the opposition, his actions were guided by the future relationship he wanted with them rather than their current behavior. Here is an example of how Mandela (1994, 1995) used this approach with the Pan African Congress (PAC) shortly after it broke away from the African National Congress (ANC):

While we welcomed anyone brought into the struggle by the PAC, the role of the organization was almost always that of a spoiler. They divided the people at a critical moment, and that was hard to forget… Yet the PAC aroused in me the hope that even though the founders were breakaway ANC men, unity between our two groups was possible. I thought that once the heated polemics had cooled, the essential commonality of the struggle would bring us together. Animated by this belief, I paid particular attention to their policy statement and activities, with the idea of finding affinities rather than differences (p.229).

Three Most Unusual Incidents

Postulating these three episodes held deeper insight into Mandela’s behavior, an episode called “Evil with a Core of Goodness” was chosen for in-depth analysis because there was a clearly identifiable unusual moment.

This episode occurred in the prison warden’s office during a visit from the commanding officer. It was unusual in that Mandela did not attempt to build a relationship to the brutal outgoing warden (Badenhorst), and it was the warden who reached toward Mandela as he offered good luck
wishes to the black South Africans who were fighting for equal rights as political prisoners. This was remarkable behavior from a man who encouraged his prison staff to abuse these very people, and who behaved abusively himself.
Discussion

Mandela’s autobiography informed the initial questions posed by this research. Here, the key findings are examined in light of the literature review. While polarity management emerged as a helpful tool, the most exciting finding related to Mandela’s inner attitude.

Key Findings

1. Mandela was the speaker and public face for the refined ideas of many brilliant minds.
2. Mandela sought to understand the viewpoint of those who opposed him and focused on commonality.
3. Mandela analyzed the systems in which he operated.
4. Mandela’s vision of the future guided his behavior.

The first three findings highlighted the importance of capacities Mandela’s developed during his early experiences (see Figure 4), while reflecting patterns of behavior found in polarity management. This paper focuses on the fourth finding, which yielded new information about the transformation of polarities.

Viewing the most unusual episode “Evil with a Core of Goodness” through the lens of presencing, as described by Scharmer (2010), the inner source from which Mandela acted was revealed. There was a structural difference in Mandela’s inner state which could be compared to the habitual structure which commonly guides one’s actions.

The most unusual aspect of this episode was that while Mandela usually sought to build the future relationship he wanted to have with others, in the case of Badenhorst he did not do that; he stayed within the larger vision of building an equal relationship for his people within the prison system.
When Mandela (M) acted into the system with this larger vision of equal relationship, the end result was that the empty interpersonal space invited Badenhorst (B) to create an interpersonal connection based on “power with,” and so he spoke the startling words, “I want to wish you people good luck” (Mandela, 1994, 1995, p.432). It is important to note that no boundary covered the interpersonal space (Figure 5) because M harbored no malice toward B, but was simply open to his presence.

The way in which Mandela constructed this episode, combined with the foundation upon which his actions rested, holds valuable information for change agents. The flow of interpersonal connection appears to be one side of the red vortex. Furthermore, the two-sided nature of this vortex showed up in the outer condition of knowing one’s guiding vision and the implied future relationships the vision seeks to elicit.

A vortex is a dynamic force that causes movement. Since the red vortex is invisible we can only notice its presence by noticing inexplicable dynamic movement. When Badenhorst moved from the context of the prison system to the context of the interpersonal system as he wished “Mandela’s people” luck, it was evidence of the unseen presence of this transformational vortex. When M and B left the office after that brief meeting, they inhabited a transformed reality (Figure 6).

Scharmer (2010) described how, during the
moment of presencing, the boundaries between past, future, and the authentic Self collapse. He wrote:

One self is connected to the past, and the second self connects to who I could become in the future...how does this self relate to that other stream of time – the one that seemed to draw me from the future that is wanting to emerge – rather than extending and reenacting the patterns of my past (p.25)?

The tables below show three different structures in relation to these selves:

**Table 1. habitual presence**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>PAST</strong></th>
<th><strong>PRESENT</strong></th>
<th><strong>FUTURE</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Feelings connected to past patterns of relationship</td>
<td>Actions taken by Self</td>
<td>Unconscious to thoughts filled with stories</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boundary covering past</td>
<td>Guided by patterns from past</td>
<td>Boundary covering future</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1 “If I am here...”  2 “…what can I do...”  3 “…to change it?”

**Table 2. gap analysis**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>PAST</strong></th>
<th><strong>PRESENT</strong></th>
<th><strong>FUTURE</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Feelings connected to past patterns of relationship</td>
<td>Actions taken by Self</td>
<td>Conscious &amp; Unconscious thoughts filled with stories</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boundary covering past</td>
<td>Guided by patterns from past</td>
<td>Boundary or no boundary</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1 “If I am here...”  3 “…what can I do?”  2 “…and I want to be here...”

In the episode with Badenhorst, Mandela operated from a transformational structure which collapsed the boundaries between these three presences or selves. Figure 7 illustrates how the shift to next table (Table 3) occurs.
Table 3. structure of transformational presence

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PAST</th>
<th>PRESENT</th>
<th>FUTURE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Feelings open to what happens</td>
<td>Actions taken by Authentic Self</td>
<td>Conscious of thoughts and choosing story from which to act</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 “…given this system…”</td>
<td>3 “…how do I need to act?”</td>
<td>1 “If I want to be here…”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No boundary</td>
<td>Guided by emerging future</td>
<td>No boundary</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4. transformational structure explained

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>FUTURE</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mandela’s connected to his guiding vision of an equal relationship</td>
<td>while detailing prisoner complaints to the commanding officer.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PRESENT</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mandela carried no baggage from the past while consciously drawing</td>
<td>upon his vision of the future to inform his actions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PAST</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focused on fighting systems rather than people, Mandela bore no</td>
<td>malice toward Badenhorst for past injustice, but remained open</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>to his presence.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

By aligning himself in this manner, Mandela established a transformational vortex which catalyzed a changed relationship between Badenhorst and himself. He later transformed the larger South African political landscape by acting in a similar manner toward the major political figures of the time, as well as toward the people of his country. Through his ability to establish a transformational portal through his inner attitude, he assisted the birth of a future few could imagine.
Old tools used in new ways and new tools

This means visioning becomes transformational when it is grounded in the future relationships an organization aspires to with its key internal and external stakeholders. If this vision becomes the source from which owners, managers and employees act, and building bridges of understanding through connecting with others becomes the activity driven by the vision, it sets up a dynamic field with the potential to transform.

Note that the same three elements from gap analysis were used: The only difference was the orientation of the self toward each of these elements, which affected the order in which they were addressed.

This finding suggested a new tool by establishing the points at either end of the transformational red vortex. One point is interpersonal connection and openness to another, and the other is a compelling vision of the future one wishes to inhabit, which informs how one acts toward others.
Conclusion

Do other well-documented transformational shifts follow similar patterns? What new insights might the two other most unusual incidents identified in this paper reveal? During his time in prison, Mandela alluded to self-directed activities such as gardening, house-keeping and exercising. Did these activities create another kind of connection which helped catalyze Mandela’s effectiveness?

Physiological and astrophysical studies may yield deeper insights into the red vortex. The circulatory system shares striking similarities with this vortex, while phenomenon occurring at the event horizon of black holes (these can’t be seen so their effect on surrounding matter is studied) closely resemble Scharmer’s (2010) description of shifts in consciousness which occur during presencing.

The concept of orienting oneself to the future recalls Gandhi’s directive, “Be the change you wish to see.” This research suggests that applying this specifically to interpersonal connections – while remaining open and curious toward those around us – may profoundly impact the work of consultants.

If Scharmer (2010) and Kahane (2010) were right about the most important factor being the inner attitude from which consultants operate, any good plan will do, but transformational inner alignment is essential to catalyzing a transformed future.
References


